In a recent issue of Vetus Testamentum attention was directed to some universal aspects of religion which appear to have been associated from an ancient time with the site of Shechem (v. Vetus Testamentum XX [1970] pp. 75-82). These remarks proceeded not from any research or insight but were simply a mise-en-scene of considerations familiar in other contexts.

Where further elucidation seemed to require original scholarship, this was indicated and left for those competent to provide it. One such question however admits of some clarification by reference to reasonably familiar matters. Accordingly it is dealt with as follows, again in a preliminary way, as an extension to the “Mythology of Pre-Israelite Shechem”.

I

Shechem has been compared with Delphi in order to illustrate the universality of its mythological “properties”—tree of life and the water of life set in the vicinity of the navel of the earth 1). Properties of a cult which is a configuration of the central facts of man’s experience, where life is death and death is life and knowledge and power is obtained over both 2). Since the central unity of life and death are here proclaimed, it is proper that the figuration of death in life is manifest. The world is a grave and the primaeval heap of matter (the omphalos) is the primaeval sepulchre 3). Accordingly it was asked “Were the chthonic, funerary associations of the omphalos emphasised by the

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1) v. G. R. H. Wright “The Mythology of Pre-Israelite Shechem” in V.T. XX, [1970], pp. 75-82.
2) Cf. ibid., p. 76.
3) For an outline bibliography of omphalos studies v. V.T XX, [1970], p. 71. All authorities deal with the sepulchral aspect cf. W. Roscher Omphalos, pp. 39 ff. (τῶμβος, κόφυξ; J. Harrison, Themis, Cambridge 1927, pp. 399 ff.)
proximity of a tomb? At Delphi the Tomb of Dionysos redoubled this significance of the omphalos itself which was generally recognised as marking the grave of Python. Did the tomb of Joseph serve the same purpose at Shechem?" ¹).

The question is an interesting one and the interest is heightened because of the unexpected appearance of Joseph’s remains on this scene. For it is the Leah tribes whom the sagas represent as active at Shechem; possibly, indeed, as forming an amphictyony centred on Shechem ²). Why then has the Rachelite Joseph been buried there? "The Bible gives no circumstantial explanation of how or why the patriarch came to appropriate this notable tomb" ³). Nonetheless if read with a discernment based on comparative knowledge, the biblical story of Joseph affords indications of the relevance of this figure to the Shechem religious centre; moreover sufficient to warrant attaching the name to the grave which appeared along with its other cult ‘properties’. And it is hoped that this can be made reasonably apparent in the following remarks.

II

“And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him: for he (Joseph) had straightly sworn the Children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you” (Ex xiii 9). “And the bones of Joseph which the Children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver; and it became an inheritance of the children of Joseph” (Josh. xxiv 32).

Thus the Bible records the circumstances of Joseph’s burial at Shechem. It appears as part of no connected narrative, and the two individual verses occurring isolated in separate contexts give every impression of an editorial effort to rationalise or ‘historicise’ a notable tradition. Certainly the only direct biblical support for localising the burial at Shechem is the devise in Joseph’s favour (over and above the regular allotment) of ‘an eminent portion’/a mountain ridge (or shoulder)—terms descriptive of the Shechem region, where the word

¹) v. VT XX, p. 80.
³) v. VT XX, p. 80.