THE JOSEPH STORY
AND PENTATEUCHAL CRITICISM

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The special character of the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis 1) has long been recognized. Writers such as Bernhard Luther 2) and Gunkel 3) reached the conclusion that, although it may have been compiled from a variety of sources, it differs fundamentally from the loosely organized cycles of saga concerning Abraham and Jacob in that its author(s) or redactor(s) brought to their material a superior literary craftsmanship which enabled them to create a single, sustained narrative work whose parts are organically related to one another.

The recognition that these chapters constitute a literary unity which cannot be broken up into separate and independent incidents did not, however, seriously call into question the application to them of the usual methods of source criticism, since these do not necessarily have to be applied "vertically", separating one scene from another, but may be used to distinguish "horizontal" layers, each of which may contain, or at least may have contained in its original state, all the elements which appear in a given narrative complex in its present form. Accordingly it has usually been supposed that there were originally two distinct versions of the Joseph Story (J and E), each of which contained all or most of the incidents found in the final version; and that these were fitted together, at some points by the omission of material from one or other of the sources, and at others by their conflation.

This hypothesis might at first sight appear to be entirely satis-

1) Here defined (following G. von Rad, Genesis (OTL), London, 1961, pp. 342 f.) as Gen. xxxvii; xxxix-xlvi; I without the short sections usually attributed to P.
factory: it seems to allow for the structural and artistic unity of the story while successfully accounting for the existence of such phenomena as repetitions, doublets, alternations in the use of the divine names and of other vocabulary, roughnesses of style and other signs of distinct sources which are the foundation of Pentateuchal source criticism, and which have been “detected” no less here than elsewhere 1). Until recently only a few scholars have challenged these conclusions 2).

The new approach to the Joseph Story which has been pioneered in the writings of Gerhard von Rad 3) suggests, however, that a re-examination of the question of sources is needed. For his brilliant analysis of its literary character, which places it for the first time firmly in its Sitz im Leben in the wisdom school and so brings out its purpose and significance more clearly than ever before, demands as a corollary that we should recognize it as a literary unity in a stricter sense than has previously been done. There can be few readers who are not convinced by von Rad’s thesis that it is “a novel through and through” 4). He finds in it a consistently high level of literary skill, especially in psychological subtlety and treatment of human character, in powers of description and in style. Nor is this consistency confined to purely literary traits: the Joseph Story exhibits from beginning to end a distinctive view of the divine activity in human affairs, an unusually broad interest in the world beyond the confines of Israel and a distinct theological viewpoint. In short it is an outstanding example of wisdom literature and a product of that cultural enlightenment which was characteristic of court circles in Israel in the reign

1) Details may be found in any commentary.
2) Probably the most persuasive of these was W. Rudolph’s special study in “Die Josephsgeschichte” in P. Volz and W. Rudolph, Der Elitest als Erzähler: ein Irrweg der Pentateuchkritik? (BZAW 63), 1933, pp. 145-184. For other attacks on the documentary hypothesis as a whole see O. Eissfeldt, The Old Testament: An Introduction, Oxford, 1965, pp. 166 f.
3) Three works are relevant here: Genesis (see page 522, note 1, supra; originally published as Das Erste Buch Mose: Genesis Kap. xxxv 19-126 (ATD 4), Göttingen, 1953), pp. 342-434; “The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom” (in von Rad, The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays, Edinburgh and London, 1966, pp. 292-300; originally published as “Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma” in VT Suppl. 3, 1953, pp. 120-127); Die Josephsgeschichte (Biblische Studien 5), Neukirchen, 1954. Other recent work, especially L. Ruppert, Die Josephergzählung der Genesis, Munich, 1965, raises similar questions, though in a rather different way; but for the sake of clarity the present discussion will be confined to the work of von Rad and its implications.
4) “Joseph Narrative”, p. 292.