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“Midianite Men, Merchants” (Gen 37:28): Linguistic, Literary, and Historical Perspectives

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Abstract

An important method of resolving contradictions in the Bible was developed by Saadia Gaon and Menasseh ben Israel based on the writings of Aristotle. It is rooted in the insight that failure to recognize linguistic ambiguity is a common source of apparent contradiction—in the Bible as elsewhere. In the case of the apparent Ishmaelite/Midianite contradiction, the crucial ambiguity—overlooked by critics of all persuasions—is syntactic. There is a second syntactic reading of וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁי־מִדְיָנִים סְחָרִים that eliminates the contradiction and solves other problems, leaving only a lack of uniformity. For the latter, there are three literary explanations, which complement each other. They involve (1) stylistic variation, (2) subjective perspective (based on the historical context), and (3) keywords and foreshadowing.

Keywords

Ishmaelite/Midianite – source/redactional criticism – apposition to affixed pronouns – ambiguity and contradiction – subjective perspective – stylistic variation – keywords and foreshadowing – Aristotle and Saadia Gaon – caravans and merchants

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For Dr. Rivka Horowitz, in gratitude for her care and her caring

לְכוּ וְנִמְכְּרוּנוּ לְיִשְׁמָעֵאלִים ... וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אַחֲיוּ: וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אַנְשֵׁי־מִדְיָנִים סְחָרִים
וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת־יֹסֵף מִן־הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת־יֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמָעֵאלִים ... וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת־
יֹסֵף מִצְרָיִמָּה:

“Come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites....” His brothers agreed. When Midianite traders passed by, they pulled Joseph up out of the pit. They sold Joseph ... to the Ishmaelites, who brought Joseph to Egypt.

Gen 37:27–28; NJPS



Who sold Joseph to Potiphar? Genesis 37:36 identifies the sellers as Midianites (more precisely, Medanites; see section 7 below), while 39:1 says that they were Ishmaelites. Hugh White calls this discrepancy “one of the most certain contradictions in the entire Pentateuch.”¹

According to the critics, this contradiction² can also be discerned within Gen 37 and even within 37:28. Donald Redford, for example, writes that “chapter 37 contains one of the most blatant discrepancies in the entire Pentateuch, viz., the contradiction surrounding Joseph’s sale into Egypt.”³

This contradiction is of particular interest to *source* critics. E. A. Speiser comments on v. 28 that “this single verse alone provides a good basis for a constructive documentary analysis of the Pentateuch; it goes a long way, moreover, to demonstrate that *E* was not just a supplement to *J*, but an independent and often conflicting source....”⁴ Redford relates that “generations of Bible students have utilized this discrepancy as a show piece for demonstrating the validity of the Documentary Hypothesis.”⁵ Joel Baden asserts that “the Ishmaelite/Midianite problem is the driving force behind the need for literary analysis of the chapter.”⁶ Even so, none of Julius Wellhausen’s followers raises the stakes as high as he himself does: “The main source for the last section of Genesis is also JE. One surmises that this work, here as elsewhere, is assembled out of J and E; our earlier results force us to this supposition and would be shattered were it not demonstrable.”⁷

The contradiction is seemingly less important to redaction critics, but they, too, give diachronic explanations for it. Many of them follow the lead of Rainer

1 White, “Reuben,” 79.

2 In this essay, the term *contradiction* is often shorthand for *apparent, prima facie contradiction*.

3 Redford, *Study*, 106.

4 Speiser, *Genesis*, 291.

5 Redford, *Study*, 145, citing many sources in n. 2.

6 Baden, *Composition*, 34; cf. *ibid.*, 3.

7 Wellhausen, “Composition,” 21: 442. All translations in this essay are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

Kessler: “The first words of 37:28, ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים, can be understood as an added motif that has the task of clearing the brothers of direct responsibility for the sale of Joseph.”⁸ Herbert Donner writes that “one can try to attribute the anomaly in v. 28 to an interpreter. He introduced the Midianites, whom he considered, based on Judg 8:22ff, to be identical to the Ishmaelites.”⁹

Donner’s comment raises a crucial issue. Judg 8:24 states explicitly that the Midianites are Ishmaelites. If so, why are biblical critics of all stripes convinced that the Midianite/Ishmaelite problem has no synchronic solution? If the Midianites are merely a subset of the Ishmaelites, the contradiction between Gen 37:36 and 39:1 would seem to be an illusion. The answer to this question was given by Wellhausen, in a comment about Gen 37:28: “The indefinite phrase ‘Midianite men’ cannot in any way be a reference to the Ishmaelites, mentioned already before.”¹⁰

The problem, then, has more than one part. For a clear formulation of it, we may turn to August Dillmann: “... the actual presence of another source is made evident (a) by the variation in the name of the merchants; (b) by the absence of the article with מִדְּאֲסָר, which prevents them from being identified with the Ishmaelites of vv. 25 and 27...”¹¹ Part (a) is a literary problem, part (b) is a linguistic problem.

In this study, I shall begin with the linguistic problem, arguing that there is a second syntactic reading of ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים, supported by parallels but overlooked by critics, that eliminates the contradiction—not only in v. 28 but everywhere in the Joseph story—and solves other problems as well. I shall then turn to the literary problem. The two literary solutions previously proposed, based on (1) stylistic variation and (2) subjective perspective, may well be sufficient, but they do not satisfy everyone. After bolstering literary solution 2 by clarifying its historical context, I shall propose a third literary solution, involving keywords and foreshadowing, that complements the other two. In short, this is a complex problem calling for a complex solution, with linguistic, literary, and historical aspects.

8 Kessler, *Querverweise*, 148. Cf. Coats, *Canaan*, 61; Otto, “Lebensauffassung,” 388; Blum, *Komposition*, 245; Schmid, “Josephsgeschichte,” 105; Wöhrle, “Joseph,” 55 n. 8.

9 Donner, *Gestalt*, 45.

10 Wellhausen, “Composition,” 442. See already de Wette, *Beiträge*, 2/1: 145.

11 Dillmann, *Genesis*, 2: 340. See also Driver, *Genesis*, 325; and Skinner, *Critical*, 448.

1 Contradictions Rooted in Ambiguity: Aristotle, Saadia Gaon, and Menasseh ben Israel

Ambiguity is extremely common in natural languages, so much so that some fields have created their own formal language(s) in an attempt to eliminate it. In a normal text, most sentences will exhibit one or more ambiguities, be they lexical, syntactic, referential, or orthographic. However, most of them will go unnoticed, partly because the brain, in processing ambiguous utterances, normally bypasses conscious analysis, suppressing—or simply failing to activate—inappropriate or unusual interpretations.¹² No wonder, then, that English speakers rarely exhibit any preference for unambiguous utterances in psycholinguistic experiments.¹³

There were two views of ambiguity in Antiquity. The Rabbis viewed ambiguity in a positive light, as a major source of omniscience. They took the position that it is possible for a single utterance in the Torah to communicate two things—sometimes even two seemingly contradictory things.¹⁴ For Aristotle, by contrast, ambiguity was a source of duplicity: “In fallacies connected with verbal equivocation and ambiguous phrases, the deception (ἀπάτη) arises from the inability to distinguish the various meanings of a term...” (De Sophisticis Elenchis 7.169a).¹⁵ Aristotle associated ambiguity with the Sophists, accusing them of using it for nefarious purposes. In *Ars Rhetorica* (3.2.7), he says that “in regard to nouns, homonyms (ὁμωνυμῖαι) are most useful to the sophist, for it is through them that he works mischief (κακοουργεῖ); and synonyms (are most useful) to the poet...”¹⁶ This passage deals with *lexical* ambiguity, but Aristotle also discusses the Sophists’ use of *syntactic* ambiguity. In *De Sophisticis Elenchis* (4.166a), he offers several examples of syntactic ambiguity in Greek,¹⁷ e.g., τὸ βούλεσθαι λαβεῖν με τοὺς πολεμίους, “to want me

12 Tompkins, “Mechanisms,” 62: “Normal comprehension skill is linked with the proficiency of a suppression mechanism, which functions to dampen mental activation that becomes irrelevant or inappropriate to a final interpretation.” For the exploitation of such suppression—or failure to activate—in jokes, see Ritchie, “Developing,” 79: “The set-up has two different interpretations, but one is much more obvious to the audience, who does not become aware of the other meaning. The meaning of the punchline conflicts with this obvious interpretation, but is compatible with, and even evokes, the other, hitherto hidden, meaning.” See also n. 46 below.

13 Wasow, “Ambiguity.” See also n. 26 below.

14 See n. 32 below.

15 Aristotle, *Sophistical*, 42–43.

16 Aristotle, *Art*, 354–355. I have made minor changes in this translation.

17 For analysis of these ambiguities, see Schreiber, *Aristotle*, 26–28.

the enemy to capture.”¹⁸ This phrase has two meanings: (1) “to want the enemy to capture me”; and (2) “to want me to capture the enemy.”¹⁹ Aristotle then proceeds to show how sophists weaponize ambiguity, using it to deceive their opponents in debates.

Aristotle used his examples to demonstrate a link between ambiguity and *deception*, but he could just as easily have used them to demonstrate a link between ambiguity²⁰ and *contradiction*. He could have pointed out that, in a passage asserting both (1) *Alexander wants me the enemy to capture* and (2) *Alexander does not want me the enemy to capture*, the contradiction is illusory if (1) means “Alexander wants me to capture the enemy” and (2) means “Alexander does not want the enemy to capture me.”

In Saadia Gaon’s thought, the link between ambiguity and contradiction became the basis of an explicit principle of exegesis. According to him, an exegete who encounters a contradiction between one verse and another (or between a verse and reason or tradition) should look for an ambiguity that might be the cause.²¹ In this matter, it is likely that Saadia was influenced, directly or indirectly, by Aristotle. In commenting on Prov 25:11, he lists three things to avoid in proper speech: connecting words that need to be separated, separating words that need to be connected, and ambiguity (אלתשאבה).²² All three are items on Aristotle’s list of “methods of producing a false illusion in connection with language” (*De Sophisticis Elenchis* 4.165b), which includes the incorrect joining and separation of words in a sentence (σύνθεσις and διαίρεσις), and two kinds of ambiguity (δμωνυμία and ἀμφιβολία).²³ Saadia even knew of the Sophists; he mentions their epistemological relativism in his commentary on Proverbs (27:22), two chapters after giving his rules of rhetoric.²⁴

Only one Jewish scholar, Menasseh ben Israel, managed to outdo Saadia in this area, devoting a multi-volume work to the connection between ambiguity and contradiction in the Bible. In it, he applies Aristotle’s negative view of ambiguity to the Torah: “ambiguities [*los equivococ*] have truly caused great

18 Aristotle, *Sophistical*, 18–19.

19 The syntactic ambiguity in this example is a *case ambiguity*. Since both the noun and the pronoun are in the accusative, it is impossible to say which is the subject of the underlying embedded clause and which the object. For a case ambiguity in Genesis, generally unnoticed by modern scholars, see n. 32 below.

20 Here, as frequently elsewhere in this essay, the term *ambiguity* is shorthand for *the failure to recognize ambiguity*.

21 See Steiner, “Saadia,” 216–220.

22 Saadia, משלי, 199–200.

23 Aristotle, *Sophistical*, 16–17. For the relevance of Aristotle’s σύνθεσις, see section 4 below.

24 Saadia, משלי, 225 lines 6–7 (of commentary): אלדי לא יצדק באן פי אלדניא עלמא, “one that does not believe that there is knowledge in the world, like the Sophists.”

harm and controversy in the world, and as there are in the Law many ambiguous [*ambiguas*] and equivocal [*equivocas*] words that receive and admit diverse interpretations, ..., they often cause doubt and lead to error.”²⁵ Baruch Spinoza, thought to be a student of Menasseh, says something similar: “For it appears that the Hebrews were not by any means strongly moved to avoid ambiguity, a thing which I could demonstrate with many examples....”²⁶

2 Contradictions Rooted in Ambiguity: Examples within a Single Verse or Pair of Verses

Before dealing with the contradiction in Gen 37:28, which has no obvious synchronic explanation, it is worth noting contradictions in a single verse or adjacent verses that *do* have obvious synchronic explanations.²⁷ An example involving lexical ambiguity is וַיְחַלֵּק לְכָל־הָעָם לְכָל־הַמִּזְוָן יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמֵאִישׁ וְעַד־אִשָּׁה ...תַּחַת לָהֶם אֶחָת. “and he distributed among all the people—the entire multitude of Israel, man and woman alike—to each a loaf of bread...” (2 Sam 6:19). According to the beginning of the verse, David distributed a loaf of bread to every אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה, but, according to the continuation, the distribution was to every אִישׁ. The contradiction, which is even more blatant in 1 Chr 16:3, is illusory because בְּחַ אִישׁ means both “man” and “each one (animate or inanimate).”²⁸ As David Altschuler comments: “אִישׁ לְאִישׁ means ‘to each individual, whether man or woman.’”²⁹

Another such example is וּמִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־נָתַן שְׁלֹמֹה עֶבֶד בְּיָהֶם אִנְשֵׁי הַמְּלָחָמָה ...וַעֲבָדָיו וְשָׂרָיו. “but he did not make any of the Israelites a slave; they served rather as warriors and as his attendants and his officials...” (1 Kgs 9:22). According to the beginning of the verse, Solomon did not make the Israelites עֶבְדִים, but, according to the continuation, some of them *were* his עֲבָדִים. Here again, the contradiction is only apparent because בְּחַ עֶבֶד means both “slave” and “attendant”; cf. Akkadian *ardu*, meaning both “slave” and “official, etc.”³⁰ In the words of Mordechai Cogan: “The Hebrew seems contradictory at first ...;

25 Menasseh ben Israel, *Conciliador*, 1:119.

26 Spinoza, *Works*, 625. According to Wasow (“Ambiguity”), the same is true of English speakers!

27 The first two examples below are from Simon, “לְדַרְכּוֹ,” 127.

28 BDB, 36 s.v.

29 https://www.sefaria.org/Metzudat_David_on_II_Samuel.6.19.1?lang=he. Throughout this article, for the convenience of the reader, I have replaced references to the best editions of Hebrew works with links to the precise passages on the Sefaria website, except where the best editions have a significantly better variant.

30 CAD A2, 243 s.v.

but the nuanced use of the noun *'ebed* for both “bondman” and “court attendant” can be maintained without emendation.”³¹

There are also contradictions within a single verse originating in *syntactic* ambiguity. Take, for example, *לֹא תִרְאֶה אֶת־שׂוֹר אֶחָיִךְ אִוְ אֶת־שֵׂינֵי נִדְחִים וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ* (Deut 22:1), where *הֵשֵׁב תְּשִׁיבם לְאֶחָיִךְ* (“take them back to your fellow,”) could be read as contradicting *וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ*, “and ignore them.” The contradiction arises only in the second of the following two readings: (1) “[you shall not] [see your fellow’s ox or sheep/goat straying away and ignore them]” (with *לֹא* having wide scope, negating *two* clauses); (2) “[you shall disregard your fellow’s ox or sheep/goat straying away] [and you shall ignore them]” (with *לֹא* having narrow scope, negating only *one* clause). According to the Rabbis (Sipre Deut 22:1; cf. b. BM 30a, etc.), both readings are true, depending on the circumstances: *פעמים שאתה מתעלם ופעמים שאין אתה מתעלם*, “at times, you do ignore, and at times you do not.”³² Abraham Ibn Ezra shows his awareness of the syntactic ambiguity by using the term *דבק* in his comment: “*וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ* is attached (*דבק*) to *לֹא תִרְאֶה*”;³³ *דבק* is a technical term that he also uses elsewhere in resolving syntactic ambiguity.

A contradiction between adjacent verses is found in Exod 3, where we find *וַיִּבֶרֶךְ ה' אֶת־הַסִּינָיִת* (v. 2) and *לֹא־יִבְרַךְ ה' אֶת־הַסִּינָיִת* (v. 3). The first says that the bush was burning, while the second seems to say the opposite. Menasseh ben Israel discussed this contradiction at some length. Among other things, he pointed out that each of the two occurrences of *b-ʿr* has a different rendering in the targum of *Anquelos a-guer* (= *אנקלוס הגר*).³⁴ The contradiction was noticed again in the twentieth century by some source critics and redaction critics, who provided diachronic explanations.³⁵

A brief survey of the ancient and medieval translations is instructive. In LXX, the contradiction is implicitly attributed to the ambiguity of the root *b-ʿr*: *ὁ βᾶτος καίεται πυρί* (v. 2) and *οὐ κατακαίεται ὁ βᾶτος* (v. 3), using *καίω*, “burn,” vs. *κατακαίω*, “burn completely, burn down.” Solutions based on ambiguity were later offered by Onqelos (as noted above) and Saadia Gaon as well,³⁶ but they

31 Cogan, *I Kings*, 304.

32 ספרי, 256 §222; cf. 257 §225. For the Rabbinic view that, when the readings of an ambiguous sentence contradict each other, they are true under different circumstances, see the discussion of *יְעֹבֵד צְעִיר וְרֵב יְעֹבֵד צָעִיר*, “and the elder shall the younger serve,” and its case ambiguity in Steiner, “Four,” 53–54.

33 https://www.sefaria.org/Ibn_Ezra_on_Deuteronomy.22.1.2?lang=he.

34 Menasseh ben Israel, *Conciliador*, 1:129.

35 See, for example, Procksch, *Sagenbuch*, 63, 65; Smend, *Erzählung*, 116; Eissfeldt, *Hexateuch-Synopse*, 111*; Fuß, *Pentateuchredaktion*, 27.

36 See Steiner, “Saadia,” 219, 221–222.

were unable to replicate LXX’s elegant technique of using nothing more than a prefix to resolve the contradiction. By contrast, translators into medieval English and German had prefixes similar to those of ancient Greek available to them in those languages. Aelfric, Abbot of Eynsham (ca. 1000), distinguishes *seó þyrne barn*, “the thorn-bush burned,” from *þeós þyrne ne sí forbærned* (= *sy forbærned*), “this thorn-bush is not burned up.”³⁷ The John Wycliffe Bible (1382) distinguishes *the buysch brente* from *the buysch is not forbrent*.³⁸ Similarly, Martin Luther distinguishes *der pusch mit feür brandte* from *der pusch nicht verbrenet* (= *verbrennet*),³⁹ seemingly anticipated by the gloss בּוֹרְבְּרוֹט “burn up (transitive)” (v. 3) in the medieval Jewish biblical glossary from Leipzig.⁴⁰ Huldrych Zwingli distinguishes *der pusch mit fheür bran* from *der pusch nit verbrünne*.⁴¹

In my view, the synchronic solution offered by these translations is superior to the diachronic solutions of the critics cited above.⁴² As it happens, the root *b-ʿ-r* really does exhibit a lexical ambiguity, when its *underlying* subject refers to fuel for a fire rather than the fire itself. It can be either *atelic* (referring to the *activity* of burning) or, less commonly, *telic* (referring to the *accomplishment* of burning *up* or burning *down*, rendered with a telic prefix in Greek, Germanic, etc.).⁴³ An atelic example related (spatially as well as linguistically) to הסנה בער באש is וְהָהָר בָּעַר בְּאֵשׁ, “and the mountain (Sinai) was burning in fire” (Deut 4:11; 5:19; 9:15); a possible telic example is שְׁלִשִׁית בָּאוּר תִּבְעֵיר, “you shall cause a third (of the hair) to burn up in fire” (Ezek 5:2).⁴⁴ Today, many scholars agree that diachronic solutions are superfluous here because it is not a contradiction to assert that the bush was burning in fire (v. 2) but not burning up/down (v. 3); cf. וְהִסְנֶה אֵינָנוּ אֶבֶל (v. 2).⁴⁵

37 Älfrik, *Testamento*, 114; cf. Narbona, “Old English.”

38 <http://textusreceptusbibles.com/Wycliffe/2/3>.

39 Luther, *Testament*, 76a–b. See also idem, *Biblia*, 36b: *der pusch mit fewer brante* vs. *der pusch nicht verbrenet*.

40 Banitt, *Glossaire*, 1: 124 line 1665.

41 Zwingli, *Bibel*, 27b.

42 See n. 35 above.

43 For a lucid discussion of the distinction between the terms *telic* and *atelic*, see Comrie, *Aspect*, 44–48.

44 For another possible telic example, see כְּאֵשׁ יִבְעַר יְהוָה עַד־תָּמוּ (1 Kgs 14:10) according to NRSV: “just as one burns up dung until it is all gone.” This verse is compared to הסנה יבער לא מדוע לא יבער הסנה by Tobias b. Eliezer https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Lekach_Tov%2C_Exodus.3.3.3?lang=bi.

45 See especially Freedman, “Burning,” 245–246; Weimar, *Berufung*, 201–202 n. 5; and Propp, *Exodus*, 200. For the use of imperfect יִבְעַר following מְדִינָה (v. 3), instead of the participle בִּעַר (as in v. 2), see Steiner, “Contradictions,” 441 n. 8.

This example, like the ones above, shows that the strategy of resolving (“harmonizing”) apparent contradictions through reanalysis and/or reinterpretation of an ambiguous phrase is just as normal and legitimate in biblical studies as it is elsewhere. This strategy is familiar to everyone who strives to understand language—in conversation, comedy, and other forms of communication.⁴⁶ Source critics have employed it, too, but usually only for contradictions that the Documentary Hypothesis is unable to explain.⁴⁷ The existence of contradictions not accounted for by the theory is significant because they must be regarded as “unexplained observations.” It is now clear that, according to the theory, the presence of a contradiction in a passage is not a *sufficient* condition for proposing source division. It hardly needs to be added that the presence of a contradiction is also not a *necessary* condition for proposing source division, since it is well known that other factors, e.g., repetition, have been adduced as grounds for source division. It is reasonable to conclude that finding a contradiction in a passage is neither necessary nor sufficient grounds for believing that it is composite.⁴⁸

In any event, the reader may wish to keep in mind the simple examples of linguistic *contradiction resolution* discussed in this section when thinking about the more complicated example in section 4 below.

3 Traditional Acknowledgment of the Midianite/Ishmaelite Contradiction

As noted above, the absence of definite articles in the phrase אנשים מדינים is an important component of the Ishmaelite/Midianite problem. If that phrase is indefinite, it would seem to follow that the Midianites are distinct from the Ishmaelites in Gen 37:27–28 (irrespective of their relationship in Judg 8:24, discussed below).

Many traditional translations, from Antiquity to the modern era, have tacitly acknowledged this problem. Take, for example, the rendering of LXX: καὶ παρεπορεύοντο οἱ ἄνθρωποι οἱ Μαδιηναῖοι οἱ ἔμποροι.⁴⁹ In this version, ignored

46 See McRoy, “Abductive,” iii: “If a listener hears something that seems inconsistent, he may reinterpret an earlier utterance and respond to it anew.” See also n. 12 above.

47 See Steiner, “ויצלהו.”

48 The same could be said of finding repetition in a passage; see Steiner, “He Said.” I am indebted to Carl Posy for his comments on an earlier version of this paragraph.

49 *Septuaginta ...: Genesis*, ed. Wevers, 359. Another version, attested in numerous manuscripts (including two from the 10th century), has only two definite articles, leaving ἔμποροι = סוחרים indefinite (ibid.).

by Wellhausen and his followers, there is no Ishmaelite/Midianite contradiction, thanks to the three definite articles (not to mention Judg 8:24). One may be permitted to wonder, as a thought experiment, what would have become of the Documentary Hypothesis had Wellhausen and his followers, who put so much weight on the Ishmaelite/Midianite contradiction,⁵⁰ decided to take LXX’s rendering of the verse as a basis for *lower* criticism, emending סחרים המדינים הסחרים to אנשים מדינים סחרים. The thought experiment becomes more interesting if we imagine a modern follower of Wellhausen accepting the fourth-century dating of JS proposed by Thomas Römer.⁵¹ That dating would make it much more difficult to ignore the third-century rendering of Gen 37:28 in the Septuagint.

Be that as it may, it is clear that at least some Jews in the third century BCE believed that “in Gen. 37: 28 ... the Midianites are identified with the Ishmaelites.”⁵² In section 4 below, we shall see that the same is true of Jews who retold the story in the second century BCE.

Saadia Gaon’s Arabic translation of the verse is very similar. There, too, we note the insertion of three definite articles (not to mention a subordinating conjunction): *מר אלרגאל אלמדיניון אלחגאר*, “and when the Midianite men, the merchants, passed by.”⁵³ According to Joshua Blau, the original version of this translation goes even further: “and when *those* (אולאיד) Midianite men, the merchants, passed by.”⁵⁴

This rendering was revived, with two definite articles, by Luther in 1524: *Vnd da die Madianiter die kauffleüt vor über reyseten*.⁵⁵ In 1531, Zwingli accepted it too, as did Dominikus von Brentano in 1796.⁵⁶ From Germany, it made its way to England, but with only a single definite article. The Coverdale Bible of 1535

50 See at nn. 3–7 above.

51 Römer, “Joseph,” 189–195.

52 Gehman, Review, 305.

53 Ignoring minor variants, this is the reading of all the early manuscripts (Cairo Genizah, etc.) that I checked: Cambridge T-S Ar.1a.63, T-S Ar.25.109, T-S Misc.28.53; Oxford heb. d.56/1 (1r); Oxford Ms. Oppenheim Add. Qu. 98 f. 30a; Paris Mosseri III, 197.1 (1v); and St. Petersburg Yevr. II C 1 part 2, f. 91b (copied by Samuel b. Jacob, the scribe who copied the Leningrad Codex of the Bible in ca. 1009). For variant readings from later manuscripts and editions, see the critical edition of Blau, *הספרות*, 22.

54 Blau, *עיונים*, 125–126. Evidence for his conjecture, based on late medieval manuscripts from Yemen, can perhaps be adduced from Abraham Ibn Ezra; see n. 71 below.

55 Luther, *Testament*, 53b; cf. idem, *Biblia*, 25a. The double definite article is found also in Luther’s commentary (*Auslegung*, 40b). However, later in the commentary (69a bot.) we read: “From this, however, it is to be deduced that Joseph was sold three times: first to the Midianites, then to the Ishmaelites, and the third time to Potiphar.” Did Luther copy the definite articles from an earlier source without grasping their significance?

56 Zwingli, *Bibel*, 19b; von Brentano, *Schrift*, 205.

has: *And as the Madianites marchant men wente by.*⁵⁷ A single definite article is inserted also in Matthew's Bible of 1537, the Great Bible of 1539, the Geneva Bible of 1560, and the Bishops' Bible of 1568.⁵⁸ After a hiatus, this rendering reappears in some modern English commentaries and translations.⁵⁹

How are we to understand these renderings? Did the translators believe that, even in the absolute state and in prose, common nouns could be semantically definite *without the definite article*? Be that as it may, one thing seems clear: unlike Rashi, his midrashic sources, and his followers, they—or, at least, the ultimate source of their rendering—assumed that the Ishmaelites and the Midianites in JS were the same individuals.

4 The Linguistic Solution: A Second Syntactic Reading (R₂) Based on Aristotle and Saadia

The linguistic problem of Gen 37:28 has an excellent linguistic solution, based on the syntactic ambiguity of the clause *ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים*. In the most obvious reading, which I shall call Reading 1 (henceforth: R₁), its meaning is: “and (then) Midianite men, merchants, passed by.” This reading assumes that *אנשים מדינים* is the immediate subject of *ויעברו*. A problem with R₁ will be discussed at the end of section 5 below.

Reading 2 (henceforth: R₂), overlooked by critics of all persuasions, is characterized by a prosodic break, pausal or intonational, after the verb: *ויעברו – אנשים מדינים סחרים*. In this reading, the meaning of the clause (together with its context) is: “Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites...! His brothers agreed. And so (when) they (= the Ishmaelites!) passed by—(turning out to be) Midianite men, merchants—they (= the brothers) pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites ..., who brought Joseph to Egypt.” The prosodic break corresponds to syntactic discontinuity between *ויעברו* and *אנשים מדינים*. The discontinuity stems from the fact that, in R₂, *אנשים מדינים* is not the immediate subject of the verb. Instead, it is *parenthetical*, standing in *apposition* to the pronominal affix on the verb.⁶⁰

57 See <http://textusreceptusbibles.com/Interlinear/1037028>.

58 Ibid.

59 See, for example, Kalisch, *Historical*, 417; Mathews, *Genesis*, 693; Douay-Rheims Bible; NET Bible; NIV; ISV; etc.

60 For “noun phrases in apposition to the pronominal affix on the verb,” see Dryer, “Expression.” Dryer's analysis appears to combine the syntax of R₂ with the semantics of R₁. In an email communication (2/19/2021), Edward L. Keenan, a leading authority on

Put differently, R₁ is a *one-appositive reading* while R₂ is a *two-appositive reading*. In R₁, the subject of ויעברו consists of אנשים מדינים plus one indefinite appositive modifier, סחרים.⁶¹ In R₂, the subject of ויעברו consists of its affixed pronoun—which, like all pronouns, is definite—plus two indefinite appositive modifiers, אנשים מדינים and סחרים.⁶² In R₂, אנשים מדינים is indefinite not because it refers to a new group but because it is derived (synchronically) from an underlying clause meaning something like “the Ishmaelites turned out to be Midianite men, merchants.”⁶³

In short, R₁ implies that the Midianites and the Ishmaelites in JS are different individuals, while R₂ implies that they are the same. Although the literary component of the problem remains to be discussed (in sections 7–10 below), it should already be clear that R₂ eliminates the Ishmaelite/Midianite contradiction, a contradiction that has been called “the driving force behind the need for literary analysis of the chapter” and “a show piece for demonstrating the validity of the Documentary Hypothesis.”⁶⁴ At the very least, R₂ renders diachronic analysis superfluous in Gen 37:28; 37:36; and 39:1. This conclusion follows from Ockham’s razor and the common-sense rule that the critic should first “take the text as it is, do all possible synchronic analysis, and then add a diachronic dimension to deal with whatever problems remain.”⁶⁵ Such an approach is well within the mainstream of modern critical scholarship, which has gradually replaced diachronic explanations of the contradiction in Exod 3:2–3 and of the repetition of ויאמר in Gen 37:21–22 with synchronic explanations.⁶⁶

The ancient audience would have had no difficulty perceiving R₂ in an oral presentation, thanks to the prosodic break.⁶⁷ Indeed, one might even argue

formal semantics and theoretical syntax, writes that the supporting reference by Dryer in WALS “definitely does support the existence of the sort of analysis you propose.”

- 61 For the function of this appositive in the story, see section 9 below.
- 62 For indefinite noun phrases, beginning with אנשים, in apposition to definite ones, see אנשים חכמים וידעים – וְאָקַח אֶת־רָאשֵׁי שְׁבִטֵיכֶם – “I took your tribal heads—wise and experienced men” (Deut 1:15); אנשי אֶת־עֲבָדָיו – אֲנֹכִי יָדָעִי הֵם – “Hiram sent his servants with the fleet—sailors familiar with the sea” (1 Kgs 9:27); cf. also Judg 3:15; 10:1. For the indefiniteness of these appositives, see the next footnote.
- 63 In that underlying clause, Midianite men and traders are predicational rather than identificational. For this distinction, see Higgins, *Pseudo-Cleft*, 237–256. Predicational noun phrases are, with exceptions irrelevant to our discussion, indefinite.
- 64 See nn. 6 and 5 above.
- 65 Dubbink, “Story,” 13 (emphasis added). See also Hong, “Synchrony,” 521–539 esp. 525–526.
- 66 See nn. 35 and 45 above; and Steiner, “He Said,” 482–483.
- 67 The modern scholar, unfortunately, does not have this advantage. We find a conjunctive accent connecting the verb to the following noun phrase in ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים, at the head of a sequence of accents that appears to point to R₁. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find parallels in which the same initial conjunctive accent (followed by the

that R2 is implicit in the ancient retelling of JS found in the Book of Jubilees (2nd century BCE). The author of this work, who composed it in Hebrew and included a paragraph stressing the importance of that language,⁶⁸ presumably learned JS in the original Hebrew. In 34:11, he writes: “And they (= Joseph’s brothers) acted fraudulently and made a plot against him to kill him, but they repented and sold him to a band of Ishmaelites.”⁶⁹ The absence of any reference to the Midianites here is difficult to explain according to R1. So is the assertion that “they ... sold him to a band of Ishmaelites,” because *they* refers to Joseph’s brothers, not the Midianites. Thus, it is possible that the author took the words אנשים מדינים to be *parenthetical*, as in R2.⁷⁰

Another possible proponent of R2 is Ibn Ezra. In his commentary on Gen 37:28, וכאשר עברו אלה ויעברו אנשים מדינים סחרים is paraphrased with והישמעאלים הסוחרים, “and when those Ishmaelites—the merchants—passed by.”⁷¹ In this paraphrase, the subject is *those Ishmaelites* (i.e., those Ishmaelites mentioned in the previous verse)—not *Midianite men*. Ibn Ezra goes on to justify his interpretation by citing Judg 8:24 as evidence that “the Midianites are called Ishmaelites.”

The only unequivocal advocates of R2 that I have succeeded in finding are two twentieth-century scholars. The first is H. C. Leupold, who translates: “Then they passed by—Midianite men, traders.”⁷² The second is Robert Longacre, whose rendering is similar: “And so they passed by, Midianite traders [as they proved to be].”⁷³ The rendering of the New Living Translation, although too free to analyze with certainty, seems to belong here as well: “So when the Ishmaelites, who were Midianite traders, came by.”⁷⁴ We shall come back to Leupold and Longacre when we turn to the literary component of the problem.

other three accents) marks a syntactic break that is even stronger than the one in R2, e.g., [וַיֵּאמְרוּ] שָׁלוֹם לָכֶם אֱלִיָּהוּ וְאֵלֵהֶם וְאֵלֵהֶם אֲבִיכֶם נָתַן לָכֶם מִטְמוֹן בְּאִמְתַּחְתֵּיכֶם כִּסְפֶכֶם בָּא [אֱלִי (43:23)]. Thus, the accents in v. 28 are at least *compatible* with R2.

68 Wintermute, “Jubilees,” 2: 43, 45. Cf. VanderKam, “Text-Critical,” 292*.

69 Wintermute, “Jubilees,” 2: 121.

70 In this regard, Jubilees bears a superficial resemblance to Charles, *Testaments*, 18, 113, and 151. According to the Testaments of Simeon (v. 9), Zebulun (v. 9), and Gad (v. 3), Joseph was sold by some of the brothers to the Ishmaelites. These passages, too, make no mention of Midianites. This work, however, unlike Jubilees, is dependent on the Septuagint; see Kee, “Testaments,” 1: 777.

71 For the reading אלה (instead of עליהם), see Ms. Paris 177 f. 20a and the most recent editions: <https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/1/37/28> and http://mg.alhatorah.org/Dual/Ibn_Ezra_First_Commentary/Bereshit/37.28#m7e0n6.

72 Leupold, *Exposition*, 970–971.

73 Longacre, *Joseph*, 31. By contrast, this solution does not appear in idem, “Who,” 85–87 and 89–90.

74 *Holy*, 32.

The crucial role played by the prosodic break in distinguishing R2 from R1 brings us back to our discussion of Aristotle and Saadia Gaon. The first of Saadia's three rules of oral expression, summarized in section 1 above, is “you should make a pause (וקפּה) between words that, if connected, would be distorted in meaning...”⁷⁵ And one of the items on Aristotle's list of “methods of producing a false illusion in connection with language” is *σύνθεσις*, “(incorrect) joining (of words).” In my view, it is the failure to recognize the *σύνθεσις*-related syntactic ambiguity in Gen 37:28 that has created the *illusion* of contradiction in it.

5 The Linguistic Solution: Additional Problems Solved by R2

We saw above that R2 eliminates the famous Ishmaelite/Midianite contradiction. Another contradiction eliminated by R2 is the one noted by Ernst Knauf: “Regardless of whether this text is made up of one or two sources, Midianites and Ishmaelites, according to Gen. 37, are two different tribes, both of whom traded between northern Transjordan and Egypt.... In Judg. 8:24, however, the Midianites are said to be Ishmaelites too, because they wear gold nose-rings. Thus the two texts clearly contradict each other.”⁷⁶

A third problem resolved by R2 is the uncertainty about the underlying subject of *וימכרו את־יוסף לישמעאלים*. At first glance, it appears to be *אנשים מדינים*. However, Rashi took the subject pronoun of *וימכרו* as having a *remote antecedent*, viz., *אחיו* (v. 27 end), presumably because *וימכרו את־יוסף לישמעאלים* is so similar to *לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים* (v. 27).⁷⁷ Indeed, he probably viewed *לכו ונמכרנו לישמעאלים* as a command/exhortation-fulfillment sequence, like the ones in *וילכו כל־העם הגלגל ... לכו ונלכה הגלגל* (1 Sam 11:14–15) and *ויפלו גורלות ... לכו ונפילה גורלות* (Jonah 1:7).⁷⁸ R2 bolsters Rashi's interpretation by making *אנשים מדינים* parenthetical.⁷⁹ It is perfectly normal for pronouns to be separated from their true antecedents by false antecedents embedded in subordinate clauses or parenthetical phrases. For example, in *והקריב אהרן*

75 Saadia, *משלי*, 199 lines 19–21.

76 Knauf, “Midianites,” 147; cf. Volz and Rudolph, *Elohist*, 154 n. 1. Knauf's paraphrase of Judg 8:24 is, of course, imprecise. According to this verse, the Midianites wear gold earrings because they are Ishmaelites, not vice versa.

77 See the supercommentary of Obadiah of Bertinoro, עמר https://www.sefaria.org/Bartenura_on_Torah%2C_Genesis.37.28?lang=he. Cf. Greenstein, “Equivocal,” 2: 119; and Baden, *Composition*, 35.

78 In vv. 27–28, the command/exhortation-fulfillment sequence is interrupted by *וישמעו*, “they listened (to him),” as in 1 Kgs 12:24.

79 Cf. Leupold, *Genesis*, 971, as well as the view that “*אנשים מדינים*” is superfluous (“מיותר”) attributed to the Rabbis by Einhorn https://www.sefaria.org/Perush_Maharzu_on_Bereshit_Rabbah.84.18?lang=he.

אֶת־הַשְּׂעִיר אֲשֶׁר עָלָה עָלָיו הַגּוֹרֵל לֵה' וְעָשָׂהוּ חַטָּאת, “Aaron shall bring forward the goat upon which the lot fell for the Lord, and he shall declare (lit., make) it a sin offering” (Lev 16:9), the false antecedents of the affixed subject pronoun of וְעָשָׂהוּ are ה' (as if the Lord has made it a sin offering) and הַגּוֹרֵל (as if the lot has made it a sin offering), both inside the relative clause. The true antecedent is אַהֲרֹן, preceding the relative clause.⁸⁰ Suffixed pronouns, too, have false antecedents embedded in subordinate clauses or parenthetical phrases. A good example is Rashbam’s discovery that the true antecedent of the suffixed pronoun of לוֹ in Num 17:5 (end) is not קָרַח or אַהֲרֹן in the subordinate clauses (v. 5) but אֶלְעָזָר in the main clause (v. 4). In the words of Joseph Ibn Kaspi, “all of the exegetes looked only nearby (for an antecedent), but in reality it (= the pronoun) refers to something remote (שב אל הרחוק).”⁸¹

Finally, R2 eliminates a literary problem that, to the best of my knowledge, has not previously been discussed. It arises from Wellhausen’s observation that v. 28 (interpreted according to R1) presents the Midianites as a new, previously unmentioned group of merchants that happen to pass by on the trade route and stop near a cistern. Presumably, they hope to find water, but instead they find a man trapped in it. They save the man from an agonizing death only to abduct him, take him to Egypt, and sell him as a slave. These events are far from routine, and yet they are related in manner that is inexplicably blasé and devoid of expressions of surprise (*mirativity*), especially when compared with the first appearance of the Ishmaelites in JS: וַיִּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהִנֵּה: “they looked up and saw and behold” (v. 25). Consider also the parallel in 1 Kgs 13:25: וְהִנֵּה אַנְשִׁים עִבְרִים וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת הַנְּבִלָה מְשֻׁלָּכֶת בְּדַרְדָּר: “and, behold, men were passing by, and they saw the carcass cast/abandoned in the way.” Even that far less consequential account leads us to expect a more dramatic introduction of the Midianites in JS than we find in v. 28 as interpreted in R1—something like וְהִנֵּה* וְהִנֵּה אַנְשִׁים מִדְיָנִים סַחְרִים עִבְרִים וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף מְשֻׁלָּךְ בְּבוֹר (cf. הַבְּרָה אֹתוֹ הַבְּרָה in Gen 37:24). R2, by contrast, does not exhibit this problem. If the men who pass by are the ones that the brothers have been awaiting, the absence of drama in v. 28 is completely natural.

80 So already Sifra ad loc.; contrast b. Yoma 40b. For more on the change of subject between וַיֵּבְרֹר and וַיִּמְכְּרוּ, often viewed as “abrupt,” see Kitchen, *Ancient*, 119–120; and Fokkelman, “Genesis,” 164 n. 20: “after v. 28a, there is an unmarked shift of subject, something which is not rare at all in Hebrew narration.” Adina Moshavi calls my attention to two articles dealing with *unmarked shifts of subject* (also known as *underspecification*) in Hebrew, Akkadian, Arabic, etc.: Polak, “Participant”; and idem, “Whodunit?”

81 https://mg.alhatorah.org/Parshan/R_Yosef_ibn_Kaspi/Bemidbar/17.5#m7e0n6.

6 The Linguistic Solution: Prooftexts for R2

In a dead language, a claim of *syntactic* ambiguity is much more difficult to prove than a claim of *lexical* ambiguity, especially when the syntactic ambiguity involves a clause rather than, say, a noun phrase. The philologist is stymied by what might be called the *paradox of the syntactic parallel*. In order to provide compelling evidence for a previously unrecognized syntactic reading one needs to find a parallel that is unambiguous, having only the unrecognized syntactic reading, while being as similar as possible to the original. However, *in cases of syntactic ambiguity, the closer the parallel the more likely it is to have the same ambiguity*.

The parallels presented below exemplify that paradox. Fortunately, in this case, parallels are somewhat beside the point, because R2—even if it is difficult to recognize in our *written* text—would have been easily perceived by the ancient audience in an *oral* presentation, thanks to the prosodic break.

As we have seen, R2 of ויעברו אנשים מדינים exhibits “apposition to a subject just minimally expressed by person/number affixes on the verb.”⁸² This is an excellent example of the paradox discussed above. For example, parallels 1–7 and (probably) 8 below exhibit apposition to such an affix because they have verbs in the *first* or *second* person, verbs whose immediate subject is normally their affix. However, that very fact makes them a bit different from ויעברו אנשים מדינים, since there are *two* normal options for the immediate subject of a verb in the *third* person: its affix (e.g., ויעברו ויבאו in Josh 2:23) or else a noun phrase (e.g., ויעברו השטרים in Josh 3:2). Parallels 1, 4, 7, 9–13, and (probably) 8 contain noun phrases that come after the normal subject slot in their clauses. That fact strongly suggests that they are appositives rather than immediate subjects, but it also makes them a little less similar to R2. Parallels 9–18 resemble R2 in having verbs in the *third* person and in other respects, but most of them also differ slightly from R2. Parallels 16–18 are arguably the closest to R2, but, for that very reason, some will argue that these noun phrases are not appositive. Nevertheless, the arguments based on agreement presented below make it likely that at least two of them, 16–17, are indeed appositive and, thus, quite similar to R2.

1. וְגַחְלֵמָה הַלְזֹם בְּלֵילָה אֶחָד – אֲנִי וְהוּא “We dreamed a dream on the same night—he and I (lit., I and he)” (Gen 41:1). In this parallel, from JS, the appositive phrase consists of conjoined independent pronouns. It is used

82 I owe this felicitous formulation—and the inspiration for other ideas in this essay—to the very stimulating comments of Edward L. Keenan.

to disambiguate the first person plural affix, showing that “we” is exclusive (he and I = the baker and the butler), not inclusive (you and I = Pharaoh and the butler).

2. אַנְי וְאַתָּה – וְהִדְבַּר אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְנוּ – “and as for the matter about which we—you and I (lit., I and you)—have spoken” (1 Sam 20:23). Here, again, the appositive phrase is used to disambiguate the first person plural affix, showing that “we” is inclusive (you and I = David and Jonathan), not exclusive (he and I = Saul and Jonathan).

3. שְׁנֵינוּ אֲנַחְנוּ – אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְנוּ – “since we have sworn—we two (lit., the two of us, we)” (1 Sam 20:42). In this parallel, from the same story as the previous one, apposition is perhaps used again—this time with שְׁנֵינוּ—to show that “we” is inclusive. As for the independent pronoun אֲנַחְנוּ, it stands in apposition to the suffixed pronoun of שְׁנֵינוּ to express contrastive focus, as in וּפְגָרֵיכֶם אֵתֶם, “and your corpses” (Num 14:32).

4–6. אַתָּה וְאַהֲרֹן – תִּפְקְדוּ אֹתָם לְצַבָּאוֹתָם, “you (plur.) shall count them by their divisions—you (sing.) and Aaron” (Num 1:3); אָצֵאוּ – שְׁלֹשֶׁתְכֶם – אֶל־אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, “come out (plur.)—the three of you—to the tent of meeting” (Num 12:4); לְמָה בְּחַרְבַּת בְּרָעַב וּבְדַבַּר תָּמוּתוֹ – אַתָּה וְעַמְּךָ – תָּמוּתוֹ, “lest you (plur.) die—you (sing.) and your people—by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” (Jer 27:13). In each of these examples, the appositive phrase clarifies which members of the group are being addressed; cf. 2 Kgs 9:5.

7. אֲנֹשִׁי לְצֹן – שְׁמַעוּ דְבַר־ה' – “hear (plur.) the word of the Lord—(you) men of mockery” (Isa 28:14). The absence of a definite article on (the last noun of) אֲנֹשִׁי לְצֹן suggests that it is appositive rather than vocative.

8. וְהִנֵּה קָמְתֶם תַּחַת אַבְתֵּיכֶם – תִּרְבּוּת אֲנָשִׁים חַטָּאִים, “and now you (plur.) have risen up in your fathers' place—(you,) a brood of sinful men” (Num 32:14). The phrase תִּרְבּוּת אֲנָשִׁים חַטָּאִים cannot be the immediate subject of the verb. It is usually taken as an extraposed appositive modifier of the affix on the verb.

9–10. וַיִּירָאוּ – אֶת־צִרְרוֹת בְּסָפִיהֶם – הֵמָּה וְאֲבֵיהֶם – וַיִּירָאוּ, “and (then) they saw their money pouches—they and their father—and they were frightened” (Gen 42:35); וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־הַיַּרְדֵּן – הוּא וְכָל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, “and they came as far as the Jordan—he and all the Israelites” (Josh 3:1) The first parallel is, of course, from JS itself.

11–12. וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּמַעְרָה – הוּא וּשְׁתֵי בָנָיו, “and he lived in a cave—he and his two daughters” (Gen 19:30); וַיֵּצֵא בְּשָׁנַת הַיָּבֵל – הוּא וּבָנָיו עִמּוֹ, “he shall go out in the year of the jubilee—he and his children with him” (Lev 25:54).

13. וַיַּחְלְמוּ חֲלוֹם – שְׁנֵיהֶם אִישׁ חֲלֵמוֹ בַּלַּיְלָה אֶחָד אִישׁ כְּפִתְרוֹן חֲלֵמוֹ הַמִּשְׁקָה וְהָאִפָּה, “and they dreamed a dream—both of them, each one (dreaming) his dream on the same night (as the other),

each one (dreaming a dream) appropriate to the dream message (meant) for him, the butler and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison” (Gen 40:5). This parallel, from JS, has a sequence of four appositive phrases.

14–15. אִישׁ לְאֹהֲלוֹ וַיִּנָּסוּ – אִישׁ לְאֹהֲלוֹ 15. “and they fled, each one to his own tents” (1 Sam 4:10); וַיִּקְמוּ כָּל הַקְּרָאִים אֲשֶׁר לְאֹדִינְיָהוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ – אִישׁ לְדַרְכּוֹ; “and all of Adonija’s invitees arose and departed, each one on his own way” (1 Kgs 1:49). Here, as in parallel 13 immediately above, we have two of the many examples of apposition with “each one” used to form a distributive adverbial. In these two examples, the appositive phrase expresses the same thought as “shall flee in seven directions (lit., ways)” (Deut 28:7, 25).

16. וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֵלָיו יִשְׁבִי יְבִישׁ גִּלְעָד אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשׂוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים לְשָׂאוֹל: וַיָּקוּמוּ – כָּל-אִישׁ ... “and when the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, they (= the inhabitants) arose—every man of valor—and marched the whole night ...” (1 Sam 31:11–12). A classic translation of the Septuagint is essentially the same: “And the inhabitants of Jabis Galaad hear what the Philistines did to Saul. And they rose up, *even* every man of might, and marched all night...”⁸³ According to the usual interpretation, חֵיל is the immediate subject of וַיָּקוּמוּ. However, this analysis seems unlikely because predicate verbs *preceding* the singular phrase כָּל-אִישׁ are normally singular as well; see twenty-one verses earlier וַיִּעַן כָּל-אִישׁ-רָע וּבְלִיעֵל (30:22), as well as וַיִּצַּעַק וְעָלִי יְבוּא כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יְהִיָּה-; וַיִּאָּסֹף כָּל-אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל, (20:11); כָּל-אִישׁ אֲפָרַיִם וַיַּעַל כָּל-אִישׁ; (19:43); וַיַּעַן כָּל-אִישׁ יְהוּדָה עַל-אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל; (2 Sam 15:4); לֹא-רִיב וּמִשְׁפָּט עָבַר כָּל-אִישׁ אַחֲרָי יוֹאָב; (20:2; note the change of both word order and agreement in the second clause!); לְרֹדֶף אַחֲרָי שְׁבַע בְּנֵי-בְכָרָי וַיִּאֵשׁ יְהוּדָה דָּבְקוּ בְּמַלְכָּם (20:13).⁸⁴ It is more likely, then, that כָּל-אִישׁ חֵיל stands in apposition to the immediate subject of וַיָּקוּמוּ—an affixed pronoun that refers to a phrase (יִשְׁבִי יְבִישׁ גִּלְעָד) in the previous verse.

17–18. וַיָּבִאוּ – כָּל-אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁאָו לְבָבוֹ ... וַיָּבִאוּ – הָאֲנָשִׁים עַל-הַנְּשִׁים. “and they came, everyone whose heart was stirred.... so they came, both men and women....” (Exod 35:21–22; NRSV); cf. already Matthew’s Bible (1537): “And they went (as many as their hartes coraged them & as many as their spirites made

83 Brenton, *Septuagint*, 1: 328.

84 There are only three exceptions to this rule in the Pentateuch and Early Prophets, at least one of which seems to have a simple explanation. In וַיִּתְקַבְּצוּ אֵלָיו כָּל-אִישׁ מִצוֹק וְכָל-אִישׁ (1 Sam 22:2), the verb may be plural because the subject is an unusually long compound noun phrase containing *three* occurrences of אִישׁ. The other two exceptions are in Exod 35:21 and 2 Sam 13:9.

them wyllynge) and brought heue offringes vnto the Lorde ...” (v. 21);⁸⁵ and the Great Bible (1539): “And they came both men & wemen (euen as many as were willing harted)...” (v. 22).⁸⁶ In parallel 17, as in parallel 16, it is unlikely that singular כל-איש is the immediate subject of the plural verb that precedes it.

The collection of parallels presented above, which is by no means exhaustive, shows that (1) apposition to a subject expressed by person/number affixes on the verb is far from rare in BH; and (2) such apposition has many forms and functions. Taken as a whole, it provides solid support for R2.

7 Literary Solution 1: Stylistic Variation

We turn now to the literary component of the problem. How are we to understand the interchange among the terms Ishmaelite, Midianite, and Medanite in JS (Gen 37:25, 27, 28, 36; 39:1)? A number of scholars have pointed out that such variation—including, but not limited to, alternation of ethnonyms—is a legitimate esthetic feature of ancient Near Eastern narrative style, in the Bible and elsewhere:

Kenneth Kitchen: “The use of multiple terms in a narrative is indicative not of disparate documents but of typical Near Eastern stylistic usage. For similar use of three terms within a few lines, compare the Egyptian stele of Sebekkhu (c.1850 BC), who refers to the one general foe of his pharaoh’s Palestinian campaign as Mntyw-Stt, ‘Asiatic bedouin’; as Rntw hst, ‘vile Syrians’; and as ʿamw, ‘Asiatics.’”⁸⁷

85 <http://textusreceptusbibles.com/Interlinear/2035021>.

86 <http://textusreceptusbibles.com/Interlinear/2035022>. In support of NRSV’s interpretation of v. 22, we may note that, in the absence of a break following ויבאו, the most salient meaning of the clause would have been “the men had relations with (lit., came in onto) the women,” thanks to the use of על instead of -ו with הנשים; cf. וְאִישׁ אִין בְּאֶרֶץ. Additional support for NRSV’s interpretation of v. 22 comes from לְבוֹא עֲלֵינוּ (Gen 19:31). Further support for NRSV’s interpretation of v. 22 comes from פֶּן-יָבֹא וְהָפְנִי – אִם עַל-בָּנַי (Gen 32:12); here the phrase אִם עַל-בָּנַי, a close parallel to אִם עַל-הַנְּשִׁים, is separated from והפני by the accents.

87 Kitchen, “Joseph,” 657. The ethnonyms appear to be misprinted; read *Mntyw-Stt*, *Rntw*, and *ʿmw*.

Derek Kidner: “The alternation may be partly for variety and partly to record both the main point (that Joseph was sold to a people outside the covenant) and the concrete detail.”⁸⁸

Moshé Anbar: “We have proposed explaining the variation of names in the sale of Joseph story as the use of three names to refer to the same group of nomads; and the variation of names in the Mari letter, in Judg 6–8, 1 Chr 5, Josh 22, Num 32, Judg 4–5, and Assyrian inscriptions, as the use of different names of tribes to refer to the larger group to which they belong.”⁸⁹

Shemaryahu Talmon: “Viewed from the angle of biblical stylistics, rather than from the point of view of ‘source criticism,’ the reference to ‘Ishmaelites’ in 37:36 as against the mention of ‘Midianites’ in 39:1 is but an instance of legitimate variation, and should not be construed as implying, as is widely held, that the redactor of Genesis here has welded together different ‘strands’ or ‘sources.’”⁹⁰

Adele Berlin: “The use of both terms for one entity in subsequent verses can be explained as ‘elegant variation.’”⁹¹

E. J. Revell: “The use of variant designations for a population group or an individual is, in fact, common in biblical narrative.... In this particular case, ‘Midianites’ is used where the noun is the subject of its clause, ‘Ishmaelites’ where it is not....”⁹²

The scholars cited above adduce parallels involving the variation of ethnonyms from Egypt, Mari, and Assyria, as well as the Bible itself. Further evidence for solution 1 can be adduced from Gen 37:36, which identifies the merchants that sold Joseph to Potiphar as Medanites. In Gen 25:2 and 1 Chr 1:32, the Medanites are presented as distinct from—albeit related to—the Midianites, and it has been suggested that “Medān ... may, in fact, be an area south-east of Midyān, still known as Wādi Mudān by medieval Muslim geographers.”⁹³

88 Kidner, *Genesis*, 183.

89 Anbar, “Changement,” 232.

90 Talmon, “Presentation,” 19.

91 Berlin, *Poetics*, 120.

92 Revell, “Midian,” 75.

93 Retsö, *Arabs*, 128; cf. 196 n. 66; and Knauf, *Midian*, 27 n. 137.

Nevertheless, the accepted view today (cf. already LXX, Jerome, Saadia, Rashi on Num 31:6, Bekhor Shor, etc.) is that, *in JS*, the terms are used interchangeably: the Medanites of Gen 37:36 are the same individuals as the Midianites of 37:28. If so, this would seem to be additional evidence, from JS itself, that we are dealing with stylistic variation.

This would not be the only example of stylistic variation in JS. One of the clauses listed above, **לְכוּ וְנִמְכְּרוּ לִישְׁמֵעָאֵלִים** (37:27), exhibits such variation with **לְכוּ וְנִהְרְגוּ וְנִשְׁלַחְהוּ בְּאֶחָד הַבְּרוּת** (37:20). Both of these clauses are proposals to get rid of Joseph, both are formulated as exhortations, both contain the hortatory imperative **לְכוּ** followed by 1cpl imperfect verbs with 3ms suffixes referring to Joseph,⁹⁴ and the two of them are assigned by many critical scholars to the same urtext (J or, for supplementarians, the base text).⁹⁵ Despite all of these similarities, the imperfects of v. 20 take the *-ēhû* suffix, while the imperfect of v. 27 takes the *-ennû* suffix.⁹⁶

Abba Bendavid has identified many examples of stylistic variation in the Bible, including the following two examples from Genesis,⁹⁷ each assigned by many documentarians to J:⁹⁸

Gen 24:14
וּגְם־גַּמְלִיד אִשְׁקָה
v. 19
גַּם לְגַמְלִיד אִשָּׂאב
v. 44
וּגְם לְגַמְלִיד אִשָּׂאב
v. 46
וּגְם־גַּמְלִיד אִשְׁקָה

94 The similarity has been noted before; see Jacob, *Buch*, 706; and Kebekus, *Josefserzählung*, 8–9.

95 See, for example, Speiser, *Genesis*, 288–289; Friedman, “Torah,” 609; Campbell and O’Brien, *Sources*, 224; Schmid, “Josephsgeschichte,” 106; Schwartz, “How,” 266; Baden, *Composition*, 35.

96 For the two interchangeable forms of the suffixed pronoun when the verb has a cohortative/final sense, see Steiner, “He Said,” 493 n. 105.

97 Bendavid, **לְשׁוֹן**, 118–19. See also Rendsburg, *How*, chapters 2–4, 9, 12, 15.

98 See, for example, Kautzsch and Socin, *Genesis*, 34–35, 48–50; Driver, *Genesis*, 196–197, 233–236; Speiser, *Genesis*, 132, 174; and Dozeman, *Pentateuch*, 246–247. Each of them assigns *both* passages to J.

The preceding example exhibits a simple *abba* pattern.⁹⁹ The following example is much more complex:

Gen 18:24
ולא תשא למקום למען חמשים הצדיקים
v. 26
אם אמיצא בסדם חמשים צדיקים בתוך העיר ונשאתי לכלהמקום **בעבורם**:
v. 28
לא אשחית **אם אמיצא** שם ארבעים וחמשה:
v. 29
לא אעשה **בעבור** הארבעים:
v. 30
לא אעשה **אם אמיצא** שם שלשים:
v. 31
לא אשחית **בעבור** העשרים:
v. 32
לא אשחית **בעבור** העשרה:

In this example, we find (underlying) numerical noun phrases each governed by *למען*, *בעבור*, or *אם אמיצא*. Of these three, the last two occur together in v. 26, after which they alternate fairly regularly, yielding an *abababb* pattern. Another alternation, beginning in v. 28, is between *לא אשחית* and *לא אעשה*; its pattern is *abbaa*. The intricate interplay between the two juxtaposed alternation patterns is reminiscent of contrapuntal music.

Another striking example of stylistic variation is found in two passages in 1 Samuel. In each passage, a single speaker utters two sequences of words that are identical except for the replacement of one word for “lad” with another: *אמר לנער הגה החצים ממך ~ בן-מיצה העלם ~ בן-מיצה הנער* (17:55–56; Saul); *אמר לעלם הגה החצים ממך* (20:21–22; Jonathan). Since these two passages contain the only attestations of the noun *עלם* in the entire Bible, it is reasonable to conclude that the only motivation for the use of this noun in the Bible is to create stylistic variation. Here again, we have clear proof for the deliberate use of this literary device in BH narrative prose.

We also find stylistic variation within a single utterance. Take, for example, *מה הביאך הלם ומה-אתה עשה בזה ומה-לך פה* “Who brought you here, and what are you doing here, and what (business) have you here” (Judg 18:3). In this ten-word sentence, there are three different deictics meaning “here,” in the sense

99 Bendavid, לשון, 1:18.

of “to this place” (הלם) or “in this place” (פה, בזה). Other examples that belong here are אֶת יָדָם וְלִמְלֵא בָּם (Exod 29:29); וְלֹא תִטְמְאוּ בָּהֶם וְנִטְמְתֶם בָּם (Lev 11:43); and מִשְׁחֶתֶם בָּהֶם מִיּוֹם בָּם (22:25). In pre-BH, the ancestors of בָּהֶם and בָּם may have been morphophonemic alternants, conditioned by the context, but these examples seem to exhibit stylistic variation.

Such parallels, which are just a tiny sample, show that the literary approaches cited in this section are, for the most part, well-founded. Even so, these approaches leave some questions unanswered. Most of them make no attempt to explain the specific details of the variation pattern in Gen 37 or the entire JS. In the following sections, we shall see that there is more to be said about the narrative functions of אנשים מדינים.

8 Literary Solution 2A: Subjective Perspective—Ishmaelites and Midianites

Does the phrase אנשים מדינים contribute anything to the narrative beyond a bit of stylistic variation? One of the earliest and clearest answers to this question is found in Isaac Abarbanel’s commentary: “But when they drew near to them, they learned more about them; for in addition to what they already knew—that they were generally Ishmaelites—they learned, when they came, that they were specifically Midianites, who belong to the general class of Ishmaelites.”¹⁰⁰ Similar answers are given by some modern scholars.¹⁰¹

The underlying assumption of these interpreters is that the Midianites of v. 28a and the Ishmaelites of vv. 27 and 28b are the same individuals, an assumption that goes back to LXX, Jubilees, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, Saadia Gaon, etc. As evidence for this assumption, Ibn Ezra (see section 4 above) cites the words כִּי יִשְׁמַעְאֲלִים הֵם גְּזָמֵי זָהָב לָהֶם, “being Ishmaelites, they (= the Midianites) had golden earrings” (v. 24).¹⁰²

100 https://www.sefaria.org/Abarbanel_on_Torah%2C_Genesis.37.12.1?lang=bi. This answer is a refinement of Ramban’s: “When they came near to them, they found that they were merchants ... Midianite men, traders ...” https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis.37.25.1?lang=he.

101 See, for example, Ewald, *Komposition*, 55; Green, *Unity*, 449; Abramsky, “הישמעאלים,” 129; and Hamilton, *Genesis*, 424. See also Leupold and Longacre, below. Cf. Greenstein, “Equivocal,” 116: “the former [= Ishmaelites] are described collectively as a ‘caravan,’ while the latter [= Midianites] are depicted as ‘men.’” For an additional explanation of Greenstein’s observation, see section 10 below.

102 The connection between Gen 37:28 and Judg 8:24 is noted also by Joseph Kara (on Judg 8:24 <https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/7/8/24>), Abraham b. Moses b. Maimon (on Gen 37:28, in the name of his grandfather); David Qimḥi (on Gen 37:28 <https://www>

Some neo-documentarians have taken issue with Ibn Ezra’s comment on Gen 37:28. Baruch Schwartz warns his readers not to accept Ibn Ezra’s “far-fetched harmonistic theory that the Midianites are Ishmaelites,” dispensing with any further discussion.¹⁰³ Baden, by contrast, admits that Ibn Ezra’s solution to the Ishmaelite/Midianite problem “is well grounded in the biblical text,”¹⁰⁴ but he, too, rejects it. One reason he gives for rejecting it is that “one might wonder that the Bible draws this equivalence only in Judges rather than at every point where the Ishmaelites or Midianites are referred to....”¹⁰⁵ This is a surprising argument, especially coming from a source critic, since it seems to assume that the biblical authors were a homogeneous group—that if *one* of them felt the need to explain something, *all* of them would or should have felt that same need. Even under that assumption, however, there is nothing to wonder about. In Judges, the equivalence (better: *hyponymy*)¹⁰⁶ is mentioned not because the author assumed it was unknown,¹⁰⁷ but to explain why Gideon assumed that most of his fighters had in their possession a golden earring taken from the Midianites.¹⁰⁸ Another surprising reason given by Baden for rejecting

.mgketer.org/tanach/1/37/28; and Judg 8:24 <https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/7/8/24>); Abarbanel (see above); Rosenmüller, *Scholia*, 1: 270; Vater, *Commentar*, 1: 292; Ewald, *Genesis*, 56; Knobel, *Genesis*, 264; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 368; Kidner, *Genesis*, 183, 186; Anbar, “Changeament,” 230; Donner, *Josephsgeschichte*, 45; Eph’al, “Ishmael,” 225–226; idem, *Ancient*, 235–236; Dietrich, *Josephszählung*, 20; Amit, שופטים, 154; Staubli, *Image*, 200; Wenham, *Genesis*, 355; Revell, “Midian,” 75 n. 16; Waltke and Fredricks, *Genesis*, 503; and Gaß, “Midianiter,” 292 n. 28. I am indebted to Shalom Holtz for the reference to Amit.

- 103 Schwartz, “ריידתו,” 7 n. 13. This note mentions neither the many modern scholars cited in our previous footnote, with the exception of Abramsky, nor Judg 8:24.
- 104 Baden, *Composition*, 7.
- 105 Baden, *Composition*, 6.
- 106 Although all or most of the Ishmaelites in *Joseph’s caravan* may have been Midianites, Judg 8:24 seems to imply that all or most of the Midianite population of the ancient world was a *subset* of the Ishmaelite population; see Abarbanel (above); Rosenmüller, *Scholia*, 1: 270: “They are differentiated as genus and species of the same nation”; Gunkel, *Genesis*, 368; Kidner, *Genesis*, 183 with n. 1; Berlin, *Poetics*, 120; Longacre, *Joseph*, 31; Hamilton, *Genesis*, 423; and Abramsky, “הישמעאלים,” 129. Cf. Eph’al, “Ishmael,” 225–226; and idem, *Ancient*, 236.
- 107 Baden’s argument is based on the assumption that the sentence **נזמי זהב להם כי הם ישמעאלים** asserts that the Midianites are Ishmaelites. However, since negating the sentence does not negate the embedded (subordinate) clause **הם ישמעאלים**, we are dealing not with *assertion* but with *presupposition*; see Keenan, “Two,” 44–52. In other words, that the Midianites are Ishmaelites is presented as a fact that everyone would be expected to know. Baden himself (*Composition*, 6) points out a second presupposition in the same verse: “Ishmaelites ... tend to wear earrings, as the biblical author assumes everyone knows.”
- 108 For golden ornaments worn by Midianites, see also Num 31:50–54.

Ibn Ezra's interpretation is that he was "forced into the standard midrashic technique of finding a single verse elsewhere in the Bible, unrelated to the passage at hand, in order to create a reading that eliminates the textual problem."¹⁰⁹ If citing a proof-text from outside of JS to elucidate the usage and semantic relationship of terms such as *Midianite* and *Ishmaelite* is a "midrashic technique," then every philological commentary ever written is midrashic.¹¹⁰ Among the modern scholars who follow Ibn Ezra in his supposedly midrashic technique of citing Judg 8:24 and in his allegedly "farfetched harmonistic theory that the Midianites are Ishmaelites" are Rosenmüller, Vater, Ewald, Knobel, Gunkel, Donner, Eph'al, Dietrich, Staubli, and Gaß.¹¹¹

The first scholar to combine Abarbanel's literary insight with R2 was Leupold: "Then they passed by—Midianite men, traders.... Since the previous words of Judah were spoken with one eye on the Ishmaelites, the next verb *wayya'abheru*—'and they passed by'—can refer only to these men. Closer inspection reveals their more exact identity, which the writer inserts parenthetically, 'Midianite men, traders.'"¹¹² He was followed by Longacre: "The text first applies the term 'Ishmaelites' to the caravan seen from afar, and then on closer view calls them 'Midianite merchants.' ... I would, therefore, render v 28a as follows: 'And so they passed by, Midianite traders [as they proved to be].'"¹¹³ Unfortunately, these two discussions have not had the impact they deserve,¹¹⁴ perhaps because they are very brief.

In any event, the use of the two ethnonyms in Gen 37:25–28 requires further discussion. Genesis 37:25 relates that the brothers who were eating and resting were able to make out, in the distance, a caravan of Ishmaelites: וַיֵּשְׂאוּ עֵינֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהָיָה אֲרֻחַת יִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וְגַמְלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נֹבָאֵת וְצִרְי וְלֹט הַזֹּלָכִים לְהוֹרִיד וַיֵּרְאוּ וְהָיָה אֲרֻחַת יִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וְגַמְלֵיהֶם נֹשְׂאִים נֹבָאֵת וְצִרְי וְלֹט הַזֹּלָכִים לְהוֹרִיד מִצְרָיִמָּה, "they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and ladanum, going to bring it down to Egypt." This formulation is somewhat misleading. The caravan may well have been too far away to see much more than a file or two of camels moving slowly towards Dotan on the caravan route from the east (cf. וַיֵּשְׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהָיָה גַמְלִים בָּאִים, "he looked up and saw camels coming," in Gen 24:63). However, that

109 Baden, *Composition*, 7.

110 The term *midrashic* is greatly overused by Bible scholars. In my view, it properly refers to exegesis that exhibits omniscience and/or atomism.

111 For these and others, see n. 102 above.

112 Leupold, *Genesis*, 970–971.

113 Longacre, *Joseph*, 31.

114 An internet search suggests that the first passage has never been quoted in a scholarly work. The second one has been quoted partially (Baden, *Composition*, 11), omitting the translation, which is the only source for the syntactic analysis (R2). It has also been dismissed in a five-word footnote by Campbell and O'Brien (*Sources*, 235 n. 62), with no verbatim quotation at all.

sighting sufficed for the brothers to know that at least some of the men in the caravan were Ishmaelites, i.e., members of “camel-breeding bedouin tribes,”¹¹⁵ and that they were bringing balm and the like from Gilead to the Egyptian market. Most adult males in that time and place would have been familiar with the lucrative aromatics trade with Egypt, made possible by the domestication of the camel.¹¹⁶ Jacob and his sons knew that *נְבִיאַת וְצָרִי וְלֵט* were in great demand in Egypt (cf. *נְבִיאַת וְלֵט* ... *נְבִיאַת וְצָרִי* in Gen 43:11) and that Gilead was Egypt’s usual source for at least one of those commodities.¹¹⁷ Indeed, depictions of ancient camel caravans have, in fact, been found in the general area of Gilead, one in the Late Bronze Age at Deir ‘Alla, ca. 2 miles west of it, and another in the Umayyad period at Deir al-‘Adas, in southern Syria, ca. 40 miles north of it.¹¹⁸ Later the brothers would learn more about the caravan.

In allowing the narrative to unfold in this fashion, the narrator has temporarily (vv. 25–28) switched from third-person *omniscient* perspective to third-person *subjective* perspective. Whether by happenstance or by design, the so-called subjective perspective seems to coincide quite regularly with the viewpoint of the grammatical *subject* of the clause. In v. 25, the subject is an affixed pronoun referring to the brothers, who will subsequently acquire information a little at a time, as the caravan comes closer (cf. 2 Sam 18:24, 27). The reality of this shift to subjective perspective is confirmed by v. 29, which contains another, unrelated example of such a shift. In the words of Adele Berlin: “In v. 29 Reuben returns to the pit and finds that Joseph is gone (*hinneh* shows

115 Knauf, “Ishmaelites,” 517; see also Anbar, “Changement,” 230; and Heide, “Domestication,” 365 n. 93. Cf. 1 Chr 27:30; and see already Ramban’s comment on Gen 37:25: “They recognized from the camels that it was a caravan of Ishmaelites”; https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis.37.25.1?lang=he.

116 See Stager, “Forging,” 109: “By the Late Bronze Age, the aromatics trade had become the most lucrative business in the ancient Near East thanks to the dromedary camel.” For camels used as pack animals in the Late Bronze Age, see Knauf, “Supplementa,” 20; Staubli, *Image*, 168, 185–186, 200; Zarins, “Camel,” 826; Artzy, “Incense,” 134–135; Kitchen, “Sheba,” 135–136, 151; Jasmin, “Emergence,” 147–149; Younker and Koudele, “Camel”; Heide and Peters, *Camels*, 179, 186 (contra Sapir-Hen and Ben-Yosef, “Introduction,” 280).

117 See Jer 8:22 and especially 46:11; Artzy, “Incense,” 133; and Heide and Peters, *Camels*, 240–242. See also at the end of this section below.

118 See figs. 3 and 4 below. Fig. 3 depicts 3 camels, believed to be Midianite (Staubli, *Image*, 186), in front of a tree, near Deir ‘Alla. That town was situated next to two ancient trade routes used by camel caravans, including the “route of the tent dwellers” (Judg 8:11) along the Jabbok, where Gideon captured Midianite camels (vv. 21, 26) not too long after fig. 3 was painted. Below the camels is a decorative pattern similar to ones on securely dated LB pottery from the same site and elsewhere; see Franken, “Excavations,” 368 and plates 14–15; and, from the 14th century BCE, Fischer, “Tell Abu al-Kharaz,” 205. Fig. 4 illustrates the practice, alluded to in Rabbinic literature (m. Shabbat 5:3; t. BM 1:2/3), of tying camels one to another and pulling the lead camel from the front. For a graffito from Dura Europos depicting a train of four unloaded camels, see Seland, “Iconography,” 111 and 113 fig. 7.

Reuben's point of view).¹¹⁹ Here we have an example of והנה used to introduce information that is *new to the subject but not the audience*, as in Gen 29:25 (conveyed already in v. 23); 41:7 (conveyed already in v. 5); 42:27 (conveyed already in v. 25); Exod 9:7 (conveyed already in v. 6); etc.

An excellent parallel to וישא עיניהם ויראו והנה ארחת ישמעאלים באה מגלעד is found in Josh 5:13: וַיְהִי בַהֲלוֹת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בִּירִיחוֹ וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה-אִישׁ עֹמֵד לְנֶגְדוֹ, “Once, when Joshua was at Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him.” At this point, the narrator speaks of Joshua seeing “a man,” shifting temporarily from omniscient perspective to subjective perspective. It is not until v. 15, after Joshua learns the identity of his interlocutor, that the narrator shifts to וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂר־צָבָא ה', “the commander of the army of the Lord said,” instead of *וַיֹּאמֶר הַאִישׁ*.

It is impossible to leave this topic without mentioning the most dramatic biblical example of such temporary switching to the clause subject's point of view, in the story of Joshua's spies. In Josh 2:7, it is reported that the king of Jericho's men רָדְפוּ אַחֲרֵיהֶם דְּרֹךְ הַיַּרְדֵּן הַיְרֵדָה, “chased after them on the road to the Jordan” (instead of the expected *בַּקְשׁוּם בְּדֶרֶךְ הַיַּרְדֵּן*, “searched for them along the road to the Jordan”; cf. v. 22). This was true only *לפני/כפי מחשבתם*,¹²⁰ according to the (mistaken) thinking of the search party, since the spies were still inside the city.¹²¹

9 Literary Solution 2B: Subjective Perspective—Caravans and Merchants

What does the appositive noun סחרים contribute to the narrative? Was it necessary to mention that the Ishmaelites in a caravan carrying merchandise were merchants? And if so, why wasn't it mentioned already in v. 25?

The answer to the first two questions is that many caravans in the second millennium BCE—even ones carrying valuable commodities—did not include merchants. This is especially obvious in the case of royal caravans, e.g., caravans carrying gifts and offerings from one ruler to another. In the Amarna

119 Berlin, *Poetics*, 120. For והנה used to introduce new information, see Rashbam on Gen 25:4; 29:25; and 41:7, https://www.sefaria.org/Rashbam_on_Genesis; Garr, “הַן,” 343–344; and Miller-Naudé and van der Merwe, “הַנֵּה,” 71–74. I am indebted to Jeremy Hutton for the last reference.

120 For this exegetical term, see Abraham Ibn Ezra's references to Josh 2:7 in commenting on Gen 2:22; Exod 7:11; 20:2; Mic 4:14; Ps 69:5; 74:4; 78:36; and David Qimḥi on Josh 2:7.

121 In an email, Shalom Holtz points out that “the mistaken information is already ‘planted’ by Rahab herself in 2:5. Indeed, one might want to take 2:5, 7 as a ‘command-fulfillment’ sequence: וְהַאֲנָשִׁים רָדְפוּ ~ וְהַאֲנָשִׁים רָדְפוּ.”

letters (194, 226, 255), written not long after the period assumed for Joseph, we find references to “caravans of the king.”¹²² These are understood to be caravans carrying tribute sent by Asiatic vassals to the Egyptian king.¹²³ Other royal caravans carried gold, turquoise, and copper to Egypt from Egyptian mines (in Nubia, Sinai, and the Aravah) without any need for merchants.

Even *merchant* caravans frequently did not include merchants in the second millennium BCE. This is clear from the Old Assyrian archives from Karum Kanesh, dated to the nineteenth century, the oldest and fullest source of information about caravans to have survived from the ancient world. The typical caravan traveling from Ashur in Northern Mesopotamia to Kanesh in Anatolia and back did not include a *tamkāru* “merchant.”¹²⁴ They were led, instead, by junior transport personnel—boys (*ṣuḥārū*) and sometimes even slaves (*wardū*).¹²⁵ The most important of these transporters was the *kaṣṣāru*, a term rendered “donkey driver (employed in the transportation of goods overland)” by CAD, and “harnesser” by Mogens Larsen and Jan Dercksen.¹²⁶ According to Larsen, “the job of a *kaṣṣārum* seems to have consisted in taking care of the animals and the goods en route.”¹²⁷

The absence of merchants from the typical Old Assyrian caravan on its way to Kanesh is not difficult to understand. Such a caravan would deliver a consignment of tin and cloth from a merchant in Ashur to a business partner or trusted agent at Kanesh, who would sell it somewhere in Anatolia on behalf of the sender. In other words, the Assyrians had set up a trading colony in Kanesh “in order to avoid the risks of a ‘venture trade’ that left them at the mercy of the momentary local situation and unable to exploit the possibilities of the various regional markets.”¹²⁸

Karum Kanesh is not the only merchant colony known to have existed in the second millennium BCE. An Amarna letter from King Burnaburiash “complained that a Babylonian trading company established by his ambassador in the Canaanite city of Khinaton had, immediately after the ambassador’s

122 Bergoffen, “Overland,” 62.

123 Na’aman, “Jerusalem,” 38–39.

124 Akk. *tamkāru* is the etymon of Aram. תַּמְקָר, the term used to render Heb. סוֹחֵר in almost every targum to Gen 37:28. Aram. תַּמְקָר is, in turn, the etymon of Arab. تاجّر, used for that same purpose by Saadia Gaon in that same place.

125 Larsen, *Assyrian*, 150; Dercksen, “Assyrian,” 65.

126 CAD K, 266 s.v.; Larsen, *Assyrian*, 41, 149–150; Dercksen, “Assyrian,” 65.

127 Larsen, *Assyrian*, 41.

128 Veenhof, “Kanesh,” 865. Cf. Veenhof, “Modern,” 339. For a possible parallel in 1 Kgs 20:34, see Elat, קשרי, 206–208; and Cogan, *1 Kings*, 469. For the financial risks and physical perils of venture trade, see the tragic story of Moses Maimonides’ beloved younger brother, David, in Goitein, *Letters*, 207–212. I am indebted to Mordechai Friedman for the last reference.

departure, been attacked and utterly plundered.”¹²⁹ Most relevant of all, there appears to have been a similar colony in the East Delta in the time of the Hyksos:

Tell el-Maskhuta was a short-lived Hyksos outpost, an unfortified village ... founded in the later part of the Second Intermediate Period.... The site's main purpose, probably as an outpost facilitating long-distance caravan trade, was met during its winter occupation. During the summer months, the population presumably relocated elsewhere, possibly at the Middle Bronze Age encampments near Tell er-Retabah.¹³⁰

There is even evidence that could be viewed as hinting that camel caravans visited the East Delta during the second millennium BCE, viz., the representation of a dromedary camel, dating to the late Eighteenth Dynasty or the early Nineteenth Dynasty (Seti I or early in the reign of Ramesses II), found at Qantir, the site of Pi-Ramesses.¹³¹

It is clear from the above discussion that, when Joseph's brothers first saw the camel caravan from afar, they could not have known that it included merchants. It could just as easily have been a small caravan of Ishmaelite cameleers hired by a merchant in Gilead to transport a consignment of aromatics to a

¹²⁹ Niebuhr, *Amarna*, 29–30.

¹³⁰ Holladay, “Tell,” 959. For a suggestion that merchants from the southern Levant resided at Maadi (twelve km south of Cairo) and Dep (in the far northwest of the Delta) already in the early fourth millennium BCE, see Wilkinson, *Genesis*, 126–127.

¹³¹ Pusch, “Dromedar,” 107–118; see fig. 1 below. For the use of dromedary camels to transport aromatics in the Late Bronze Age, see n. 116 above. On the other hand, since the bowl into which the representation was scratched is from an industrial bronze factory (Pusch, “Dromedar,” 107, 116), it is possible that the camel came to the Delta loaded with copper smelted at Wadi Naşib in southern Sinai, where a camel petroglyph has been found, as well; see Younker and Koudele, “Camel.” See also fig. 2 below, depicting a presumably Midianite man, bringing a camel and a tablet-shaped object (made of copper?) before Ba’alat-Hathor, who is seated on a high-backed throne in her mining temple at nearby Serabiţ el-Khadim. The camel, like the ones in the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III and the Persepolis reliefs, is an offering. It will be used to transport the goddess's malachite and copper to and from the smelters. The solar disk headdress on her wig has forward-pointing horns, an unusual feature reminiscent of the cattle horns depicted in nomadic rock art in the region (see Chaix and Hansen). Was it a third gift from the cameleer? A second headdress, with the standard upward-pointing horns, sits next to her throne, as if she has just taken it off to put on the other one. For a pottery model of a camel loaded with water jars, found in a tomb of the Nineteenth Dynasty at Rifeh (Middle Egypt) and further discussion, see Kitchen, “Camel,” 182; idem, “Sheba,” 135 with n. 22; Heide, “Domestication,” 342 with n. 17; and Heide and Peters, *Camels*, 158–165.

partner or agent in the East Delta.¹³² Indeed, that would have been a reasonable inference if the Ishmaelites were, already at that time, known as members of “camel-breeding bedouin tribes.”¹³³ It was only when the caravan passed by that it emerged that these particular Ishmaelites were professional merchants rather than mere transporters.

The relevance of these facts to Gen 37:28 should be obvious. Boys or slaves charged with the responsibility of taking care of the animals and goods en route would be much less likely than professional merchants to take the risk of purchasing a self-described kidnap victim (Gen 40:15). Even if Joseph kept quiet, it is difficult to disagree with the judgment of Moses Maimonides’ son, Abraham, concerning the sale of Joseph, that “given the circumstances, it was not hidden from the buyers that he was stolen.”¹³⁴ If so, the buyers would also have been aware that (1) there might be a posse of angry, armed kinsmen looking for Joseph;¹³⁵ (2) any attempt to outrun them would expose the loaded camels to injury, posing a risk to profitability;¹³⁶ and (3) the men of the caravan might well be outnumbered by the pursuers.¹³⁷ In my view, the considerations

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- 132 The cameleers would have gotten fresh camels in the Ishmaelite tribal territory extending to Shur (Gen 25:18), in or near the East Delta. The consignee (of the aromatics) may have been an Ishmaelite, as well. In Persian times, there was an Arabian (Kedarite) settlement at Tell el-Maskhuṭa (Rabinowitz, “Another,” 155). This settlement may have served as a trading colony for shipments of aromatics from Arabia to Egypt; cf. Eph’al, *Ancient*, 208–13.
- 133 Knauf, “Ishmaelites,” 517a. According to 1 Chr 27:30, the man in charge of David’s camels was an Ishmaelite. For discussion of his Arabian name, see Heide and Peters, *Camels*, 278–279.
- 134 Abraham ben Moses ben Maimon, פִּירְוּשׁ, 141 lines 20–21 (on Gen 37:28). Cf. Potiphar’s assertion that “this is no slave” and his demand for a guarantor in Genesis Rabba https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.86.3?lang=he; and Charles, *Testaments*, 184 (T. Jos. 11:3): “Thou art not a slave, for even thy appearance doth make it manifest.”
- 135 For irate relatives of female kidnap victims, see Gen 34:1–3; Judg 21:21–22; and (in Laban’s false narrative) Gen 31:23, 26, 43. See also Charles, *Testaments*, 187 (T. Jos. 15:5): “For they (= the Ishmaelites) feared my father, lest he should come and execute upon them a grievous vengeance.” Cf. Westbrook, “Slave,” 1642: “The safest course was to sell the kidnap victim abroad.”
- 136 For the pace of a fully loaded camel, see Baker, *Nile*, 133: “a loaded camel seldom exceeds two and a half miles per hour”; and King, *Mysteries*, 86: “two and a half miles per hour ... is about the rate of a caravan of loaded camels over normal ground.” By contrast, a donkey with only a rider travels ca. five miles per hour; see Baker, *Nile*, 32.
- 137 Even assuming that, in the Bronze Age, each camel had its own puller, the men in a caravan of, say, ten animals would have been overwhelmed by a posse of two dozen armed men. And if Joseph’s buyers were using camel trains, with one puller for each file of four or five animals attached by ropes (see n. 118 above and figs. 4 and 5 below), the caravan would have been virtually defenseless without a substantial number of armed guards.

in this paragraph are sufficient to explain why it was necessary to note the fact that the Ishmaelites—in a caravan carrying merchandise—were merchants, just as the considerations in the previous paragraphs are sufficient to explain why that fact is not mentioned earlier in the chapter.

I suspect that many—if not most—students of the Bible will consider literary solutions 1 and 2 sufficient. For those who do not, I offer a third literary solution that has not been previously recognized.

10 Literary Solution 3: Keywords and Foreshadowing—“Midianite Men” and “An Egyptian Man”

Solution 3 is based on an intriguing parallel found a little later in JS: וַיִּקְנֶהוּ וַיִּמְצְרֵהוּ (Gen 39:1). This clause is structurally similar to וַיִּמְצְרֵהוּ וַיִּקְנֶהוּ – סָרִיס פְּרָעָה, שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים, אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם (Gen 39:1) and works in tandem with it to identify the successive foreign purchasers of Joseph who—together with his father (vv. 13–14), a helpful stranger (vv. 15–17), and his brothers—served as *unwitting agents* (Gen 45:5–8; 50:20; Ps 105:17; and Prov 19:21) of the divine plan revealed to Abraham (Gen 15:13) to bring Israel to Egypt.¹³⁸ The narrative identifies the foreign purchasers as “men/man + gentilic adjective” (אִישׁ and אֲנָשִׁים מִדִּינִים), giving their occupations (סָרִיס פְּרָעָה, שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים and סַחְרִים) as well.

Many critics have called attention to the placement of אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם in 39:1, following סָרִיס פְּרָעָה שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים. At first glance, it seems superfluous to describe Potiphar as “an Egyptian man” *after* identifying him as “a courtier of Pharaoh.” The expected order would appear to be אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם סָרִיס פְּרָעָה שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים*, with the three appositive phrases arranged in order of *increasing* specificity.

Now, this is a relatively minor problem with numerous possible solutions, as we shall see. Nevertheless, Wellhausen considered this problem to be serious enough to necessitate a diachronic solution: “That ‘Potiphar, the captain of the gentlemen at arms (*Trabantenoberst*)’ is an interpolation of the redactor is clear from the following אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם, which, as an appositive to that (phrase), is

138 The motives of these agents are aptly characterized as a “concatenation of bad and good intentions” by Blum, “Zwischen,” 497. Indeed, in my view, the concatenation begins much earlier, when (1) Rebekah tricks Isaac into giving Abraham’s blessing to Jacob instead of Esau; (2) Esau plans to take revenge after Isaac’s death, forcing Jacob to flee to Laban; (3) Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Leah, a woman he does not love, before marrying Rachel, his true love; (4) Jacob creates jealousy by showing that he favors Rachel and her son, Joseph.

completely senseless (*völlig sinnlos*).¹³⁹ Following Wellhausen, John Skinner comments that “the words הַטְּבַחִים—פוֹטִיפָר are a repetition by R^JE from 37³⁶ (E), in order to harmonise the two sources.”¹⁴⁰ Horst Seebass asserts that “the awkward formulation of v. 1 makes it certain that it is redacted.”¹⁴¹

Westermann adds a new argument for this theory: “It is certain that it (= הַטְּבַחִים שֶׁר פָּרְעָה שָׂר הַטְּבַחִים) is an addition ... because it is restricted to these two places, 37:36 and 39:1.”¹⁴² This argument is difficult to understand. It has long been recognized that 39:1 is a resumptive repetition (*Wiederaufnahme*), made necessary by a long digression, viz., the story of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38.¹⁴³ By definition, this literary device consists of a phrase occurring in precisely two places—one right before an interruption and the other right afterwards.

Wellhausen chose to account for the extraposition of a single noun phrase by excising the three preceding noun phrases from 39:1 in his J-source. In so doing, he created a new problem, one that involves an entire verse in that source: וַיִּקַּח אֲדָנָי יוֹסֵף אֹתוֹ וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ אֶל-בֵּית הַסֵּהַר מִקּוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֲסִירֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲסוּרִים (39:20).¹⁴⁴ The audience of Wellhausen’s J-source would have had no reason to assume that Joseph’s master was a high-ranking official. Indeed, Wellhausen himself notes that, in J (unlike E), “Joseph comes ... first to a private citizen (*Privatmann*) 39, 1. 2.”¹⁴⁵ That audience would have wondered how a private citizen managed to obtain “admitting privileges” at the prison where the king’s prisoners were incarcerated.¹⁴⁶ In this case, Wellhausen’s diachronic remedy seems to be worse than the synchronic disease that he diagnosed.

Wellhausen’s premise—that אִישׁ מִצְרִי is senseless—is itself flawed. It assumes that, if Potiphar was a courtier of Pharaoh, he was obviously an Egyptian. That assumption, although generally accepted by Wellhausen’s followers, has long been known to be incorrect. Even before Wellhausen’s time,

139 Wellhausen, *Composition*, 442. See already de Wette, *Beiträge*, 2/1: 147–148; and Hupfeld, *Quellen*, 66. See also Driver, *Genesis*, 333 n. 1; Speiser, *Genesis*, 302; and many others.

140 Skinner, *Genesis*, 457 n. 1.

141 Seebass, *Genesis III*, 51.

142 Westermann, *Genesis*, 3: 61.

143 So already Rashi ad loc.; and Samuel b. Ḥofni, פִּירוּשׁ, p. פג (early eleventh century): “It (= the narrative) has repeated (אֶעָאֵד) here the sale of Joseph and his descent to Egypt after saying there, ‘The Medanites sold him into Egypt,’ ... because it was interrupted (אֶנְקִטֵּעַ) by the marriage of Judah....” For modern research on the use of this device in the Bible, at Ugarit, and at Mari, see Natan-Yulzary, “Use.”

144 Wellhausen (*Composition*, 444) explicitly assigns vv. 20–23 to his J-source.

145 *Ibid.*, 442.

146 See already Hävernick and Keil, *Einleitung*, 148; and Jacob, *Quellenscheidung*, 25–27. Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 271, 275.

Eduard Böhmer argued, following August Knobel, that “the fact that Potifar is further characterized explicitly as ‘an Egyptian man’ is not remarkable, especially for that time, when the Hyksos ruled the land.”¹⁴⁷ Today, we know that Wellhausen’s assumption overlooks not only the non-Egyptian (Semitic) rulers of the Hyksos period but also the many foreign functionaries in Egypt during the New Kingdom, including some Semitic viziers.¹⁴⁸

In my opinion, Wellhausen also failed to grasp the significance of the two additional characterizations of Joseph’s master as an Egyptian found in vv. 2 and 5. In v. 2 we read *וַיְהִי בְּבֵית אֲדֹנָיו הַמִּצְרִי*, “and he remained in the house of his Egyptian master,”¹⁴⁹ instead of simply *וַיְהִי בְּבֵית אֲדֹנָיו*. And in v. 5 we have *וַיִּבְרַךְ* *וַיְהִי מֵאֵז הַפְּקִיד אֹתוֹ בְּבֵיתוֹ וְעַל כָּל-אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ-לּוֹ ה’ אֶת-בֵּית הַמִּצְרִי* instead of *וַיִּבְרַךְ ה’ אֶת בֵּיתוֹ**, following the three pronouns referring to the master in *יֵשׁ-לּוֹ*. By ignoring this repetition, Wellhausen wrenched *איש מצרי* from a key part of its context. He failed to recognize that the emphatic *repetition* of *איש מצרי* in vv. 2 and 5 is evidence that in v. 1 we are dealing with the emphatic *positioning* of *איש מצרי*, perhaps following another prosodic break.¹⁵⁰ After all, extraposition, used for emphasis or to express an afterthought, is attested elsewhere in BH, as well as in Greek.¹⁵¹ In my view, *איש מצרי* is a keyword in Gen 39:1–6. Indeed, of the many keywords identified in biblical narratives by modern scholars, the ones singled out by Robert Alter as an illustration of this literary technique are in that very same passage:

147 Böhmer, *Buch*, 89; cf. Knobel, *Genesis*, 274; König, *Genesis*, 653; Procksch, *Genesis*, 2: 406; Volz and Rudolph, *Elohist*, 156; Grintz, “פּוֹטִיפָר,” 17; Schmitt, *Josephsgeschichte*, 86–87.

148 Janssen, “Fonctionnaires,” 50–62; Wilson, *Burden*, 257–258; Faulkner, “Egypt,” 238; Hoffmeier, *Israel*, 93–95, 143; Donadoni, *Egyptians*, 242; Ritner, “Semitic,” 37.

149 For *וַיְהִי* meaning “remained” with adverbials of place, see Gen 39:20 (parallel to 39:2); Exod 25:15; Num 11:35; Deut 10:5; Judg 17:12; 1 Kgs 11:20; and, with adverbials of time and place, Exod 34:28; Judg 19:2; and 2 Sam 13:38. The idea may be that Joseph was not resold (https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Lekach_Tov%2C_Genesis.39.2.2?lang=bi) or else that he remained a house slave rather than being demoted to a field slave (https://www.sefaria.org/Abarbanel_on_Torah%2C_Genesis.39.2?lang=bi).

150 For this threefold emphasis, see Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 1: 519 (“repeatedly emphasized”); Rubin, *Probleme*, 30 (“the narrator stresses twice,” referring to vv. 1 and 2 only); and Volz and Rudolph, *Elohist*, 156 (“deliberate emphasis which comes back in vv. 2b and 5”). Cf. Schmitt, *Josephsgeschichte*, 86; and Willi-Plein, “Aspekte,” 315 n. 23.

151 For “emphatic extraposition at the end” of BH sentences marked by “modulation of the voice [or] a short stop,” described as “afterthought [that] serves ... as apposition with special emphasis,” see Gottstein, “Afterthought,” 36–37. For a similar usage in Greek, see BDF §473: “A word, torn out of its natural context and made more independent, is emphatic even when placed at the end of the sentence.”

These six verses are the introductory frame for Joseph’s encounter with his master’s wife, setting the scene for it not only in regard to narrative data but also in the announcing of formal themes. The reiterated verbal motifs function like the statement of musical themes at the beginning of the first movement of a classical symphony.¹⁵²

Alter goes on to point out the “varied instances of artful repetition” (except for the repetition of *מצרי*!) in the introductory frame and the subsequent narrative.¹⁵³ He argues persuasively that “the pervasive repetitions of the Bible’s narrative art” are designed to help the audience understand the “divine historical plan.”¹⁵⁴

As noted above, the divine historical plan at work in JS is the one revealed in Gen 15:13. Both the emphatic extraposition of *איש מצרי* in v. 1 and the emphatic repetition of *מצרי* in vv. 2 and 5 are designed to establish a link with a related text in Exodus,¹⁵⁵ thereby drawing attention to the coming fulfillment of that plan. The same goes for the parallel between *אנשים מדינים* in Gen 37:28 and *איש מצרי* in 39:15¹⁵⁶ as well as for the repetition of *מדינים* (in the form *מדנים*) in 37:36. These are all markers of an (anticipatory) allusion to the events of Exod 2:15–22, where Moses, identified as an *איש מצרי*, confronts a group of Midianite men and is given asylum and a wife by another Midianite man.¹⁵⁷ The Egyptian man would later implore the Midianite to help guide the Israelites through the desert (Num 10:29–32). More generally, *the allusion hints that the eisodus into Egypt foreshadows the exodus from there, that both are parts of a single divine historical plan, carried out by parallel agents.*¹⁵⁸

The suggestion that JS foreshadows the Exodus is hardly revolutionary. After all, in the last chapters of JS (Gen 48:21; 50:24–25), Jacob and Joseph speak explicitly about the coming departure from Egypt. Moreover, another foreshadowing of the Exodus narrative has been noted by Mark Brett in Gen 47:

152 Alter, *Art*, 135.

153 Alter, *Art*, 135–140; idem, *Genesis*, 224.

154 Alter, *Art*, 141. See also Steiner, “Four,” 44–47.

155 One use of keywords in the Bible is the linking of texts. See, for example, Amit, “Multi-Purpose,” 106; Polak, *הסיפור*, 91–93; and Alter, *Art*, 75, 116–122, and passim (see index s.v. *Leitwort* and *Leitwortstil*). All of these discussions are based on Martin Buber’s studies of what he called *Leitwortstil*.

156 In an email, Shalom Holtz raises the possibility of strengthening this parallel “by asking why we’re told that they are *אנשים*, at all, instead of the simpler *מדינים* *מסחרים**.” Another alternative, *מדין מסחרי*, is suggested by parallels in Isa 23:2 and Ezek 38:13.

157 For the term *marker*, see Sommer, *Prophet*, 11.

158 For the same conclusion, based solely on the observation that Midianites were catalysts for both eisodus and exodus, see Knauf, *Midian*, 27; and Retsö, *Arabs*, 234 n. 126.

Ominously, the land of Egypt is described in v. 11 as “the land of Rameses,” a narrator’s foreshadowing of the harsh experience of slavery to come, under a king “who did not know Joseph” (Exod 1:8, 11 and 12:37). This collaboration with empire is subsequently revealed to be a fragile experiment in politics.¹⁵⁹

We may add that אֶרֶץ רַעְמֶסֶס (Gen 47:11) seems to be a Hebrew designation for the region of Egypt containing the city of רַעְמֶסֶס (Exod 1:11),¹⁶⁰ viz., the East Delta or part of it. As such, the place name אֶרֶץ רַעְמֶסֶס belongs not to the time-frame of Gen 47:11 but to that of Exod 1:11. Brett seems to be hinting that *this onomastic prolepsis*¹⁶¹ is an ideal vehicle for foreshadowing.

11 Conclusions

Was Joseph sold to Potiphar by Medanites = Midianites (Gen 37:36) or by Ishmaelites (39:1)? The discrepancy in the Torah’s answer to this question has been called “one of the most certain contradictions in the entire Pentateuch.” The problem involves Gen 37:28, as well, especially the words וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אֲנָשִׁים מְדִינִים. It has two major components, one linguistic and the other literary with a historical subcomponent.

The linguistic component of the problem is the absence of the definite article in the phrase referring to the Midianites, “which prevents them from being identified with the Ishmaelites of vv. 25 and 27.” Critics have not recognized that וַיַּעֲבְרוּ אֲנָשִׁים מְדִינִים has a syntactic ambiguity, with a second reading (R2) that eliminates the contradiction and solves other problems as well. R2 is characterized by a prosodic break after the verb: וַיַּעֲבְרוּ – אֲנָשִׁים מְדִינִים. In this reading, the meaning of the clause (together with its context) is: “Come, let

159 Brett, *Locations*, 70. See also Alter, *Genesis*, 282; and Wolff, “Kerygma,” 91: “The Joseph story is like a prologue to the Exodus narrative.” Cf. Ramban’s principle in his commentary to Gen 12:6: “everything that happened to the forefathers is a sign for their descendants” https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis.12.6?lang=he.

160 This archaic name for the region was replaced by שְׂדֵה־צֶעַן, “field of Tanis” (Ps 78:12, 43; cf. Egyptian *sh-t-D’nt/D’*, “field of Tanis”) after 1070, when *Pr R^c-ms-sw* was replaced by Tanis as the East Delta capital; see Kitchen, “Egyptians,” 80–84; and idem, *Reliability*, 256. The term מִיֵּטֵב הָאֶרֶץ (Gen 47:6, 11) may refer to the entire verdant Delta.

161 The term *anachronism*, used here by Alter (*Genesis*, 282) and others (in contrast to Driver, *Genesis*, 371 and, especially, Kitchen, “Egyptians,” 67), is misleading, since the narrator of Gen 47:11 is assumed by the audience to be the same as the narrator of Exod 1:11. A true anachronism would be a reference to something that did not exist/occur until after Moses’ death.

us sell him to the Ishmaelites...’ His brothers agreed. And so when they (= the Ishmaelites!) passed by—(turning out to be) Midianite men, merchants—they (= the brothers) pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites ..., who brought Joseph to Egypt.”

The ancient audience would have had no difficulty perceiving R₂ in an oral presentation, thanks to the break. In R₂, the phrase אנשים מדינים is not the immediate subject of ויעברו. Rather, it stands in apposition to the affixed subject pronoun of ויעברו, which refers to the aforementioned Ishmaelites. In R₂, the Midianites and the Ishmaelites of 37:25–28 are the same individuals—in contrast to R₁, where they are distinct.

The literary component of the problem is not a contradiction but a lack of uniformity. There is a shift in 37:25–28 from Ishmaelites to Midianites and back again, echoed by a similar shift later on involving Medanites and Ishmaelites. Assuming that these three ethnonyms refer *in this story* to the same individuals, what is the point of the variation? For this question, there are three answers—answers that complement each other.

One answer is that the Ishmaelite-Midianite-Medanite shifts exhibit stylistic variation, a phenomenon well attested elsewhere in biblical literature—including JS itself—and in writings from Egypt, Mari, and Assyria. This answer is quite general; it does not deal with the specific details of the variation in JS.

A more specific answer is that the shift from Ishmaelites to Midianites in Gen 27:25–28 is a case of subjective perspective: the brothers acquire information a little at a time, as the caravan comes closer. At first, they see a file or two of *camels* moving slowly towards Dotan on the caravan route from the east. That sighting suffices for the brothers to know that at least some of the men in the caravan are Ishmaelites, i.e., members of camel-breeding bedouin tribes. It is only later, when they finally pass by, that these particular Ishmaelites are seen to be (1) Midianites (cf. Judg 8:24) and (2) merchants (rather than mere transporters). Each of these two new details contributes to the story in its own way.

A third answer is that סחרים – אנשים מדינים, ויעברו in Gen 37:28 is structurally similar to ויקנהו פוטיפר – סריס פרעה שר הטבחים, איש מצרי in 39:1. Both the similarity and the use of מצרי as a keyword in 39:1–6 are markers of an (anticipatory) allusion to Exod 2:15–22, where Moses, identified as an איש מצרי, confronts a group of Midianite men and is given asylum and a wife by another Midianite man. The Egyptian man would later implore the Midianite man to help guide the Israelites through the desert (Num 10:29–32). In other words, the eisodus into Egypt foreshadows the exodus from there; both are parts of a single divine historical plan for Abraham’s descendants (Gen 15:13), carried out, in part, by parallel agents. This striking foreshadowing is paralleled by another foreshadowing of the Exodus narrative in JS.

Taken together, the three answers provide a compelling synchronic explanation for the cameo appearance of אנשים מדינים in the Joseph story, rendering diachronic explanations superfluous.

Acknowledgement

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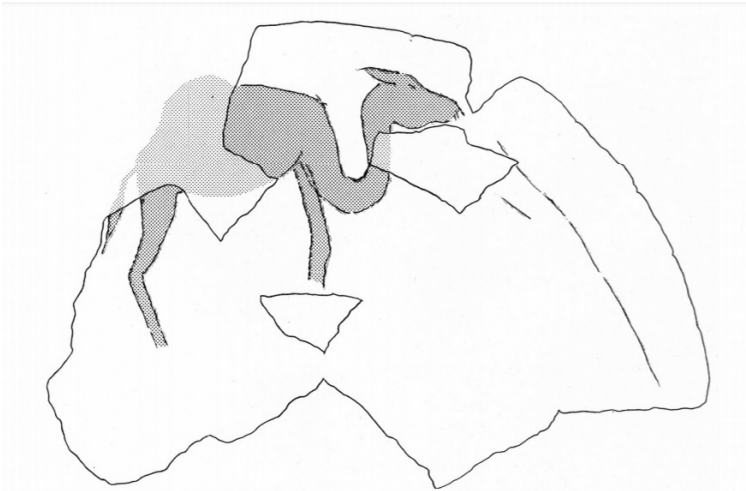


Abb. 7: Qantir, Q I – b.c/10.11, Stratum B/3: Schale aus Nilton mit Ritzung eines Dromedars, Detail der Darstellung, M 1 : 2, entzerrt und ergänzt

FIGURE 1 Late Bronze Age sherd from an industrial bronze factory at Qantir depicting a camel
FROM PUSCH, “DROMEDAR,” 113



FIGURE 2 Petroglyph at the Egyptian copper-smelting area in Wadi Naṣīb. For discussion, see n. 131 above
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF RANDALL W. YOUNKER,
INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY, ANDREWS UNIVERSITY; DIGITAL
RESTORATION BY JUDY TASHJI



FIGURE 3

Late Bronze Age sherd from Deir 'Alla, depicting 3 camels (not 2 as often asserted) that are not too distant in time or place from the Midianite camels captured by Gideon (Judg 8:8–21); see n. 118 above
 PHOTOGRAPH BY HUBERT DE HAAS COURTESY OF GERRIT VAN DER KOOIJ; DIGITAL RESTORATION BY JUDY TASHJI



FIGURE 4 Mosaic pavement dated 722 CE from Deir al-'Adas (southern Syria) depicting Mousachos, the καμιλαρις < καμηλάριος, "cameleer," leading a train of 4 loaded camels. For discussion, see n. 118 above and Seland, "Iconography," 109–111

FROM DONCEEL-VOÛTE, *PAVEMENTS*, 1:49, FIG. 23



FIGURE 5 Modern caravan, consisting of two camel-pullers, each with a train of 5 loaded camels. For a hint that this unprovenanced image is from the Empty Quarter Desert of Dhofar Province, Oman, see <http://omanlastminute.com/detail.php?p=NDc=>. An ancient processing and shipping center for Dhofari frankincense has been excavated in that desert; see <https://madainproject.com/ubar>. Until recently, camel caravans were used to bring the frankincense to market in Şalalah, etc.; see https://satoyama-initiative.org/case_studies/oman-use-and-management-of-frankincense-trees-in-the-dhofar-region.