

inciting incidents have peak-like characteristics. (2) As an embedded narrative, Gen. 37 has its own discourse structure so that 37:5-11 is inciting incident (Episode 1) within the chapter (Joseph's dreams provoke a crisis); 37:12-17 is Episode 2 (Joseph goes to seek his brothers); 37:18-22 is Episode 3 (the conspiracy); 37:23-28 is Peak (the crime); and 37:29-35 is a Post-peak Episode (the cover-up). There is rising tension through the pre-peak episodes, especially in Episode 3 (the conspiracy); and there is relatively high but falling tension in the post-peak episode (the cover-up).

Genesis 37:23-28 seems plausibly to constitute the peak of its chapter. To begin with, the introductory *wayhi* And-it-happened (that) followed by *ka'asher ba' yosep 'el-'echayw* 'when arrived Joseph to his brothers' (i.e., when he arrived where his brothers were) introduces an episode where we anticipate a crescendo of activity. Details are added such as the reference in v23 "to his-cloak, the 'special' cloak" (*ketonet happassim*, not mentioned since 37:3); the descriptive clauses in v24, "The pit was empty. There was no water in it"; and the description of the Ishmaelite caravan in v24. Also note the solemn repetition of the name Joseph (3 times) in 28 -- like tolling the bell for Jacob's favourite son.

I believe that the delayed identification of the Ishmaelite caravan, first cited in v25, as Midianite in v28, is also a feature of suspense-at-peak. There is, indeed, a certain parallelism here between events in Episode 3 and in the Peak. In v18 the brothers see Joseph from afar; in 19-22 they sit down to consider how to dispose of him; and in vv23-24 they explode into activity on his arrival at the scene. Similarly, in v25 they sight a caravan afar off; in 26-27 they discuss how to use the caravan to dispose of Joseph; and in v28, on the arrival of the caravan a spate of activity culminates in the selling of Joseph to the caravaneers. The story, I believe, is an artful construction just as it stands: The caravan, first sighted afar off as generally Ishmaelite (=Bedouin?) proves on closer inspection to be Midianite, and Joseph is sold to them. The intervening suspense is artful and effective. Reuben, evidently away on an errand, is not a partner to the transaction and is in consternation at finding Joseph gone -- at which point he becomes a participant in the cover-up.

Conclusion

To answer briefly the question posed in the title: I believe that careful attention to the discourse structure of Gen 37 -- in the light of the *whole* Joseph story -- establishes the traditional view that the brothers sold him (not a group of interlopers called Midianites). This accords with Joseph's words in 45:4, 5 where Joseph twice refers to their having sold him and with the dialogue in 50:17-21, where the brothers ask forgiveness for the sins and wrongs that they committed in treating Joseph so badly and where Joseph agrees "you intended to harm me."

The traditional interpretation also accords with the dialogue in 42:21-22: "They said to one another 'Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his