

of the Scriptures, let us remind ourselves that: (1) The first question about this passage (Gen 37: especially vv25-28) was raised in the twelfth century³ -- considerably before the advent of modern source criticism; (2) The passage has been favored by source criticism as a *prime example* of two contradictory documents combined so as to leave a visible seam.

The Problem

In the English of the NIV, Gen 37:25-28 reads as follows:

As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh. and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. (v26) Judah said to his brothers. 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? (27) Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him: after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.' His brothers agreed. (v28) So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

Actually, the English, especially that of v28, reads more smoothly than the Hebrew. Verse 25 reports that a caravan of Ishmaelites are sighted, coming from Gilead, bound for Egypt, and loaded with spices. Verses 26-27 report Judah's proposal to sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites and the agreement of the brothers to the transaction. This brings us to the crux of the matter, i.e., v28:

<i>wayya' abru</i>	<i>'anasim</i>	<i>midyanim</i>	<i>socharim</i>
And-they-passed-by,	men,	Midianites,	merchants

Here a preterite (waw-consecutive plus the preformative tense) resumes the story line by telling us a group of men are now on stage. The group is identified as *Midianites, men, and merchants*.

Verse 28 now goes on:

1. *wayyimsékû* *wayya'alû* 'et-yôsep min-habbôr
And-they-pulled-up and-they-raised Joseph from-the-pit.
2. *wayyimkerû* 'et-yôsep layyishmê'elîm be'esrîm kasep (pausal form).
And-they-sold Joseph to-the-Ishmaelites for-20 (pieces of) silver.
3. *wayyabi'û* 'et-yôsep mishrayêmâ
And-they-brought Joseph to-Egypt.

In the above passage I have italicized again the preterite forms that propel the story-line forward in this narrative. The critical question is: Who is the (unstated) subject of the verbs?

Thus Rabbi Eric Lowenthal in his stimulating (and reverent) treatment of the Joseph story⁴ assumes the following scenario: (1) The brothers, sighting the Ishmaelite caravan in the distance, decided to sell Joseph to them. (2) Meanwhile, however, a (small?) group of Midianite merchants came by, heard Joseph yelling and scratching around in the pit, and hauled