

The Reason(s) Jacob Went Down to Egypt

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Parashat Vayiggash confronts us with many narrative questions. How does Jacob learn that Joseph is alive: from his sons (Gen. 45:26) or through a divine communication (Gen. 46:4)? Does Jacob head for Egypt because he wishes to see his son (Gen. 46:30), to survive the famine (Gen. 41:54; Gen. 46:6), or because God tells him to go (Gen. 46:1–4)? If there was famine “over all the face of the earth” (Gen. 41:56, 57), why does the Torah insist that in Egypt there was plenty of food (Gen. 41:54)? Why did God feel it necessary to tell Jacob to go to Egypt and “not to fear” (Gen. 46:1–5) when, by the time of this divine communication, Jacob had already decided on his own to go (Gen. 44:28)? Did Jacob’s sons bring Jacob to Egypt (Gen. 46:5–6) or did Jacob bring *them* (Gen. 46:6–7)? Did Jacob settle in the land of Goshen (46:28) or the land of Rameses (47:10)? These and other questions cannot but befuddle any close reader of the text.

To resolve these kinds of questions and others, scholars theorize that our Torah is actually an amalgam of separate source documents. This theory is called the Documentary Hypothesis (DH). While earlier iterations of the DH focused on thematic, stylistic, or linguistic markers, modern scholars (called Neo-Documentarians) have focused on narrative contradictions, inconsistencies, and redundancies to identify the underlying source documents. This adjustment to earlier documentary models has produced four cohesive and coherent source documents with different narrative and historical claims, providing a literary solution to what is essentially a literary problem.

Parashat Vayiggash is a good place to illustrate the modern scholarship, which sees the Torah’s Joseph story as a combination of three source documents with separate accounts of how and why Jacob descended to Egypt.

The bulk of the Joseph story is attributable to the J document, a document considered by many to be composed in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the 10th century BCE and the oldest of the sources. In J, the brothers—back from their journey to Egypt—inform Jacob that his long-lost son, Joseph, is alive and well in Egypt, and they bring Jacob there to reunite with him. Leaving Canaan for Egypt is not a concern for Jacob; his grandfather Abraham already did so (see Gen. 12:10, a passage also attributable to J). Indeed, Jacob’s sojourn to Egypt is all a part of God’s overall plan. As Joseph tells his brothers: “it was not you that sent me [to Egypt], but God [who] has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (Gen. 45:8). The idea of a God who secretly works behind the scenes and whose providence is discernible only after-the-fact, is a hallmark of J.

The story ends with Jacob in the land of Goshen where, in J and only J, the children of Israel live.

The E document, concerned primarily with the northern tribes, is thought to be composed in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in about the 9th century. Here, Jacob doesn’t have to speculate as to God’s hidden intentions. God appears to Jacob in a night vision—a form of divine communication ubiquitous in E—and expressly directs Jacob to go to Egypt where, Jacob is informed by God for the first time, Joseph is waiting for him! In that same communication, God addresses Jacob’s understandable “fear” of descending to Egypt since in E none of the other patriarchs had ever left the Promised Land.

The P document is shaped by the concerns of the Priestly class in Jerusalem and its emphasis on purity and Temple-based sacrificial systems. In contrast to J and E, Jacob’s

sojourn to Egypt in the Priestly source is not God's idea at all. Jacob is simply foraging for food in the face of a catastrophic famine in Canaan. This leads Jacob to bring his sons and their families to Egypt where, in P and only P, there is plenty of food. Jacob feels the license to leave Israel because, in P, there is nothing holy about the land in the absence of God's in-dwelling there. This will not occur until the Temple is built. In fact, even after God comes down from Heaven on Mount Sinai, His presence (*kavod*) is not locative. Rather, it is in a portable Sanctuary built to his specifications in which He chooses to dwell.

In P, Jacob is no stranger to life outside of the land. Jacob has traveled to Paddan Aram to find a wife and he sired all twelve of his sons there, including Benjamin. Thus, searching for food, Jacob brings his sons and their families to Egypt where Joseph had previously freely and voluntarily moved (neither kidnaped by the Midianites nor sold to the Ishmaelites), reaching the heights of society. Joseph introduces Jacob to Pharaoh and, with his royal prerogative, settles Jacob not in the backwaters of Goshen, but in the "choicest part of the land," Rameses.

Each of the separate sources which together form the canonical Joseph story have a clear, cohesive, and coherent story line. Why would anyone turn these internally consistent sources into one difficult-to-read document containing contradictions, inconsistencies, and redundancies? It is hard to speculate about the compiler's motives. What is obvious, however, is that the compiler considered each of the underlying source documents to be sacred and faithfully sought to preserve them as much as possible—even at the cost of inconsistencies in the final product. Just as later rabbinic literature, like the Midrash, the Mishna, and the Talmud, champion diversity and a pluralism of opinions by featuring a myriad of voices preserved as a *mahloket leshem shamayim* (debate for the sake of heaven), it is exciting to see that this phenomenon was equally important to the ancient compiler of the Torah as well.