Wisdom in the Joseph Story

1  The Joseph Story as Wisdom Novella

Gerhard Von Rad confidently located the Joseph story in the context of the supposed Solomonic "enlightenment" ("Josephgeschichte und ältere Chokma", VTSup 1 [1953] 121-27). The intellectual qualities of the enlightenment he likewise confidently described as an "awakening of spiritual self-consciousness," in which new dimensions of experience were exposed to Israelite eyes, among them an "anthropological" factor. Few would still share von Rad confident assumptions about the dating of the Joseph story and the events of the Solomonic period, and many would reject the location of Wisdom literature in the royal court. But even without these assumptions, the core of the theory is viable and requires evaluation, namely that the Joseph story is a didactic text cued to Wisdom literature, whose ideals it is meant to exemplify and inculcate.

This theory was disputed first by James Crenshaw, mainly on the (very good) grounds that the story lacks indicators of specifically Wisdom influence ("Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," JBL 88 [1969] 129-42). Donald Redford too rejected the Wisdom classification, going so far as to assert that many of Joseph's characteristics are contrary to the Wisdom ideal (A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph [VTSup 20 (1970)], pp. 100-105). Others added nuances to the debate. Most denied that the story can be classed simply as a "Wisdom narrative," while some (including Redford) found Wisdom influence in certain literary strata but not in others.

I would like to address the question anew, asking whether the Joseph story is indeed a didactic text written to provide a paradigm of Wisdom ideals. I will be considering the character of the Joseph story as a whole, which is to say, Gen 37; 39-45; 50. There are compositional layers, but a unified story with a
single story-line resulted from their combination. In any case, further subdivisions are not necessary to my task, since my conclusions apply to the entirety of the biblical pericope.

In my view, the Joseph story is not the sort of tale one would create in order to exemplify the ideals and assumptions of Wisdom literature. This is not to say that the story runs counter to the Wisdom ideal. It just reflects different attitudes and assumptions from those reflected in didactic Wisdom.

2 Types of Wisdom

Much confusion can arise from failing to distinguish different senses of the word wisdom. We must first of all distinguish “wisdom” as a human faculty or knowledge from “Wisdom” as Wisdom literature, a well-defined literary genre of instructional texts whose exemplars share characteristic assumptions, principles, and literary formulations. Wisdom in the first sense can manifest itself anywhere and be a factor in any genre. Hence, the appearance of the wise behavior in a story, or even of words that refer to the faculty of wisdom, such as hakam w’ nabon, does not demonstrate a special connection with Wisdom literature.

We must also distinguish Wisdom literature from the wisdom school. We have a good sampling of the former; we have no evidence for the latter. There were schools, in Egypt and Mesopotamia at least, and probably in Israel, but there is no evidence that Wisdom literature was written for them. Moreover, the connection of Egyptian Wisdom to the royal court has been exaggerated. The texts themselves indicate a variety of social settings. We should test the Joseph story against didactic Wisdom proper rather than imagining how it would serve the purposes of a conjectured “school” in the royal court.

3 Joseph’s Wisdom

Joseph is, or becomes, wise in many ways. The question is whether his manifestations of wisdom are such as to make him a good exemplar of the Bildungsideal of Wisdom literature. To answer this question, it is not enough to find a proverb that can be applied to some aspect of Joseph’s behavior. Proverbs are meant to offer explanations and guidance in all life’s situations. We have to consider how the Joseph story would reinforce the particular ideals, assumptions, and principles characteristic of Wisdom literature.
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4 Ethics

Any wise man, prophet, or priest--and their wives--would have approved of Joseph's rebuff of the advances of Potiphar's wife. Yet this episode does not really reinforce Wisdom literature's ethical teaching, because Joseph's moral stance brings him no lasting benefit. Joseph's prior accomplishments are suddenly wiped out by an unfair and erratic accusation, and he is thrown into prison for an indefinite term. When he finally prospers it is not because of his sexual virtue but in spite of it.

Wisdom literature recognizes that the wise and righteous might find themselves in hard times despite their virtues (e.g., Prov 24:16; Tobit; Ahiqar; ‘Onsheshonqy), but it never concedes that they might fall into difficulties because of them. That message is left to a different type of tale.

5 Success

The Joseph story does not adduce Joseph's successes to demonstrate his wisdom. Rather, the author emphasizes that it was Yahweh who brought them about (39:2f., 5, 23). To be sure, no sage would hesitate to ascribe good fortune to God's favor, and there are several proverbs to that effect. Still, it cannot be said that Joseph exemplifies the role of wisdom in securing success. If his life were meant to teach this, there would have to be a causal connection between wisdom and reward. But this is lacking.

Presumably Joseph was a wise steward for Potiphar. The author, however, ascribes Joseph's achievements directly to God (39:3, 5). Joseph is a god-favored man. We are not told why, except insofar as Joseph unwittingly serves greater goals (50:20). He is not being rewarded for any prior virtue. (His rebuff of Potiphar's wife's sexual advances comes after his advancement.) In any case, the benefits of Joseph's talents in the management of Potiphar's affairs cease when Joseph was taken to prison. There is no continuity between Joseph's wisdom in the service of Potiphar and his ultimate rise to power, so this wisdom cannot be an exemplar for those who wish to succeed professionally.

Likewise, in prison, Joseph prospers because Yahweh made his work prosper and gave him favor in the warden's eyes (39:21-23). Even with the warden's favor, Joseph might have spent his life in prison if God hadn't helped him interpret the steward's dream, and even then, his good fortune required a confluence of fortuitous circumstances. Those came from God, not from
Joseph’s diligence or foresight, except in one regard: He asked the butler to put in a good word on his behalf. But even that preparation did not work out the way Joseph had expected.

There is nothing in all this that the sages of Wisdom literature would object to, but it is just not the way Wisdom tries to make sense of the course of an individual’s life. Wisdom is concerned with explaining how to win God’s favor and how to achieve success through one’s own wisdom. It teaches ways to avoid surprises and prepare for difficulties. The Joseph story offers little help in these regards. In Wisdom literature, wisdom—as dramatized in Proverbs 8—speaks to ordinary people, who may not feel that God is with them and paving their way at every step. Joseph’s success is not much of a paradigm for ordinary circumstances. It does not display the power of wisdom so much as the power of divine favor, and it doesn’t even teach us how to gain it.

Certainly Wisdom literature says that God determines a man’s success, but this is hardly peculiar to Wisdom. Wisdom’s affirmations of divine control are not meant as theological pronouncements but have a practical goal, namely to instill humility and gratitude to God for one’s achievements, and to advise us not to strain too hard for wealth (Prov 10:22). Such teachings have a different didactic thrust than the Joseph story’s attribution of the hero’s good fortune to Yahweh.

6 Dream Interpretation

The stellar display of Joseph’s wisdom comes when he interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams (41:39). Some dreams are beyond human skills and require divine wisdom for their solution. Aware of the challenge Pharaoh’s dreams may present, Joseph insists that dream interpretations come from God (40:8; 41:16). This is meant seriously, not just as a modest demurral. There is no hint that Joseph uses his intellectual powers to figure out the meaning of the dreams. He does not even say that hokmah, the faculty that might be used in interpretation, comes from God. The pitronim themselves do.

If real wisdom and interpretations come from God, Joseph’s interpretive skill cannot serve as a model for those not blessed with such communications. Ordinary people can only look upon him with awe.

The Joseph story does affirm that the ability to interpret dreams is wisdom. This is true even of the lesser skills that the h’kamim in the Egyptian court
7 Joseph’s Rise to the Royal Court

Von Rad assumes that Wisdom literature teaches young men how to rise to power and authority and he believes that the Joseph story provides a model to inculcate these skills. Indeed, Joseph’s opportune advice to Pharaoh in 41:33 is wise and exemplifies the power of *dabar b’itto*, “a word spoken at the right time” (Prov 15:23). Still, Wisdom literature is not much interested in teaching how to rise in status but rather how to do well in whatever situation he finds himself.

We could even say that Joseph’s rise runs contrary to the disgust expressed in Prov 30:22 toward a slave’s coming to rule. In any case, Joseph’s experiences would provide little guidance to others who served in the royal court or wished to do so. The combination of circumstances that brought him there was unlikely and unpredictable. Also, the Joseph story lacks attention to personal comportment in the royal court, which is a more important theme in Wisdom literature. A young man wishing to rise in the royal court could not effectively model his career on Joseph’s.

8 Foresight and Prudence

Joseph advises Pharaoh to find a man who is "discerning and wise" (*nabon w’hakam*). The wisdom that Joseph has in mind is the amalgam of practical skills and judiciousness needed to carry out a plan such as he himself is about to propose. Joseph exhibits this sort of wisdom in several ways.

It was wise of Joseph to plan for the unexpected and to cast his bread upon the waters. He did this when he told the butler to remember him when he is restored to his position.
Another such use of wisdom was Joseph’s taxation of the land in preparation for the famine. To this we could apply Prov 10:5a, “The wise son stores up (food) in the summer.”

Wisdom as foresight and prudence is in line with Proverbs’ concept of wisdom but common elsewhere as well. To some degree, Joseph’s judgment and acumen could be a model for Wisdom teachings. Still, Joseph’s foresight was based on extraordinary information and as such would not be too helpful as an example to most of us, who must make our plans ignorant of what will happen in the next fourteen years.

Joseph exercises *hokmah* in cleverly exploiting the famine to amass landholdings for the crown and subjugate the Egyptian population (47:13-28). He also has the good sense—*hokmah*—to placate the priesthood during this property aggrandizement (vv. 22, 26b). These maneuvers are “wise” in the instrumental sense that *hokmah* bears in most of the Bible, and it is clear that the author recounts Joseph’s maneuvers with admiration.

None of this entails the deeper ethical wisdom that Wisdom literature would have us emulate. Indeed, this behavior violates Proverbs’ warning, “He who withholds grain—the nation will curse him” (Prov 11:26a), for Wisdom literature is primarily concerned with the ethical use of wealth.

9 Theology

Joseph recognizes God’s hand in events when he tells his brothers, “You planned evil against me, but God planned it for good, so as to keep numerous people alive, as at present” (50:20). Man proposes and God disposes. This recognition is indeed a lesson of Wisdom literature, but it is omnipresent in the Bible.

In sum, while Joseph exemplifies some virtues taught by Wisdom literature, neither his character nor the story is shaped by a desire to teach these virtues. He is not a practical exemplar of wisdom.

10 Wisdom and its Acquisition

In the Joseph story, Wisdom exists on two discrete planes, higher and lower, or divine and human. The former is incomparably greater than the latter, yet certain men can receive a measure of the higher wisdom. The Egyptian sages had human wisdom—otherwise they would not be *hokhim*, and Joseph dis-
plays human skills in administering the land. But Joseph also acquires a measure of the higher wisdom when he learns the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams.

Wisdom of the higher sort is necessarily a divine endowment. It is not achieved by study. Upon hearing Joseph’s satisfying dream-interpretation and advice, Pharaoh exclaims: "Is there found another such man as this who has the spirit of God in him?" (41:38b). The first thing that Joseph’s interpretive ability shows Pharaoh is that the young man possesses the divine spirit, that he is inspired. The spirit of God is a divine endowment that gives a human a surplus of power, whether physical, spiritual, or intellectual, to do whatever the situation demands. Pharaoh takes Joseph’s brilliant interpretation as evidence that the spirit of God is already resident in him.

Pharaoh, who speaks with a reliable voice in this story, also declares: "Since God has informed you of all this, there is none as discerning and wise as you" (41:39). Joseph’s being wise is consequent upon his having received this information. Pharaoh does not say that God gave Joseph the ability to interpret the dream, but rather that he informed him of its meaning. There is no suggestion that Joseph studied wisdom or sought it out.

In Wisdom literature, in contrast, wisdom or receptivity to wisdom is never said to reside in a wise man as a “spirit of God” or even to indicate the presence of that power. Wisdom is obtained by listening, absorbing the wisdom of the past and applying it in new ways. Wisdom literature does have a concept of wisdom as a divine gift, but it is of a different sort. According to Prov 8 and Ahiqar 94b, wisdom is from gods. It is, however, granted to mankind as a whole, not dispensed in special communications to individuals. Wisdom literature never claims that God makes someone wise by communicating to him wise information or imperatives. Pharaoh’s logic (which is here the author’s) would be alien to a Wisdom sage.

11  Wisdom in Daniel

The book whose assumptions about wisdom are closest to those of the Joseph story is not Proverbs but Daniel. This is no surprise, since some of the Daniel tales model themselves on the Joseph story. But the affinities between these two books appear not only in the motifs and locutions most closely deriving from the Joseph story, but also in assumptions and concepts
that do not seem to be literary borrowings, in particular in the visions of chapters 7-12.

Even more emphatically than the Joseph story, the book of Daniel distinguishes two planes of wisdom. On the lower level, there is human wisdom, namely the broad erudition which the Chaldeans possess and the Jewish lads study. For the best of them, Daniel, it includes "understanding in every sort of vision and dreams" (1:17), in other words, mantic wisdom. This wisdom in a general way comes from God (2:23), perhaps in the sense of native endowment. It is an object of respect, not polemic.

For certain challenges, however, another kind of wisdom is required, one more directly divine in origin. This is entirely disjunct from human wisdom, even from Daniel's own impressive intellectual resources and oniroytical talents. The divine wisdom that is necessary for penetrating cryptic symbolism is not a faculty. It is the message en claire, God's own decoding of his own encoded message.

To prove the divine source of this higher wisdom, the author has the king demand that the Chaldean wise men reveal the dream as well as its meaning, and they insist that the gods alone can do this (2:11). Daniel recognizes that his own wisdom is not up to Nebuchadnezzar's challenge. Rather, God himself will reveal and decipher the dream (2:27f.). Daniel is not just being modest. This belief is central to the story and underscored in various ways. Daniel prays for the needed information and receives the interpretation of this dream in a dream of his own (2:18-19). The entire process has been lifted out of the mundane sphere.

Daniel, as the Chaldeans deduce from his wisdom in a later story, has the "spirit of the living god(s) in him (5:11; sim. 4:6). As in the case of Joseph, the possession of God's spirit is prerequisite for an understanding of dreams, at least ones of this opacity (Gen 41:38).

Daniel 7 distances the human interpreter even further from the communication, making him a passive recipient and dutiful messenger. Daniel has a vision within a dream, and an angel explains its symbolism within the same dream (7:15-28). Human intellect is pushed out of the picture.

In the latter part of the book, all of Daniel's wisdom, including interpretation of written prophecy, comes from direct angelic input. When Daniel's book-study fails to enlighten him on the meaning of Jeremiah's seventy years (9:2), he prays and makes confession, whereupon Gabriel comes and promises "to
teach you understanding" (’haskilka binah; 9:22). The binah that Gabriel gives him is not the ability to interpret the prophecy; it is the interpretation itself (9:22). Daniel is said to have "understanding in visions" (abinah lo bamar'eh; 10:1), but every insight he has comes from supernatural communications. Insofar as Daniel himself has anything to do with them, it is his piety and prayers, not his study, not even his study of the sacred scriptures, that is conducive to wisdom.

Daniel’s erudition is deemed praiseworthy and a source of prestige, but it has little effect on the course of events, and it is not brought into play at the critical moments. His learning moves the story forward in only one way, namely by alerting the Babylonian courtiers to his special talents, which mark him as possessing the “spirit of the holy gods” (5:11). The only human abilities of real significance in Daniel are piety and the tenacity to hold one’s faith through danger and suffering.

The book of Daniel shares and elaborates the Joseph story’s idea that the wisdom of dream interpretation is a divinely communicated message rather than a talent or a learned competence.

The Joseph story and, more deliberately, the book of Daniel, create a rank of dream interpretation beyond the ordinary. Decoding by inspiration trumps decoding by expertise yet keeps the status of wisdom (hokmah, binah). Oneiromancy becomes prophecy.

In Daniel this principle is brought to the fore almost polemically, by dismissing the efficacy of human intellectual powers in the most important and difficult matters. Real wisdom is elevated to the realm of the supernatural, and wise humans become its passive recipients. Wisdom itself becomes a body of esoteric truths. Yet since “wisdom” consists of the truths themselves, and these can be transmitted by books and shared with the learned, we circle back to the idea of wisdom as human learning. By simply reading Daniel and absorbing the message, anyone can assimilate the wisdom that Daniel received, with only one intermediate step in the communication.

To summarize: There is indeed wisdom in the Joseph story, but it is not the wisdom of Wisdom literature. The concept of wisdom in the Joseph story is affiliated with the pietistic and inspired wisdom of Daniel rather than with the ethical and practical wisdom of Wisdom literature.