

## The Nameless African Wife of Potiphar and Her Contribution to Ancient Israel<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*The wife of Potiphar is popularly believed to have come from Egypt on the African continent like her husband. She is referred to as the "African Wife of Potiphar" not only because Egypt is part of the African continent, but also because the ancient Egyptians referred to themselves as having ancestors in Punt along the coast of Somali Land. Despite the fact that the discussion centres on the woman's seduction or her misbehaviour, her action has a blessing on its own.<sup>2</sup> The woman is pivotal to the survival of the Hebrews in Egypt. Her seduction initiated the event that brought the family of Jacob to Egypt, thus setting the stage for one of the major themes of the entire Bible, the Exodus or deliverance. This misbehaviour brings Joseph to the notice of Pharaoh and to a very high position of authority through which he organises the food supplies in Egypt. Joseph made Egypt to become the bread basket of the ancient Near East in that period (Gen 12:10). Despite the fact that so many readers condemn the behaviour of Potiphar's African wife, she behaves like any normal human being with great desire for children. An examination of her story in the Bible, Qur'an, Jewish Legends and ancient works of art reveals that she is not better or worse than any normal human being whose husband may be impotent or a eunuch.*

### A INTRODUCTION

The story of the African Wife of Potiphar who tries to seduce Joseph, Jacob's favourite son, presents an interesting theme that is common in Ancient Near Eastern narrative. The Egyptian parallel appears in the XIX dynasty, "Tale of the Two Brothers." Other parallels include the "Canaanite Tale of Aqhat" and "Ishtar's attempt to marry Gilgamesh." Although these narratives are similar, each carries its own set of meaning.

Heather McKay, however, refused that this African wife of Potiphar goes without identity as well as being characterized as wicked. She thus decided to name her "Rahpitop," which is the reversed form of the word Poti-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the Ancient Near Eastern Conference at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Susan T. Hollis, "Wife of Potiphar," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (ed. Carol L. Meyers, Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 184-185.

phar.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that this narrative is condemned by many biblical scholars, a close reading of the Joseph story shows that the African wife of Potiphar has made some contributions, not only to the narrative, but to the history of ancient Israel. She is also an example of any normal human being who faces the problem of childlessness, a eunuch as a husband, a handsome young man in her house and a misunderstood personal vision.

Although the discussion centers on the seductive activity or the misbehaviour of Potiphar's African wife, she happens to have some good in her.<sup>4</sup> This woman is pivotal to the survival of the Hebrews and their God as well as their moral behaviour according to the Hebrew precepts. Her misbehaviour brought Joseph to the notice of Pharaoh and Joseph's eventual promotion to a very high position of authority through which he organises the food supplies in Egypt. Egypt became the bread basket of the ancient Near East in that period (Gen 12:10). Despite her seductive action, she filled a positive narrative role. She initiated the event that brought the Hebrews to Egypt, thus setting the stage for one of the major themes of the entire Hebrew Bible, the Exodus or deliverance.

The purpose of this article is to examine the story of the African wife of Potiphar, the Egyptian priest of On (through the analysis of the biblical text (Gen 39), the examination of the Qur'an (sura 12), the Legends of the Jews and some Christian works of art in order to understand the woman's seductive activities and how the same seductive, vindictive and negative activities of the temptress produced some goodness in the history of ancient Israel. This article also has the purpose of identifying the African wife of Potiphar as an African from Egypt, despite the fact that many Euro-American biblical scholars still do not believe that Egypt is part of Africa and do not recognise African presence in the biblical period. This is an effort to identify the presence of Africa and Africans in the biblical period and the role they played in ancient Israel.

## **B THE AFRICANNESS OF THE ANCIENT EGYPT AND EGYPTIANS**

The title of this article is "The Nameless African Wife of Potiphar and Her Contribution to Ancient Israel." The particular words "African Wife of Potiphar," stress that it is in the first place important to discuss the Africanity and blackness of Egypt and ancient Egyptians. The question of Africanity of ancient Egypt and Egyptians has been a contentious issue since the days when Euro-Americans discovered massive monuments during their archaeological excavation in Egypt. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 opened up Egypt for archaeological discoveries. Around this time the new Hamite hypothesis

<sup>3</sup> Heather A. McKay, "Confronting Redundancy as Middle Manager and Wife: The Feisty Woman of Genesis 39," *Semeia* 87 (1999): 215-130.

<sup>4</sup> Hollis, "Wife of Potiphar," 184-185.

which was based on the theories about race, placed the Negro at the very bottom of evolution. Consequently this theory could not allow the possibility that Negroes could have developed from such a massive civilisation as has been discovered in the Nile Valley.<sup>5</sup> The Euro-American Egyptologists had to formulate the theory that Egyptians were not Africans or Negroes. This idea coincided with the very time when justification for the enslavement of the Negroes was feverishly sought. For example, Hermann Junker believed that both Egyptians and Ethiopians which he called *Nehesi*, are not Africans and of course, not black people.<sup>6</sup> In 1810 Blumenbach, a pioneer in racial classification was in Egypt studying human remains and trying to prove that the ancient Egyptians-Cushites were not Negroes.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, many other Egyptologists accepted Junker's and Blumenbach's views uncritically.<sup>8</sup> It is still unfortunate that even up till today many Euro-American biblical scholars believe in such theories that Egypt is not part of Africa, and thus in their scholarly essays they frown upon any claim that Egypt is part of Africa or that ancient Egyptians may have been black people. Lepsius says that the Kushites of the southern Wawat came from Asia between the time of Pepi I (1200 B.C.E.) and Amenemhat I (1700 B.C.E. who drove back the Africans who occupied the place.<sup>9</sup> J. D Baldwin also maintained that the Kushites originated from Arabia and built settlements throughout Africa, down to the Eastern Coast, nearly to the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>10</sup> Lepsius' and Baldwin's theory of the origin of the Kushite is very unlikely, given the fact that it has been generally accepted that Africa, south of Egypt is the origin of human race. Kuntz discussed Egypt under the

<sup>5</sup> Charles B. Copher, "The Black Man in the Biblical World," *JITC* 1/2 (1974): 7-16.

<sup>6</sup> Hermann Junker, "The First Appearance of the Negroes in History," *JEA* 7 (1921): 121-32. See also David T. Adamo, "Africa and Africans in the Old Testament and Its Environment," (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1986), 36-42. *Nehesi* is an Egyptian term which means "black" and is at times used as a name of a Kushite from Kush. This term *Nehesi*, was probably used to distinguish the southern Negro/Black in order to distinguish the southern *Nehesi* from themselves since they themselves were black. See Wallis E.A. Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (New York: Dover Publications, repr. 1978), 386; E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Sudan: Its History and Monuments* (vol. 1; New York: Arno Press, 1976), 505.

<sup>7</sup> Johann F. Blumenbach, *Anthropological Treaties* (trans. Thomas Bendyshe; London: Anthropological Society, 1865).

<sup>8</sup> Jean Vercoutter, "Iconography of the Black in Ancient Egypt from the Beginnings to the Twenty-fifth Dynasty," in *Image of the Black in Western Art* (ed. Ladislav Bugner; New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1976), 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> Gaston Maspero, *The Dawn of Civilization* (vol. 1; trans. by M L. McClure; New York: Frederick Ungar Publication Co. repr. 1968), 488.

<sup>10</sup> John D. Baldwin, *Pre-Historic Nations: Or Inquiries Concerning Some of the Great Peoples and Civilizations of Antiquity and Their Probable Relation to Still Older Civilization of Ethiopians or Cushites of Arabia* (New York: Harper and Bros. Publishers, n.d), 345.

title, "The Ancient Near East during the Patriarchal Period."<sup>11</sup> Ninian Smart discussed Egyptian religion under the title "the Ancient Near East," alongside Israelite religions rather than under African religions.<sup>12</sup>

Many ancient and modern scholars maintain that Egypt is part of Africa and that Punt and *Nehesi* as countries in ancient Africa were places of origin of the ancient Egyptians. The present location of Egypt was originally part of an ocean but the Kushites inhabited the land.<sup>13</sup> Ancient Egyptians themselves claimed that their place of origin is Punt. Diodorus Siculus, the Greek-born writer (59-30 B.C.E) who set out to write the general history of humankind says that the Ethiopians were the first of all people and the pioneer in worshipping the gods.<sup>14</sup> Many of the customs of the Egyptians originated from them and they sent the Egyptians out as colonists.<sup>15</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, George Rawlinson, and Maspero were emphatic that the original home of the Egyptian ancestors was Punt which is to be sought in the African side of the gulf where the present side of Somaliland is located.<sup>16</sup> Budge says:

It is interesting to note that Egyptians themselves always appear to have had some idea that they were connected with the people of the land of Punt which they considered to be peopled by "Nehesh," or "Blacks," and some modern authorities have no hesitation in saying that the ancient Egyptians and the inhabitants of Punt belong to the same race. Now Punt is clearly the name of a portion of Africa which lay far to the south of Egypt, and at no great distance from the western coast of the Red Sea, and, as many Egyptians appear to have looked upon this country as their original home, it follows that, in the early period of dynastic history, at least, the relation between the black tribes of the south and the Egyptians in the north were of friendly character.<sup>17</sup>

Budge continues,

Many facts go to show the persistence of the Negro influence on the beliefs, and manners, and customs of the Dynastic Egyptians, and

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<sup>11</sup> Roland Kuntz, *The People of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Old Testament Literature, History and Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 60-63.

<sup>12</sup> Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), vi.

<sup>13</sup> Adamo, "Africa and Africans in the Old Testament," 66.

<sup>14</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*. 3.8.5, 3.15.2, 3.9.2, An Arbor: Michigan Reprint Series, University of Michigan Library, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*. See also Adamo, "Africa and Africans in the Old Testament," 67.

<sup>16</sup> Budge, *The Egyptian Sudan I*, 512-13; George Rawlinson, *History of Ancient Egypt* (vol. 2; Chicago: Clarke & Co. Publishers, n.d), 72; Maspero, *The Dawn of Civilization I*, 488.

<sup>17</sup> Budge, *The Egyptian Sudan I*, 512-513.

the most important thing of all in connection with this is the tradition which makes them to come from the land of Punt...We may accept without misgiving the opinion of Professor Maspero and of Professor Naville, both of whom believe that it was situated in Africa, at a considerable distance to the south-east, and south of Egypt...All things considered, it is tolerably certain that the men of Punt, who influenced the manners, customs, and beliefs of the people of the Nile Valley were of African origin.<sup>18</sup>

According to David O'Connor,

Typically, the men [Punt] have dark reddish skins and fine features; characteristic Negroid types...and the Egyptians have always visited Punt from the time immemorial... The relationship has been of trade rather than political or subordination.<sup>19</sup>

The fact is that ancient Egypt and ancient Egyptians are Africans and black as attested to by Mokhtar.

The Egyptians used only one word to describe themselves: *KMT* the strongest term existing in the language of the Pharaohs to indicate blackness. This hieroglyphics was written with a piece of charcoal. The word *KMT* gave rise to the term *Hamite* which has been much used subsequently. It is also found in the Bible in the form of Ham.<sup>20</sup>

Many other scholars such as Glenn Ustry and Craig Keener have argued for the Africanness and blackness of ancient Egypt and the Egyptians. According to them "most Egyptians were black by any one's definition."<sup>21</sup> The Egyptians themselves considered Africa as their origin and not Asia. The inscription of Queen Hatshepsut attested to the fact that they originated from Punt to which they made several expeditions.<sup>22</sup>

Knut Holter is right in his observation when he says,

In recent years, however, one has become increasingly aware of its African heritage. On the one hand, the geographical source for the peopling of the Egyptian Nile Valley seems to have been predominantly African, rather than European or Near East. On the other

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<sup>18</sup> Budge, *The Egyptian Sudan II*, 415-416.

<sup>19</sup> David O'Connor, "Egypt, 1552-664 B.C.," in *Cambridge History of Africa* (ed. Desmond Clark; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 917-918.

<sup>20</sup> Gamal Mokhtar, with the collaboration of Jean Vercoutter, "Introduction," in *Ancient Civilizations of Africa* (vol. 2 of *General History of Africa*; New York: Unesco/Heinemann, 1981), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Glen Ustry and Craig S. Keener, *Black Man's Religion: Can Christianity be Afrocentric?* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 61.

<sup>22</sup> Adamo, "Africa and Africans in the Old Testament," 32.

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hand the civilization from here was to an extent, that is usually not recognized, fundamentally African; evidence of both language and culture point in this direction.<sup>23</sup>

The concept of Egypt as part of Africa is not a new one. However, it appears that people forget that Egypt is part of the continent of Africa and only think of the modern state as part of the Middle-East. This is because Arabic is the main language and the country has become predominantly Islamic since the settlement of Islamic religion and culture in 642 C.E.

From the above testimonies of the ancient Egyptians themselves, the Greek writer, Diodorus Siculus, eminent scholars such as Budge, Maspero, Rawlinson, Mokhtar, Usry, Kenner, Holter and others, one can say comfortably that ancient Egyptians and Egypt are Africans and belong to Africa even geographically. Therefore, if we accept Egypt as an African country and that ancient Egyptians are Africans, then the assumption that the African wife of Potiphar is an Egyptian and African, like her husband, is correct. One will be correct then to consider her as the "African Wife of Potiphar" as the title of this article proposes. What then is the relevance of her African identity?

Since this article is part of the research that consider Africa and Africans in the Bible, identifying Egypt and the wife of Potiphar as Africa and Africans promotes African presence in the Bible which as such has not been recognised and accepted by many Euro-American and African biblical scholars.

The recognition of the presence of Africa and Africans in the Bible proves that Christianity is not a foreign religion, but can be considered as African religion also.<sup>24</sup>

The recognition of Egypt and the wife of Potiphar as African and from Africa shows that Africa and Africans participated in the drama of redemption, and not as slaves as many Euro-American scholars have alleged in their biblical exegesis.<sup>25</sup> The story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar is part of the drama of redemption.

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<sup>23</sup> Knut Holter, *Contextualized Old Testament Scholarship in Africa* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2008), 80-81.

<sup>24</sup> David T. Adamo, "A Mixed Multitude: An African Reading of Exodus 12:18," in *Exodus and Deuteronomy: Texts @ Contexts* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 67-78.

<sup>25</sup> For example, McKane, Ullendorf, Philbeck, Smith and others considered the Kushite in King David's army in 2 Sam 18 as an African slave serving in King David's army. See William McKane, *I & II Samuel: Introduction and Commentary* (TBC; London: SCM Press, 1963), 267; Ben F. Philbeck, Jr., *I Samuel-Nehemiah* (BBC 3; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), 123; Edward Ullendorf, *Ethiopia and the*

It shows that the Bible is not a foreign book to Africa and Africans as some political agitators or anti colonialists in Africa have claimed. If the Bible is not foreign to Africa and Africans, it means that Christianity is not a foreign religion.

Nobody's heritage has been as unrecognised and attributed to someone else like that of African heritage. It follows that the recognition of the African heritage of Potiphar's wife is not only gratifying, but promotes African heritage and identity which have been denied or unrecognised as a result of outright prejudice or ignorance.

The identification by so many references to Africa and Africans and the role they play in the Bible, including the wife of Potiphar, shows that without Africans the Bible would have not been in the shape it is now. No people and continent are mentioned so many times in the OT like that of Africa and Africans.<sup>26</sup>

### **C LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE STORY OF POTIPHAR'S WIFE (GEN 39)**

In Gen 12-50 the priestly source is found primarily in genealogical lists such as the list of the twelve sons of Jacob in 31:22-26, the descendants of Esau in 36:1-14 and the list of the descendants of Jacob who came to Egypt in 46:6-27.<sup>27</sup> "These lists bring order to the narrative by posting relationships," with "a sense of historical reliability by their fictitious details."<sup>28</sup>

A close examination of Joseph's story shows that the story is unfolded through a veritable roller coaster of plot twists.<sup>29</sup> Many scholars have tried to find a kernel of history in the story of Joseph by dating it to the time when the

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*Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 8; Henry P. Smith, *Samuel I and II* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1910), 359.

<sup>26</sup> See David T. Adamo, *Africa and the Africans in the Old Testament* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001). This book discusses references to Africa and Africans in the Old Testament. The primary terminologies used for Africa and Africans in the Bible include Cush/Cushite, Punt, and Egypt.

<sup>27</sup> John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 104.

<sup>28</sup> Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Example of these plot twists are: 1) Joseph incurs the wrath of his brothers as a result of his father's favour and dream; 2) His brothers plot to kill him, but he is rescued by Reuben and Judah; 3) Joseph is sold by his brothers who deceive their father Jacob; 4) Judah and Tamar's story is inserted; 5) Joseph experiences a transition to power from slavery twice; 6) His master's wife tries to seduce him; 7) Joseph is in prison as a result of the seduction and lies against him; 8) He also rises to power because of God's wisdom given to him to interpret dreams and other stories. See Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 101-102.

Hyksos ruled Egypt (1750-1550 B.C.E.).<sup>30</sup> The story of Potiphar's wife cannot be separated from the entire story of Joseph's narrative and, of course, the entire Patriarchal story. While many scholars consider the entire patriarchal stories as history, others consider it as legends.<sup>31</sup> Since Potiphar, one of the major heroes was not mentioned after the first verse, Redford considers the inclusion of Joseph and Potiphar "an editorial patch." According to him, an editor, "plagued by a bent toward completeness, inserted them in the story."<sup>32</sup> Regardless of whether the stories in the book of Genesis are historical or not, the tales of the patriarchs remain powerful religious stories because they touch on perennial issues such as jealousy or rivalry, Abraham outwitting the Pharaoh and Isaac and Rebecca and others. Many of the stories are also entertaining.<sup>33</sup>

Matthews labels Genesis 39:1-41:32 as an "embellishment."<sup>34</sup> He sees the garment motif in Genesis 39 as not "an explicit part of the story." By way of structural analysis Matthews divides the entire story of Joseph into two stages. The first stage in the development of the story of Joseph is related to how Joseph was presented with a garment by Jacob and loses it (Gen. 37). Ultimately he receives garments and royal insignia from the king of Egypt (Gen. 41:41-42).<sup>35</sup> The second stage in the development of the story, according to Matthews, is the plot where the "morally upright man, Joseph, loses his garment at the hands of Potiphar's wife."<sup>36</sup> The garment motif in both stages serves "explicitly or implicitly as status indicators."<sup>37</sup> The garment story in Genesis 39 is not "an explicit part of the story" according to Matthews. Yet he considered Genesis 39-41 "as part of a well-structured narrative, not one that has been expanded later."<sup>38</sup>

There appears to be a contradiction by Matthews: He says that Genesis 39 was not to be an explicit part of Joseph's story but an "embellishment." How can Genesis 39-41 be both an embellishment and an integral part of the well-structured narrative?

<sup>30</sup> This account of these people was given by the Hellenistic Egyptian historian called Manetho who calls them "Shepherd." *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 102.

<sup>31</sup> Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 83-105.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)* (Tosup 20; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 136-137.

<sup>33</sup> John Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in the Joseph Narrative," *JSOT* 65 (1995): 25-36.

<sup>35</sup> Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing," 25-36.

<sup>36</sup> Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing," 25-36.

<sup>36</sup> Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing," 25-36.

<sup>37</sup> Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing," 25-36.

<sup>38</sup> Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing," 25-36.



The importance of garments in Genesis 37-39 is prominent.<sup>39</sup> In the story of Joseph, especially in Genesis 39, "garments play a pivotal role in plot development as markers of status and authority by which identities are revealed or concealed."<sup>40</sup> The garment motif in Joseph's story is "a textual signifier" according to Furman, and for a male person garments are "symbolic markers of filial love and recognition" which "reinforce the emotional link between men, a link from which women are excluded."<sup>41</sup> For women also, for Tamar and for the wife of Potiphar, garments function as "communicative devices between the sexes and as a means of self-inscription in a system that neglects them."<sup>42</sup>

In the book of Genesis, Joseph's story provides the richest illustration of "irony and mystery of providence." This story is in a way different from the short, folkloric tales in the patriarchal stories. In fact, it has been considered "a novella and superb example of early prose fiction."<sup>43</sup> This story is one of the oldest novellas in the literature of the ancient world.<sup>44</sup> It is also one of the finest works of literature ever created.<sup>45</sup>

Not only are modern novelists, poets, and literary critics fascinated with this narrative but ancient people also feted its charm and power, as is clear from almost all the major works of ancient and medieval times: the Hebrew midrash, the writings of the Christian Church Fathers and Muslim narrators and commentators. The story is retold again and again in different versions and narrative interpretations. Not surprisingly, one part of this long novella, that erotic and tense episode involving Joseph and Potiphar's wife has been selected most often for retelling. Some scholars assign this story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar traditionally to the Yahwist (J), and others to the Elohist (E). Scholars arrive at this division due to the many duplications in the text.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>39</sup> John R. Huddlestun, "Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion: The Garment Motif in Genesis 37-39," *JSOT* 98 (2002): 47-62.

<sup>40</sup> Huddlestun, "Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion," 47-62.

<sup>41</sup> Nelly Furman, "His Story versus Her Story: Male Genealogy and Female Strategy in the Jacob Cycle," in *Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Miri Amihai, George W. Coats and Anne M. Solomon; *Semeia* 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 141-149.

<sup>42</sup> Furman, "His Story versus Her Story," 148.

<sup>43</sup> Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 101.

<sup>44</sup> Eli Yassif, Review of S. Goldman, "Women, the Wives of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Islamic Folklore," *JSS* 44/1 (1999): 115-117.

<sup>45</sup> Yassif, Review of S. Goldman, 115-117.

<sup>46</sup> Examples of such duplications are that Joseph's brothers appear as sons of Israel (J) or sons of Jacob (E): Reuben's intervention to save Joseph (E) and Judah's intervention (J), Joseph is variously said to be sold to the Midianites (37:36) or to the Ishmaelites (39:1).

It has been noticed that the purpose of Joseph's story was for entertainment with a theological theme, namely divine providence in the history of Israel.<sup>47</sup> The story forms a bridge between the patriarchal narratives in Genesis and the exodus by explaining how the Israelites came to Egypt to settle.<sup>48</sup>

This nameless African wife of Potiphar is primarily identified as a wife (Gen 39:9, 19), though not a very good one, but a wicked and vindictive woman. It is interesting that her husband was never named in the same verse where she is mentioned. She is the subject of many of the verbs of similar action. Her role in the text is unusual in comparison with Joseph's role in the book of Genesis. The author describes Joseph as "nice and of good appearance and figure" and he uses the same terminology that described his mother, Rachael in Gen 29:17.

One notices that the introduction of the African wife of Potiphar is sudden and connected to the appearance of Joseph. Yet this African woman's physical appearance was never mentioned in this text. There is no evidence that she has any children. The episode took place in Egypt and her husband is labelled as an Egyptian. Yet she was never labelled as such despite the fact that it is not the normal tradition for Egyptian high officers to marry foreign women. The most logical conclusion, despite the narrator's silence is that she is an Egyptian and an African<sup>49</sup> and this was taken for granted by the narrator. For a biblical narrator it is not unusual to be silent about a woman's Egyptian identity. An example is Asenath in Gen 41. The narrator prefers to identify her with her husband rather than saying that she is Egyptian. Asenath is the daughter of Potiphara and a wife of Joseph (41). In Gen 39 the seductress is the wife of Potiphar.

The African wife of Potiphar is very active for a woman who appears only in a chapter of the book of Genesis. She is the subject of many verbs and they are unusual ones for a female biblical character. For example, the verb she "lift up her eyes" at Joseph (39:7) means that she fixed her eyes on Joseph.<sup>50</sup> An Akkadian parallel supports this interpretation which uses the same idiom to describe how Ishtar fixed her eyes on Gilgamesh.<sup>51</sup> This use of sight also can be interpreted in the light of a corporate personality in the OT when a part can

<sup>47</sup> We have such stories in ancient Egypt such as the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor or the Tale of the Two Brothers. In the Old Testament, several complex novellas can also be found in the Book of Samuel, Esther and Ruth.

<sup>48</sup> As said before, this story is different from all other stories in the book of Genesis. It has certain amount of authentic local colour.

<sup>49</sup> See the above discussion on Egypt as an African country.

<sup>50</sup> Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 303.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy K. Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972), 85-96. See also Speiser, *Genesis*, 303.

be used to represent the whole. Sight may represent a total person including the mind. In Genesis 39:7 Potiphar's wife with her total person was actually obsessed with Joseph. Evidently, after eyeing Joseph, she could not bear it to speak like other woman in Genesis, therefore her words are unusual. She says "Lie with me" שְׁכַבָּה (39:7) with the preposition עִם. Schneider's idea that because the narrator uses the preposition עִם, means that she wants the relationship to be mutual is untenable. If the שְׁכַבָּה is imperative, it means it is a command and cannot be mutual. Her command is based on the African (Egyptian) tradition and culture. In Israelite and Egyptian cultures a slave girl is automatically sexually available to her master (Ex 21:9-11), although sex with boys was forbidden by Israelite moral code. Perhaps, the African wife of Potiphar tried to take advantage of the Egyptian culture by saying that a male slave should also be sexually available to her if she wishes, just like a female slave was available to have sex with her husband. That is probably why the woman commanded him. The word the woman used according to the narrator is עִם יִשְׁכַּבָּה which is *qal imperative masculine singular* and literally means "You lie with me." This tradition probably gave her the guts to command a slave boy to lie with her. This is supported by the fact that she did not stop by commanding the slave boy to lie with her, she moved to action in order to force Joseph by grabbing him. Again, her action is unusual among the women in Genesis since most of them only spoke.

Once more she is the subject of the verb "says." After she grabbed Joseph he runs away and leaves his coat with her. This is the beginning of "a blame game." She calls to the men of the house and speak, "See, he hath brought in a Hebrew unto us to mock us; he came in unto me toiled with me, and I cried with a loud voice" (39:14), thus claiming attempted rape which is a total lie. Again, she is the subject of the verb דָּבַר. Day after day Joseph refuses her advancement when she spoke to him (39:10). Again she is the subject of the verb as she speaks to her husband. In 39:18 she is also the subject of the verb "raised" when she raises her voice (39:18).

The African woman is the subject of the many verbs (speaks, cry out, raises her voice), most of which are associated with speaking and conveying ideas regardless of whether it is true or not.

Her actions of grabbing and crying out reverse the roles of the women in Genesis because most of them never had the privilege of choosing her sexual partners and those who carry out actions for sex do so for procreative purposes. This African woman was in a position of power with her words. What she says was more powerful than Joseph's or her husband's action.<sup>52</sup> The African woman has not been the object of many verbs, but where she is an object, she is

<sup>52</sup> Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2008), 209-213.

still in control of the situation: "Lie with me" (39:17), "wife of his master" (39:8). Nothing is withheld from him except "her" (39:9); Joseph did not agree with her proposition to lie with "her," to be with "her" (39:10); his garment remains with "her" (39:16). In some cases the African woman places herself as an object when she relates the story to her household, and says, he came to lie with "me" (39:14); and he left his garment with "me" (39:15); he came to play with "me" (39:17); and she recounts what the slave did to "her" (39:19).

Wilfred Warning listed some specific terminological patterns in Genesis 39.<sup>53</sup> He identified eleven terminologies which occur very frequently, which are basic to the theme of Gen 39 and are essential to the understanding of the story of Joseph and Potiphar.<sup>54</sup> These terminologies are: "Joseph," "YHWH," "leave," "lie (sleep) with," "outside," "go out," "flee," "be successful," "garment" which provide "linguistic linkages in Genesis 39."<sup>55</sup>

Believing that the story in Genesis 39-50 is historically authentic, William Ward discusses the 14 Egyptian [African] titles in them.<sup>56</sup> Of these 14 titles, four appear in Gen 39: Potiphar as "captain of the guard" (39:1), Joseph as the "overseer of the house" of Potiphar (39:4), the "commander of the prison," (39:21), Joseph as the "minor official in prison," (39:22).<sup>57</sup>

## D THE AFRICAN WIFE OF POTIPHAR IN POST BIBLICAL LITERATURE

My concern here is to trace how the story of Joseph and Potiphar has been told, retold and elaborated among the Jews, Christians and Muslims with great fascination. Since it is impossible to deal with all the Jewish, Christian and Islamic literature concerning Joseph and Potiphar, this will be selective, choosing, the Legends of the Jews, the Christian representation in art, and the Quran.

### 1 The Story according to the Legends of the Jews

Even though the African wife of Potiphar is nameless in the Old Testament, Jewish literature gave her a name, Zuleika.<sup>58</sup> It was the medieval commentator *Sefer HaYashar* in his commentary on the *Torah* who gave her this name. She was filled with an "invisible passion" for Joseph who was a slave in the house

<sup>53</sup> Wilfried Warning, "Terminological Patterns and Genesis 39," *JETS* 44/3 (2001): 409-419.

<sup>54</sup> Warning, "Terminological Patterns," 409-419.

<sup>55</sup> Warning, "Terminological Patterns," 409-411.

<sup>56</sup> William A. Ward, "Egyptian Titles in Genesis 39-50," *BSac* 114/453 (1957): 40-59.

<sup>57</sup> Ward, "Egyptian Titles," 40-59.

<sup>58</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *Bible Times and Characters from Joseph to the Exodus* (vol. 2 of *The Legends of the Jews*; trans. H. Szold; Philologos Online Books), n.p. [Accessed 3 November 2012]. Online: <http://philologos.org/eb-lotj/>

of Potiphar or Potiphera, an idolatrous priest in Egypt. Her longing to have a child through Joseph was heightened by the astrologic forecast that she was destined to have a descendant through Joseph according to what has been read by the stars. Unfortunately, she misunderstood that prediction which was to be fulfilled in Joseph marrying her daughter, Asenath, later on with many children. According to the Legends of the Jews, since Zuleika did not have a son, she pretended she wanted to adopt Joseph as her son and she was demonstrating her affection by going to Joseph at night trying to persuade him. When Joseph eventually knew her trick, he prayed to God to divert her attention from him.

Zuleika did all she could to persuade Joseph to make love to her. She talked well of Joseph before Potiphar, her husband. She requested from Joseph to teach her the word of his God and that she and her husband would change to his God if Joseph did her wish. She promised to kill her husband, so that she could marry Joseph. She sent to Joseph a dish prepared with magic in order to captivate him, but he refused to eat her food. Her unholy passion so overwhelmed her that she got sick and when her husband asked her, she replied, "I have a pain at my heart, and the groaning in my spirit oppresses me." Another time when she was with Joseph alone, she rushed toward him and cried, "I will throttle myself, or I will jump into a well or a pit, if thou will not yield thyself to me."<sup>59</sup> Joseph replied, "If thou makest away with thyself, thy husband concubine, Asteho, thy rival, will maltreat thy children, and extirpate thy memory from earth." She pursued Joseph day by day with amorous talk and her flattery words. Zuleika lavished great gifts on Joseph. But Joseph refused to lie with her. When Joseph would not yield, she threatened him with false accusations before his master. She continued her threat:

"I will deprive thee of food."

Joseph replied, "the Lord giveth food to the hungry."

"I will have thee thrown into the prison."

Joseph replied, "the Lord looseth the prisoners."

"I will put heavy labor upon thee that will bend thee double."

Joseph replied, "The Lord raiseth up them that are bowed down."

Zuleika took Joseph to the chamber and covered the idol in the room so that Joseph will not see it. But Joseph saw it and told her that the eyes of the Lord run to and fro. She told Joseph exactly in unmistakable language what she wanted and when Joseph still refused, she asked him, "Why dost thou refuse to fulfill my wish? Am I not a married woman?"<sup>60</sup>

Zuleika got sick of her unfulfilled passion and all the women of Egypt visited her. They asked her, "Why art thou so languished and wasted, thou that

<sup>59</sup> Ginzberg, *Bible Times and Characters*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Ginzberg, *Bible Times and Characters*, 4.

lacketh nothing? Is not thy husband a prince great and esteemed in the sight of the King?" She answered and said, "This day shall it be made known unto you whence cometh the state wherein you see me."

Zuleika commanded her maid-servant to prepare food for the women and placed oranges on the table for them to peel. She ordered Joseph to appear at the banquet to wait upon her guests. Immediately when Joseph came in, all the women could not take their eyes off from him because of his handsomeness. Those who were peeling oranges cut their fingers with knives and still could not take their eyes off from his beauty even when the oranges were filled with blood. Then Zuleika looked at them and asked them "What have you done? Behold I set oranges before you to eat, and you have cut our hands." The women looked to their hands, and lo, they were full of blood, and it flowed down and stained their garments. The women said to Zuleika, "This slave in thy house did enchant us, and we could not turn our eyes away from him on account of his beauty." Zuleika therefore said to the women,

This happened to you that looked upon him but a moment, and you could not refrain yourselves! How then can I control myself in whose house he abideth continually, who see him go in and out day after day? How then, should I not waste away, or keep from languishing on account of him.

The women answered and said, "It is true, who can look upon this beauty in the house and refrain her feelings? But he is thy slave. Why dost thou not disclose to him that which is in thy heart rather than suffer thy life to perish through this thing?" Zuleika answered "Daily for I endeavor to persuade him, but he will not consent to my wishes. I promised him everything that is fair, yet have I met with no return from him, and therefore, I am sick as you may see."

During the month of Nile festival, when all people had gone to celebrate, she refused to go by claiming that she was sick. The purpose was to look for an opportunity to be with Joseph and to persuade or force him to obey her wishes. When Joseph came from the field he found himself with Zuleika in the house. She was almost successful in persuading Joseph and he almost yielded until all of a sudden the image of his mother Rachel, his aunt Leah, and his father Jacob appeared to him. They said to him, "Will thou forfeit this honor through sinful conduct? For now, he that keepeth company with harlots wasteth his substance." Joseph quickly fled away from the house.

But he returned again to Zuleika and at this time the Lord appeared to him with these words:

"If thou touchest her, I will cast away this stone upon which the earth is founded and the world will fall to ruin." When Joseph was trying to run away, she grasped him and drew a sword from under her garments and said that Joseph must die. But Joseph was able to escape leaving his garment with her.

When the people came from the festival, Zuleika reported Joseph to the people and her husband and demanded punishment. Potiphar ordered that Joseph was to be flogged mercilessly. Joseph cried to God and God opened the mouth of Zuleika's child of eleven months, who spoke to the men beating Joseph,

What is your quarrel with this man? Why do you inflict such evil upon him? Lies my mother doth speak and deceit is what her mouth uttereth and that her mother was the one who tried to persuade Joseph to force him into her wish.

Potiphar therefore stopped beating Joseph. The matter was taken to court where Joseph protested his innocence. The judges who were priests, instead of pronouncing the death penalty, put Joseph into prison. When Potiphar was putting Joseph into prison, he said, "I know that thou art not guilty of so vile a crime, but I must put thee in durance lest a taint cling to my children." Joseph was then put in prison. While Joseph was in prison, Zuleika visited him many times and spoke of her love for Joseph. When Joseph refused to yield, she threatened Joseph: "I will rush matters so far that all men will hate thee; and I will sell thee into a strange land." But Joseph was not persuaded.

## 2 Potiphar's Wife According to the Qur'an

In the Qur'an, a whole Sura was devoted to the story of Joseph and the African wife of Potiphar (Sura 12). Her name was Zuleika. However, some Arabian writers name her *Jami*. Potiphar was named Aziz. She is given the opportunity to repent and confess publicly. In later Muslim literature she is named Zuleika according to Jewish literature. Later writings continued to cast Joseph (Yusuf) as a holy man and prophet, a precursor of Muhammad. In *mi'raf* literature Muhammad encounters Yusuf in a position of honour in the third heaven.<sup>61</sup> For Muslims during the Mecca period, Yusuf was a role model for Muhammad.<sup>62</sup>

In the Qur'an, the story of Zuleika is more inclusive and is toward the exploring and explaining Joseph's (Yusuf) sexual attractiveness in very human terms. The Qur'an is less clear whether the encounter actually leads to his imprisonment or not. The wife is the wife of Joseph's buyer, Aziz, who installs Joseph in their house and perhaps to be adopted by them. In the Qur'an the wife of Aziz solicits Joseph, closing him into her room with her. Joseph would have taken her if not because of the divine warning not to (7). Joseph ran away

<sup>61</sup> Shalom Goldman, *The Wives of Women/The Wives of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish and Islamic Folktales* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 43.

<sup>62</sup> Ena G. Heller, "Bible, Midrashim and Medieval Tales: The Artistic Journey of Potiphar's Wife," in *Women of the Hebrew Bible and their Afterlives* (vol. 1 of *From the Margins*; ed. Peters Hawkins and Leslie C. Stahlberg; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 18.

from the room, but the woman grabbed his dress which he left with her. When Joseph met Aziz at the door as he was trying to escape, he refused to believe his wife's lie that Joseph wanted to seduce her. He urged her instead to ask for forgiveness for the sin she has committed by accusing someone falsely of adultery (7). When some women friends blamed her through gossip, she invited them to show them what happened by inviting them to the house so that they could know how tempting Joseph is. Zuleika gave each woman a knife to cut the food. She then invited Joseph in. They thought that the handsome youth was an angel. While the visitors saw Joseph's beauty, they lost control and did not know when they cut their hands instead of the food. The women had to sympathise with Zuleika and she decided to send Joseph to prison if she could not have him. Joseph then prayed to God to turn the woman's desire from him.

When Joseph received summons by the king to leave the prison, he refused until he had cleared the matter with the women including Zuleika and other women. Eventually Zuleika confessed her sin and asked for forgiveness.

### 3 The Story According to Christian Representation in Works of Art

In post biblical literature the event took on a life of its own. Due to some extent, its usefulness as a moral lesson and cautionary tale, the story captures the imagination of the literary and visual interpretations of all the three major Abrahamic traditions.<sup>63</sup> The truth is that it occupies a central place in both Jewish and Islamic literature which embellished and elaborated on it with even other tales spun off the original biblical literature.<sup>64</sup> The Midrashic literature tried to elucidate some details on which the Bible is silent and even offered some contradictory information.<sup>65</sup> The artworks discussed extends over one thousand years as different countries and cultures tried to bring a contemporary message of the story of Potiphar's wife.

As early as the sixth century, artistic representations of Potiphar's wife shows that they have some knowledge of extra-biblical materials of which the Bible is silent about. The first representation is *The Vienna Genesis* which is a lavish sixth century Byzantine illustrated manuscript. In this representation, the African wife of Potiphar was seen "seated on a monumental, throne-like piece of furniture." Some scholars interpreted it as an imposing bed which reflects the Jewish legends in which she feigns illness on that particular day so that she can remain at home alone with Joseph when everybody has gone to the Nile

<sup>63</sup> Heller, "Bible, Midrashim and Medieval Tales," 17-30.

<sup>64</sup> Heller, "Bible, Midrashim and Medieval Tales," 17-30; James L. Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 21-25; Goldman, *The Wives of Women/The Wives of Men*, 12-33.

<sup>65</sup> Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*, 28-124.



festival.<sup>66</sup> Another work of art interprets the African wife of Potiphar as seated on a bench beside the door of the house with her semi-circular colonnade crowned by a prominent triple cornice. This interpretation reflects the Jewish legends which record that after she had dressed in the most gorgeous apparel, she sat waiting for Joseph to pass to his work-room so that she could tempt him. These two interpretations point to the fact that there is knowledge of rabbinical interpretation of the biblical story.

Christians considered him an anti-type of Christ and in the Christian interpretation the story of Potiphar's wife is an allusion to the passion of Christ and the institution of a new law.<sup>67</sup> "This interpretation casts the wife of Potiphar as Synagoga (the old law), unsuccessfully trying to tempt Christ; the coat that Joseph leaves in her hands signifies either the body he sacrificed on the cross or the veil that hid the Holy of Holies in the temple, which torn as Christ dies and thus marked the end of the old law and the beginning of the new (as recounted in Mt 27:51)."<sup>68</sup> The body of biblical literature, that is, rabbinical exegesis, Christian writings and Medieval fable rather than the biblical text alone shape the history of the artistic representation of Potiphar's wife from the late antiquity through the Baroque periods in both Jews and Christian renderings.

At the right of the door Joseph is depicted standing without a cloak over his tunic looking back. Two women are also standing next to him, one carrying a baby. Underneath the picture of the women are three women, one holding a baby and another one bathing babies. These depictions are additions that are not mentioned by the Bible or Qur'an. Kurt Weitzmann believes that these scenes are derived from the Midrashic literature.<sup>69</sup> Michael Levin tried to identify the women standing at the right side dressed in blue as astrologers. The woman next to her holding a baby is the African wife of Potiphar and her adopted daughter Osnath or Asenath.<sup>70</sup> The depiction of an infant seems to illustrate the Jewish legends where Potiphar's infant child was temporarily given a speech to intercede on Joseph's behalf when he was being beaten mercilessly by Potiphar's men.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> KatrinKogman-Appel, "The Shephardic Picture Cycles and the Rabbinical Tradition: Continuity and Innovation in Jewish Iconography," *ZK* 60/4 (1997): 451-481.

<sup>67</sup> Heller, "Bible, Midrashim and Medieval Tales," 18.

<sup>68</sup> Heller, "Bible, Midrashim and Medieval Tales," 18; Gertrude Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (trans. Janet Seligman, Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1971), 110.

<sup>69</sup> Kurt Weitzmann, *Illustration in Roll and Codex* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1974), 165-166.

<sup>70</sup> Michael D. Levin, "Some Jewish Sources for the Vienna Genesis," *ArtB* 54/3 (1972): 241-244.

<sup>71</sup> Ginzberg, *Bible Times and Characters*, 4.

In *Vienna Genesis*, the story continues on folio XVIV which depicts Potiphar's return and the accusation. The rest of the people represented shows the African wife of Potiphar and the corroboration of the story by members of the household. The presence of the males and female household demonstrates the knowledge of the Midrashic commentary, possibly the text known as *Assemblies of Ladies* where the African wife of Potiphar's obsession with Joseph is not a secret but well-known and a matter of gossip among women of the Egyptian court.

The *Golden Haggada* is a Spanish manuscript (ca. 1320) which is one of a group of illuminated Passover Haggadot dating from the fourteenth century and contains compositional and iconographic patterns pointing to the Christian pictorial sources.<sup>72</sup> The seduction scene presents clear affinities with the *Vienna Genesis*. That indicates the earlier Christian models were known to the artists responsible for the manuscript.

In the *Golden Haggada*, the African wife of Potiphar is shown in her chamber, sitting in her bed. This image is consistent with the story of the feigned illness which prevented her from attending the festival on the banks of the Nile. Joseph, being a foreigner is not supposed to attend such celebrations, but to attend to the daily business in the household. In this scene, he is pictured as running away from the bed with his head turned backwards to observe the African wife of Potiphar's grabbing hold of his cloak. The return of Potiphar is on the scene to the left while his wife dresses up in the most attractive way for the occasion. The presence of the scene in the Haggada further reveals the cross-fertilisation between Christian and Jewish circles with respect to illustrating biblical narratives.

In the latter version of the story Joseph is sold not to Potiphar, but rather to the pharaoh, therefore, it is the queen of Egypt and not Potiphar's wife who attempts to tempt Joseph. What this means is that the iconographic presentation of the story of Potiphar's wife, was an interpretation that replaced the biblical character by substituting a crowned figure for an officer's wife. This substitution might have made the moral message more poignant or more contemporary to the European Medieval society.

In *Queen Mary Psalter*, a work contemporary to the *Golden Haggada*, the female character to the left is wearing a low-cut gown, head cloth and crown, pointing to the bed. She almost pushes Joseph toward it. This manuscript was an attempt to respond to a particular moral issue of royal adultery. In this case, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife served as an *exemplum* of

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<sup>72</sup> Kogman-Appel, "The Shephardic Picture Cycles," 454.

marital infidelity in royal circles.<sup>73</sup> The right half of the image depicts the queen telling an armed guard about attempted rape. She cries out, rents her gown, tears out her hair and tells the sergeant that Joseph wished to force her. This visual representation of the African wife of Potiphar that identifies her as a rape victim can be considered as enhanced representation of her cunning character.

Orazio Gentileschi's (ca. 1626-30) painting in the Royal Collection at Windsor illustrates well what seems to be a common view in the early seventeenth century Europe. The African wife of Potiphar is depicted in an advanced state of undress. Her dress is pulled down enough to expose her full breasts and lifted up enough to see part of her thighs. The hair is down but well combed and adorned with a very splendid tiara. The bed is covered with a provocatively rumpled sheet and rich fabrics. The African wife of Potiphar lifts the corner of the bedspread with one hand, invitingly. In this picture she is not presented as a victim because she is in control of the situation which she manipulates into her advantage. Iconographically it depicts her as a seductress. Joseph is represented as dressed in a silky coat making unhurried escape, without been appalled or disturbed. By his looks, he is wholly unaffected.

One of the most popular texts around the turn of the sixteenth century is *The Power of Women* which is a compilation of tales that illustrate the great sexual power that women have over men and depict men as helpless victims of any interactions with evil irresistible seductresses.

One of the paintings that depict the wiles and sexual deceit is Guerin's 1649 painting which portray a very young Joseph struggling to get away from a half-naked wife of Potiphar who looks like a beautiful ancient goddess. She does not touch him but he is frantically struggle to escape. The story of Potiphar's wife and Joseph became the favourite vehicle for artist to illustrate a tale of seduction and resistance, virtue and vice. From defining Joseph as a paragon of virtue to a warning against adultery, from bemoaning rape to portraying women as instigating it, from ancient tales to the Bible and from Midrashim to Christian and Muslim Medieval lore, the artistic representation of Potiphar's wife traces a complex and fascinating journey.<sup>74</sup>

Closer examinations of the Joseph, Zuleika, and Potiphar's story in the OT, the Qur'an and Jewish legends and commentaries, the advantages are not only that of authenticating the story, but also some reflection of dependence. There are basic similarities and differences. Where the OT is silent, the Jewish legends and the Qur'an seem to fill the gap. This means there are extensions of

<sup>73</sup> Heller, "Bible, Midrashim and Medieval Tales," 25; Kathryn A. Smith, "History, Typology and Homily: The Joseph Cycle in the Queen Mary Psalter," *Gesta* 32/2 (1993): 147-159.

<sup>74</sup> Heller, "Bible, Midrashim and Medieval Tales," 30.

the story. For example, a name was given to the African wife of Potiphar; the refusal of Zuleika to attend the Nile National festival so that she could tempt Joseph; the repentance of the African wife of Potiphar for tempting Joseph; and the possible marriage of Zuleika to Joseph.<sup>75</sup> Whether the story is historical or not, it helps the reader to appreciate the fascination and the possible authenticity of the story. One of the greatest remarkable characteristics and advantages of sacred texts, whether they are read within a community of faith or in another respectful and admiring context is that they prompt the reader to seek almost endlessly a better disclosure of what was already there.<sup>76</sup> The artistic depiction of the story also adds to the fascination and the existential dimension of the story.

### E THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE AFRICAN WIFE OF POTIPHAR TO ANCIENT ISRAEL

The African wife of Potiphar appears in the story to be an ancient picture of a modern, lonely, bored, wealthy housewife who has relationships mostly with servants and a limited relationship with her husband. Potiphar's wife has occupied a prominent place as the first sensualist in the gallery of scriptural women.<sup>77</sup> The woman has been characterised in various evil ways. According to Herbert Lockyer, the sins against morality committed by biblical women up to this point were for dynastic reasons due to the custom of that period, but the story of the African wife of Potiphar's lust for Joseph is "of a woman, spoilt, rich and beautiful, a product of a luxurious and licentious civilization coveting one of the holiest and most attractive men in Egypt."<sup>78</sup> Many commentators seem to see no good in her. "Potiphar's nameless wife takes the price for diabolical, cunning and dastardly wickedness."<sup>79</sup> She is described also as a faithless wife, a she-devil and a woman with slanderous lie, hate and accusation.<sup>80</sup> Susan Niditch describes her as exemplifying the female personification of "anti-wisdom, disloyal to her husband, quick to seek satisfaction in the forbidden places, strongly sexual and duplicitous."<sup>81</sup> She is also described as aggressive, independent, vengeful and sexually demanding.

<sup>75</sup> Marilyn R. Waldman, "New Approaches to 'Biblical' Materials in the Qur'an," *MW*75/1 (1985): 1-16.

<sup>76</sup> Waldman, "New Approaches," 1-16.

<sup>77</sup> Morton, Henry V. *Women of the Bible* (London: Methuen and Co.), 1940.

<sup>78</sup> Herbert Locker, *All the Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 176.

<sup>79</sup> Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible*, 177.

<sup>80</sup> Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible*, 177.

<sup>81</sup> Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *The Women's Bible Commentary: Expanded Edition, with Apocrypha* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 10-25.

Despite the evil characterisation of the African wife of Potiphar by the narrator and most commentators, she has made some substantial indirect contributions to ancient Israel. Unfortunately many key elements in her were ignored. It is very unfair to her. She is the cause of Joseph going to prison which has some significant consequences. He takes charge of the whole of Egypt, saves his family, and brings Israelite to Egypt.

Firstly, without the seduction story, whether true or false, Joseph would have not ended up in prison. Recurring language in the story indicates that God was with Joseph and everything he touches prospers (Gen.39:2-3, 5-6, 8-9). What appears to be a misfortune in Joseph's life eventually turns to the benefit of him and his family (45:7, 8). The grievous charge against Joseph by the powerful African woman, did not lead to his death, but to the royal prison. Normally the death penalty supposes to be the verdict for such sin. Who knows if there might have been a secret meeting between Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar not to punish Joseph with the death penalty? Note that there was still an outstanding love of Joseph by Mr. and Mrs. Potiphar. Even though the African woman's love was that of lust, that does not erode the fact that she is an example of what dedicated love is to readers. Although the Bible is silent Jewish legends and the Qur'an mentions that she followed him to the prison and still expressed her desire to have an offspring through Joseph.

Secondly, without the African wife of Potiphar, which led Joseph to prison, he would not have had the benefit of interpreting the dreams of his fellow prisoners, one who later recommended Joseph to Pharaoh as someone who can interpret his troubling dreams of cows and sheaves. Joseph saved the entire Egypt and possibly the whole ancient Near East from hunger and death. The interpretation of the dream gave Egypt the wisdom to collect food during the times of plenty and to save it for the period of famine. To this writer, it is an achievement which uplifted Egypt and her reputation.

Thirdly, without the incident of the African wife of Potiphar, Joseph would have never become vizier of all Egypt. The incident of the African wife of Potiphar becomes one of the important links in a chain inevitably leading to Joseph becoming vizier of all Egypt after the interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams. Joseph first of all became the "commander of the prison" (Gen 39:21).<sup>82</sup> This is the Egyptian title meaning the "overseer of the prison." Such title is an important one in Egypt. It enabled Joseph to exercise some authority in prison in preparation for the higher position. As the vizier of Pharaoh, Joseph is described as *ablephar'oh*, "Father to Pharaoh" (Gen 45:8). Joseph also became the "Ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen 45:8). If Joseph had not gone to prison, he would not have gotten to this position. The temptation took him there.

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<sup>82</sup> Ward, "Egypt Titles in Genesis 39-50," 43.

Fourthly, without the incident of the African wife of Potiphar, the impeccable character of Joseph would not have been known and he would not have become an example of the most faithful vizier for the Jews and Muslims. This incident contributes to Joseph's character. The characterisation of "too good to be true a Joseph," is consistent throughout the narrative and that makes him to become a wisdom hero-type represented in the books of Daniel and of Esther, and the ancient Near Eastern works such as the story of Ahikar.<sup>83</sup> This characterisation is emulated by Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Despite the unforgiving sin of seduction in the story, she fills a positive role in the narrative. The whole story initiated not only the event of bringing the Hebrews to Egypt, the narrative and the events set a stage for one of the major events that is considered to be the theme of the entire Bible, that is, the theme of the exodus and salvation/deliverance within later Christian theology.

During the famine, Joseph was able to invite his brethren to Egypt. They survived as the result of Joseph's wisdom. Eventually when there was a pharaoh who did not know Joseph, the Hebrews were persecuted and Yahweh sent Moses to deliver them. He did not allow them to perish. When the mighty Egyptian army pursued them, God in his mighty work delivered them from the Sea of Reeds. The exodus of the Hebrews went beyond the deliverance from the Sea of Reeds. It includes the entire experience during the wilderness, the conquest, the settlement, the united and divided monarchy, the exile. Yahweh continued to deliver them from the hands of the enemies. The story of Joseph and Potiphar is a bridge to these mighty events.

## **F CONCLUSION**

It is important to appreciate how this tale of sexual temptation, intrigue, and virtue transcends the limits of its original scriptural exemplar. Joseph became more impressive and stronger in his moral steadfastness at the African wife of Potiphar's attempted seduction even when it became as extremely difficult to resist. His unwavering devotion made Joseph to be looked upon as a symbol of moral faithfulness for Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The women in Genesis are markers and creators of transition and transformation. In certain sense their narrative roles parallel the social position of and attitudes toward women in male dominated cultures in which women are marginal in all economic and political spheres.<sup>84</sup> Yet, their roles as people "in between" can be powerful and critical for the development of the stories and for the progress of human civilisation and Israelitic culture according to the biblical writers.<sup>85</sup> The African wife of Potiphar's role in this narrative reflects

<sup>83</sup> Niditch, "Genesis," 10-25.

<sup>84</sup> Niditch, "Genesis," 10-25.

<sup>85</sup> Niditch, "Genesis," 10-25.

how women in Genesis succeeded behind the scenes, always through the medium of trickery, and their powers are in the private instead of the public realms. The story of the African wife of Potiphar implies the culture in which powerful women are regarded with suspicion and as unnatural and evil.

No post-biblical literature has exonerated the African wife of Potiphar except the Qur'an where this story receives a more sympathetic treatment because she is given the privilege to repent and be forgiven. She later marries Joseph in accordance with Joseph's other wife. The lesson to learn is that no biblical woman is completely useless. They fill a divine purpose. It is therefore unfortunate to generalise that biblical women (women in general) are bad and misleading to men.

Despite all the evil characterisation of the African wife of Potiphar, as a deceitful woman into whose clutches Joseph fell,<sup>86</sup> or as a shrewd villain,<sup>87</sup> vindictive and scared woman<sup>88</sup> a negative temptress,<sup>89</sup> as the embodiment of sinister power of deathly temptation,<sup>90</sup> as a woman whose story was suppressed in the patriarchal retelling of Joseph's life,<sup>91</sup> she is an ordinary human being in a true-to-life story, no better and certainly no worse than any of her contemporary.

More importantly, the presence of an African woman and her role in the drama of redemption in the Bible is expressed and cannot be denied. I am of the opinion that any denial that Egypt and Egyptians are Africa and Africans is considered a mere prejudice against the African people who continue to claim their African heritage of ancient Egypt.

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<sup>86</sup> Williams L. Humphreys, *Joseph and his Family: A Literary Study* (SOPOT; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 76, 135.

<sup>87</sup> Eric I. Lowenthal, *The Joseph Narrative in Genesis: An Introduction* (New York: Ktav, 1999), 39.

<sup>88</sup> Susan T. Hollis, "The Woman in Ancient Examples of the Potiphar's Wife Motif, K2111" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>89</sup> Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (BibSem 2; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 112.

<sup>90</sup> Judith McKinlay, "Potiphar's Wife in Conversation," *A Feminist Theology* 10 (1995): 69-80.

<sup>91</sup> McKay, "Confronting Redundancy," 215-231.

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