

WHOSE STORY?

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INTRODUCTION

Whether the story be oral or written, the story-teller largely controls and determines the story that he or she tells. Other factors may well intrude into the details of the story, such as the audience's expectations, and (at least according to some contemporary authors) the feeling that the characters are "taking over" the story, but by and large, authors shape their story so that it says just what they intend.

Readers therefore expect a careful author to tell the story in a way that suggests how they should read or understand it. This is true whether or not those "clues" are intentional. Since no linguistic choices are unmotivated (Longacre) every aspect of a story is significant, and none can be changed without changing the story, however slightly.

When a footnote says that "names and details have been changed to protect the innocent", readers know better than to expect a verbatim account of events or accurate descriptions of persons. They still expect, nonetheless, that the author has told the story as accurately as possible—that is, as proximate to the truth—yet in a way that would make it difficult for them to reconstruct precisely what happened, or at least who said or did what to whom.

How many details can be changed without changing the story itself? If an account of a crime, for example, exchanges the genders of the criminal and victim ("to protect the innocent"), is it still the same story? Does it affect our understanding to be told that a woman stole a man's laptop case when in the actual event a man stole a woman's purse? It would surely change the imaginary picture of the events—the "mental movie"—that most readers would create in reading the story, and probably change the reader's interpretation of the events as well.

In a well-written series of juvenile fiction, ??? retells stories from Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, sometimes so thoroughly that it is difficult to recognize the story until one reads the epilogue in which the author identifies his sources. In the epilogue to ???, for example, ??? says that one of his motivations was to "rediscover" the Sir Gawaine of *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight* in place of Malory's portrayal of him as a rather boorish oaf.

Do Peter Jackson's film versions of the *Lord of the Rings* tell the same story as that found in Tolkien's books? Most people who are familiar with both would say "Yes, but ..." And there—at the point of the "but"—the debate begins.

¹This is a slightly revised edition of a paper read at the ETS Convention (Philadelphia/Valley Forge, 2005).

In the same way, the various versions of *Das Boot*—the original book in German (1973), its English translation (1975), the film version (19??, in either language, with or without subtitles)—all differ, and yet all relate, to some extent, Buchheim’s experiences on the U-boat’s last mission, so that each version is therefore a “historical” or “historically based” account, even if some of the events depicted in the various versions are mutually exclusive.²

To be [quite] silly, what if we made the seven dwarfs into penguins and Snow White into a polar bear? Or Goldilocks into a fully armed professional bear hunter?

Perhaps some or all of these changes go beyond the level of “details”, but at some point we ask whether or not we are reading or listening to the same story, *whether or not this matters*, and why or why not.

PURPOSE & SCOPE

This paper examines the Hebrew text of Gn 44.1-13, and compares this story with that found in the *New Living Translation*³ [NLT].

This use of NLT as a vehicle to get at this question is *not* a critique of either the translation philosophy of NLT in general or of the NLT translators of Genesis in particular, all of whom I highly respect. Nor am I attempting to establish a general theory of translation, or even to argue for or against particular translational choices.

My purpose is far simpler. This paper merely (1) analyzes several aspects of Gn 44.1-13 and suggests an overall interpretation of the passage; (2) analyzes the passage in NLT; (3) summarizes and evaluates the observed differences between the two texts, attempting to assess the extent to which both tell the same story; and then (4) addresses the question of the title—viz., “Who ‘owns’ the [final form of the] story?”, or “At what point do translational choices begin to make an author’s story into another version of the same events?”

I believe that NLT makes a number of translational choices that change the tone—and thus the narrative function (which is the basis of the passage’s “meaning”)—of this portion of the story of Joseph and his brothers.

²Buchheim says “This book is a novel, but not a work of fiction. The author witnessed all of the events reported in it; they are the sum of his experiences aboard U-boats. Nevertheless, the description of the characters who take part are not portraits of real persons living or dead” (1975, no page no.).

³This paper is based on the first edition of NLT (1996), and was complete before I saw the second edition (NLT²). My thanks to Mr. David Brewer for sending me a copy of this passage from NLT². The point of the paper remains the same; the second edition addresses (“corrects”, in my view) some of the concerns raised herein, but makes other, perhaps less felicitous changes.

NLT does this by changing⁴ references to participants and verbal “voice” (rendering passive verbs as active and thus changing the relationship of the participants to the events and to each other), by changing the tone of the conversation between Joseph’s “servant” and the brothers, by its lexical choices⁵. Together these and other, more subtle, differences yield a story that is similar in outline, but quite different in detail.

I then address whether or not the [very real] differences between the Hebrew and NLT versions of Gn 44.1-13 matter, and why or why not,⁶ in order to ask at what point a translation begins to overtake (or even “undo”) the goals of the author.

In the background of our passage is Joseph’s dinner for his brothers, at which they drank and became drunk (Gn 43.26-34).⁷ In Gn 44.1-13, Joseph sets and springs a trap for his brothers, orchestrating events to his own ends.

COMMENTS ON THE HEBREW TEXT (BHS)

1. Narrative continuity (43.32 – 44.1)

Where does a narrative begin? In attempting to read [interpret] stories, we should distinguish one story from the next. There are several reasons for this. If interpretation depends at least partially on recognizing a story’s overall narrative structure—its rising and falling action, including the “climax” and “denouement”—then we need to be sure that we are reading the author’s intended story, and neither (1) dividing an intended unity or (2) combining stories that were intended to be understood severally. This is not to argue against either the study of sub-narratives or overall narrative architectonics, merely to note that a story functions as a narrative unity, and to assert that understanding that unity *as a unit* is the first responsibility of the student of the text.

Narrative *aperture* and *closure* are well-marked in many literatures. Aesop’s fables end with “Moral: ...”, and in modern editions have titles (illustrations), &c. that tell the reader that one story has

⁴In this paper, the term “change” refers to any rendering that would garner a less-than-satisfactory grade if it were turned in on an examination in a course in Biblical Hebrew (in my opinion, of course).

⁵This paper does not address lexical choice.

⁶Some may object that this paper misrepresents the purpose(s) for which NLT was produced. In response, I merely quote from the “Introduction”: “... to translate the thought of the original language requires that the text be interpreted accurately and then be rendered in understandable idiom. So the goal ... is to be both reliable and eminently readable. Thus, as a thought-for-thought translation, the New Living Translation seeks to be both *exegetically accurate* and idiomatically powerful” (xli; emphasis added).

⁷MT [BHS]: English versions render the last verb in 43.34 as “drank freely” (NLT, NASU), “drank their fill” (JPS), “were merry” (NRSV), or the like (even though this is the only passage in any of these versions where the root *škr* is *not* translated “be/become/get drunk”). Fox renders this (correctly) as above (1995, 208). The prepositional phrase “with him” () may imply that Joseph became drunk along with them, or it may mean “in his presence”.

ended, so that the next block of text is a separate story. In the same way “Once upon a time” and “... happily ever after”, “The End”, or the like signal the beginning and end of a fairy tale.

Biblical storytellers, however, rarely use such obvious signals. Nor were their stories published—so far as we know—with the visual clues that we take for granted, such as paragraphs, dingbats, numbered or titled chapters, &c. Instead, the onset [aperture] of a new biblical narrative is signalled largely by means of *discontinuity*—or change—in either participant(s), time, place, genre, or some combination thereof.

Joseph’s story, for example, begins with the thematic *toledot*-formula (Gn 37.1a), but only after reintroducing Jacob (Gn 37.1a) after a lengthy non-narrative “digression” dealing with Esau’s descendants (Gn 36). Discontinuities in *participant* (Esau / Jacob), *genre* (“genealogy” / narrative), *time* (from Esau’s grandsons to Jacob, who does not yet have any grandchildren), and *location* from Edom (Mt. Seir) to Canaan (and, as we later learn, Hebron (37.14)), taken cumulatively, lead the reader to expect—even apart from the *toledot*-formula—that a new (or at least a different) story has begun. This break between Gn 36 and 37 is exceptionally complete, but similar instances characterize the entire book of Genesis, and most biblical narrative.

There are no such discontinuities in Gn 44.1. On the contrary, this narrative is tightly bound to that found in Gn 43. There is no discontinuity in place or participants, nor is there any explicit or implicit temporal discontinuity. The genre is also uniformly narrative.

The primary sign of the narrational continuity of Gn 44 with Gn 43 is that Joseph is not named as the subject of a verb in 44.1-2a, even though he is the major participant in those vv. He is referred to only via the grammatical form of the verb (44.1) and by pronominal suffixes (“the one over *his* house” (44.1) and “*my* silver cup” (44.2a)). He is not named, in fact, until the subordinate clause at the end of 44.2b noting that the servant “did *as Joseph* had said”.

In the same way, the author does not identify either “the men” (44.1) or “the youngest” (44.2a) mentioned in Joseph’s orders to his servant, but expects us to understand that “the men” are Joseph’s brothers and “the youngest” is his youngest brother, Benjamin.⁸ They are not called “brothers”, even though everyone (author, reader, Joseph, and they themselves) know that they are brothers.

⁸This is almost precisely parallel to beginning of Gn 18, where Abraham is not named until v. 5, when he has already been the subject of six conjunctive (preterite) clauses and one disjunctive clause. Again, one effect of this non-identification is to bind together the two often-separated stories of the promises and requirements of the covenant of circumcision (Gn 17) and the feast ratifying that covenant (Gn 18).

This cohesive device of an unidentified or unspecified participant⁹ holds the narrative together by forcing the reader to maintain participant identity mentally, since it is not textually explicit. Here, the lack of explicit nominal reference to Joseph from 43.30 to 44.2b, and the referentially vague phrases “the men” (1, 3, 6) and “the youngest” (2) help unite this narrative.

Given the tendency of biblical narrators to identify participants, the author *expects* the reader to understand this otherwise unspecified person as the Joseph who was last named in 43.30 (when he hurried out to avoid weeping over Benjamin in front of his brothers), just as he expects us to identify “the men” and “the youngest” from the preceding part of the story (i.e., Gn “43”).

So, the first point is that Gn 44.1 does *not* begin a new story, merely the next phase of an ongoing one, and that the narrator’s failure to identify Joseph, and to specifically identify either “the men” or “the youngest” at the outset of this, the next sequence of events, is a major indicator of that continuity.

A further implication of the narrational unity of Gn 43 and 44 is that the events described at the beginning of Gn 44 take place soon, if not immediately, after the events of Gn 43. While the brothers were [still?] drunk, Joseph set in motion the events of the next day. As he controlled their state of mind (drinking and partying with “the lord of Egypt” (45.9)), he was also about to control their actions (below).¹⁰

2. Fraternal Passivity (44.3b) or Josephian Sovereignty

Genesis 44.3 contains two clauses, the first asyndetic, the second disjunctive. In biblical narrative generally, asyndetic clauses take on the function of the following clause—disjunctive (in one of several functions of disjunctive clauses) or conjunctive.

According to the second clause, the brothers (“the men”) “were sent away” (3mp *pual* perfect). Since one effect of (and possible motivation for) using the passive voice in biblical narrative is that the actor normally remains unidentified, we are intended to understand that Joseph’s brothers were not left to their own devices, free to leave Egypt whenever they wished. They were instead dismissed, “sent away”, and—if I have correctly interpreted the chronological relationship between the party and

⁹Although we might be tempted to consider this a case of delayed identification, to identify either Gn 18.6 or 44.2b as “delayed identification” is only permissible if we first demonstrate that the chapter break signals a real narrative boundary—genuine narrative aperture. If, on the other hand, it interrupts a continuing story, the identification is not delayed, since the participant was identified earlier *in the same story*, and his (in both cases the characters are men) identity maintained by verbal and pronominal affirmatives.

¹⁰In light of this discussion, it is quite valid to question ending in Gn 44.14. This is not the end of the fraternal saga (which ends in v. 13, as the change in location signals); in fact, v. 14 opens the next vignette (which continues into Gn 45). I have included it because NLT makes it the last sentence in this paragraph (11-14).

Joseph's instructions to his overseer—they were sent away at dawn the very next day.¹¹ In fact, the author's note that overseer did everything according to Joseph's command suggests that their sending was also by his word.

I believe (although I cannot prove) that this sequence of events is implied by the relatively unusual asyndetic – disjunctive clausal sequence in v. 3., so that this v. is a further sign of Joseph's sovereignty, a hint that he was manipulating his brothers toward some end yet unrevealed to the reader. At the very least, this v. suggests that the brothers were sent away as soon as their grain was ready, whether or not it was the time of their choosing.

3. Relational Distance (“man/men” or “brother(s)”) ¹²

The relationship(s) between Joseph and his family, and within his family are of prime importance in the plot of this story. How are the main characters—Joseph, his servant, his brothers—referred to?

Joseph and his servant are called “the man” (*h 'iš*).¹³ Both Jacob and his sons refer to Joseph as “the man” as they argue over Benjamin (43.3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14); the narrator calls Joseph's servant “the man” (43.17a, b, 19), but only after his identity is clearly established, *and* he is not being instructed by Joseph.¹⁴

With only two exceptions, both Joseph and the narrator consistently refer to the brothers as “the men” (*h 'an šim*).¹⁵ First, the narrator notes that “Joseph lifted his eyes and saw *Benjamin, his* [Joseph's] *brother, the son of his* [Joseph's] *mother*” (43.29a). Joseph then uses the term “brother” to refer to a member of their group for the first time when he asks if Benjamin is “[their] brother” (43.29b).¹⁶ The second exception is when the narrator refers to “his [Judah's] brothers” when they return to Joseph's house (44.14).¹⁷

¹¹A further hint that this follows immediately upon Gn 43 is that in order for him to accuse them of stealing his silver cup, the cup could not have been missing for very long. The sequence of events was therefore likely to have been: *Day One*: dinner, drunkenness (43.32), Joseph's instructions to his overseer (44.1-2), the preparation of their bags (2); *Day Two*: their dismissal at dawn (3), pursuit (6), &c. Note further that one function of the dinner was to make the accusation of theft plausible—being in his house, they had opportunity.

¹²This discussion includes the preceding passage (42.35ff) in order to demonstrate the consistency of lexical choice.

¹³Joseph is also identified by name (44.2, 4), as “lord/master” (44.5, 8), grammatically as a verbal subject (44.1, 5), and by pronominal suffixes (“my” (44.2), “his” (44.1, 4)). This discussion focuses on the use of “man/men” and “brother(s)”.

¹⁴The narrator calls Joseph's servant “the one over his [Joseph's] house” when Joseph addresses him (43.16; 44.1, 4) and once when the brothers approach him (43.19); he otherwise calls him simply “the man” (43.17(*bis*), 19), reinforcing his identification as an agent of Joseph (since Jacob and his sons called *Joseph* “the man” (43.3-14).

¹⁵The anarthrous singular “[a] man” (‘iš) is exclusively by the narrator to show that an action was shared among the brothers (42.35; 43.21, 33b; 44.4, 11, 13). This “distributive” is a standard feature of Hebrew syntax, and so does not affect the present discussion.

¹⁶Apart from this reference, Joseph merely calls them “the men” (43.16; 44.1(*bis*)).

¹⁷The compound subject is “Judah and his brothers”.

The narrator uses the singular “brother” (*’ h*) three times, twice for Benjamin (43.29a, 30)¹⁸ and once to refer to “his [Judah’s] brothers” (44.14; i.e., all of Judah’s brothers except Joseph)¹⁹ who returned to Joseph’s house after the discovery of the cup.

The term “brother” is thus restricted to two passages in the preceding context: it refers to Joseph and Benjamin in the discussion between Jacob and his sons (42.38-43.14),²⁰ and to Benjamin at the moment when Joseph first sees him (43.29-30). Apart from the note that Joseph “saw *his brother* Benjamin ...” (43.29a) and that “his [Joseph’s] compassions became tender/warm over *his brother*” (43.30), the narrator does not use the term “brother” from their initial return to Canaan until their return to Joseph’s house (44.14), even though the term “brothers” occurs frequently in the story of that first visit (Gn 42.3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 28).

This consistent use of “men” instead of “brothers” to refer to a group that Joseph, his brothers, the narrator, and the reader—everyone, in fact, except perhaps Joseph’s servant [Was he perhaps in on the secret?]
—know to be brothers (and Joseph’s brothers at that) suggests a deliberate relational distancing by the author, an artistic reluctance to name the relationship in order to increase the shock of the coming disclosure (45.1, 3).

4. The Fraternal Response (44.6b-9)

When the overseer overtakes the brothers and accuses them of stealing the silver divining cup (44.4b-5), they respond as we might expect. In order to appreciate this, we need to set the stage.

It is highly unlikely that Joseph would send his overseer after them alone—what if they resisted arrest? What if they treated his servant as they had treated him so many years ago? He yet had no assurance that they were truly changed men? It is far more likely that he would send at least several servants, perhaps even enough to outnumber the brothers should they try to cause trouble for the overseer.

Secondly, the brothers were aliens, traveling in a foreign country, accused of having stolen something from “the lord of ... all Egypt” (45.8), the man who had already imprisoned them for three days on the mere suspicion that they were spies (42.18-20), and who had kept one of them, Simeon, in prison for the whole time that they had been gone to Canaan (43.23). Even if they were still somewhat hung over or even partially drunk, it is hard to imagine that they did not realize that they were grave danger.

¹⁸In both clauses Joseph is the subject and “his brother” the object of the clause.

¹⁹This shift from “the men” to “his brothers” (44.14) suggests a shift in perspective that supports the idea that a new section of the story begins in 44.14.

²⁰It refers once to Reuben (43.14).

It is in this light that we read their humble, almost abject, response to Joseph's overseer:

They said to him "Why does *my master* speak words like these? Far be it from *your servants* to do anything like this! If the silver which we found in the mouth of our sacks we returned to you from the land of Canaan, then why would we steal from your master's house silver or gold? With whichever of *your servants* it is found—he shall die, and also we shall become *my master's* servants."²¹

In four sentences (seven clauses), the brothers refer to the overseer as "[my] master" twice (an honorific, but not a *mere* honorific), and to themselves as his "servants" (or "slaves") three times—twice as deferential terms of respect, once as their fate if the cup indeed turned up in their possession (their "offer" merely acknowledged their probable sentence; it was not a bargaining chip).²²

Their further reference to Joseph as "your master"²³ shows that they recognize that he is acting on someone else's authority—that they are not merely dealing with a servant or slave, but with a representative of the absolute power of Pharaoh's "father" (45.8).

Here, however, we must be careful, since (as is usual in biblical narrative) the quotational formulae give us no explicit guidance regarding, e.g., their tone of voice, or their attitude toward either the overseer or his accusation. Were they truculent, argumentative, or rude? Or were they cowed and frightened, scared of being hauled off or sold as slaves? Were they confident that he was wrong, and that they would be soon vindicated and on their way? Or did they suspect that something else had "gone wrong", and they were going to get into trouble again with this man who seemed to enjoy toying with them?

Since the narrator does not tell us that they "shouted", "grumbled", "quivered", "cried", or the like, we may feel free to interpret their statement in whatever way seems most fitting. But we are in fact not free. Their quotation itself, with its repeated "my master" and "your servants" suggests that they are being extremely deferential, kowtowing to the overseer, who is (after all) the chief servant of the second most powerful person in the most powerful country around.

And this too is the author's very clever way to maintaining the reader's perspective on Joseph as the one in control of these events. They are "nobodies", to the extent that even his *servant* is greater than all of them put together.

²¹In preparing a translation of the entire book of Genesis (or even of the entire story of Jacob), it would be wise to make this translation comport with Laban's accusation and Jacob's response about Laban's missing household gods (Gn 31.30ff); the literary resonances are manifold.

A further note on these verses. The word *'ebed* is often translated "servant" when deferential, but as "slave" when referring to an actual social condition. Rendering it as either "servant" or "slave" in all three occurrences in this statement of the brothers affects the tone of their statement.

²²There was good reason for the later covenantal insistence on justice for the alien (e.g., Ex 22.20-23[21-24]).

²³Their use of "your master" reflects the overseer's own words, to the extent that he repeated Joseph's speech precisely (cf. 5a, 8b).

We can now suggest an overall reading of these verses.

5. Summary: MT/BHS

In Genesis 44:1-13, Joseph sets up his final test—the threat to Benjamin—by allowing his brothers to get drunk, perhaps so that they cannot interfere with the loading of their sacks.²⁴ He then orders his servant to prepare their grain along with the trap, and has them sent off first thing the next morning.²⁵ At his word (again), Joseph’s overseer then springs the trap on the brothers by accusing them falsely of stealing Joseph’s silver divination cup. At their humble and submissive response—punctuated by repeated “your servants” and “my lord”—he (acting implicitly or explicitly at Joseph’s word) tacitly accepts their admission of guilt,²⁶ setting up Joseph’s final confrontation.

Throughout the story the author has carefully maintained a distance between Joseph and “the men” by refusing to call them “brothers” so that the reader should wonder why Joseph wants to leave their original claim implicitly disputed (in the eyes of his servants, at least). He has written these verses so that the reader will see the sovereign figure of Joseph behind all of the events in this story²⁷. Like Elohim in Genesis 1, Joseph’s word ordains and causes events. He himself does nothing but speak. His overseer does nothing apart from his command, his brothers are manipulated at his word, and so (by v. 14, and far more so by the story’s climax, early in Gn 45), we see Joseph as almost in the rôle of God,²⁸ moving people and ordering events to his own ends by the power of his word.²⁹

²⁴Given their concern over the silver that they found in their sacks after their first trip, they may well have tried to oversee the loading of their grain this time, a potential problem dealt with by having their sacks loaded while they were drunk.

²⁵Why should they be sent off at first light? We can imagine a number of reasons; the text is completely silent on this point. Perhaps so that there will be enough light to be sure that they are caught, or so that the business at hand can be concluded in one day, or so that they might still be fuddled by their drink.

²⁶Tacitly as far as the text is concerned. We need not suppose that no words were said.

²⁷Joseph is the main figure in nearly every story in the latter quarter of Genesis. The main exceptions are 46:1-27 and Jacob’s prophetic blessing (49:1-33; although even here Joseph gets the longest blessing).

²⁸Actually, this is the normal picture of Joseph after his exaltation by Pharaoh. He stands very nearly in the place of God, ruling over Egypt, superintending his family’s destiny, eventually taking control of the people and land of Egypt for Pharaoh, so that only the land of the priests remains outside the royal fiefdom(?). And this “failure”, too, is the barest literary hint of the struggle to come between YHWH and Pharaoh in the days of Moses, when the “plagues” would demonstrate YHWH’s defeat of some of the major Egyptian gods in whom Pharaoh put his trust. As Joseph—YHWH’s representative—failed to overcome those gods by purchasing “their” property with grain, Moses—YHWH’s later representative—would succeed. This is, of course, not an adumbration (at least, not in the etymological sense), since there is no true foreshadowing, nor is this a portent of things to come. In those cases, the alert reader should be able to anticipate the later outcome, whereas here alert readers of Exodus may see allusions to the events of Joseph’s life in Moses’, but it is hardly possible to predict, or even suspect, the latter events from the former.

²⁹At this point, we might wonder about the servant’s apparent initiative in agreeing in principle with the punishment that they propose should the cup be found. Had the overseer been given authority to negotiate or respond at his own initiative? Had he been closely or explicitly instructed by Joseph (i.e., “If they say *this*, here is your response”)?

Since Joseph was still at home (14b), it seems that the overseer’s real charge was to bring the brothers back to Joseph’s house so that Joseph himself could deal with them. In other words, since the brothers had suggested that the guilty party be executed, the discovery of the cup would (presumably) have justified Benjamin’s immediate execution, without further hearing or trial.

THE NEW LIVING TRANSLATION (NLT¹)

1. Narrative discontinuity (43.32 – 44.1)

Instead of the narrative continuity identified (above), NLT seems to go out of its way to separate the events of Gn 44.1ff from those of Gn 43. This is done in three ways.

First, NLT inserts a temporal (circumstantial) clause at the beginning of 44.1: “When his brothers were ready to leave”. There is no textual warrant for this clause,³⁰ which functions much like “Meanwhile, back at the ranch” as a means of redirecting the narrative from one (temporal) location to another, dividing one episode from the preceding.

Secondly, NLT uses the identificatory phrase “the brothers” in this inserted clause, and has Joseph refer to Benjamin as “the youngest brother” rather than as “the youngest” (44.2).

Thirdly, NLT refers to “Joseph” by name as the subject of the first main verb (44.1), so that the later pronominal references have an explicit referent.

There is thus no need for the reader to wonder (however briefly) about the identity of “the men” or “the youngest”, or to return to the story in Gn 43 for their identification. These changes, subtle as they may seem, conceal the close relationship between the events of 44.32 and 44.1ff, and shift the reader’s attention away from seeing even their presence in his house and subsequent drunkenness as part of Joseph’s plot.³¹

2. Fraternal Initiative (44.3b) or Josephian Reaction

In strong contrast to the narrator’s portrayal of the brothers as passive objects of Joseph’s manipulation and power, NLT makes them the instigators of the chain of events, so that they are implicitly in control until the trap has been sprung and Benjamin’s guilt proven.

The first demonstration of this is the temporal clause inserted at the beginning of 44.1 (above): “When the brothers were ready to leave”, which makes Joseph’s instructions to his overseer a *response* to their readiness to depart, rather than the event which sets the string of events in motion. Now the brothers establish the timetable, now they choose when and how to act, and Joseph merely falls in with their plans.

I suggest that this is either an example of the tendency of the biblical authors to record partial conversations at each “end” a “message narrative” (i.e., the directions given and the actual exercise of that commission, as in 1 Kgs 21), or else Joseph had empowered his overseer to act in whatever way would secure their presence before him after demonstrating Benjamin’s “guilt”. In either case, Joseph’s directions underlie the overseer’s actions and words.

³⁰There is no textual variant (so BHS and Rahlfs).

³¹None of this discussion is meant to suggest that the author deliberately avoided identifying the brothers as brothers, or Benjamin as the youngest brother, or Joseph. The author was merely writing a story. The construction of the story, however, reveals the author’s intentions, conscious or not. As Robert Longacre says, “There are no unmotivated choices”.

They further control their own timing when, in v. 3, we read “The brothers *were up* at dawn, and set out ...”. The asyndetic clause describes daybreak, merely noting that it had begun to get light; it does not mention either the brothers or their arising.

Secondly, NLT says in the same clause that “... the brothers *set out* on their journey ...” (44.3b), whereas the Hebrew text uses a passive verb (above): “the men and their donkeys *were sent* off [away]”. Again, NLT puts the brothers in charge of their actions, letting them choose the time of departure, since they “were [already] up”.

NLT thus sets the brothers at the head of the story, choosing and deciding for themselves, losing the very strong implication of the text that the brothers are merely objects of Joseph’s manipulation, lacking either the initiative or ability to control events.³²

3. Fraternal Relations (“man/men” vs. “brother(s)”)

In NLT the narrator’s voice reinforces their relationship to Joseph and each other by calling them “his brothers” in the opening clause (44.1x),³³ just as calling them “the brothers” two more times (44.3, 7)³⁴ emphasizes their relationship to each other. In the same way, Joseph calls Benjamin “the youngest brother” when instructing his steward (44.2), and the narrator identifies “the eldest” as “the eldest brother” (44.12). None of these relational terms are in MT.

By reinforcing their identity as brothers (each other’s and Joseph’s), and especially by identifying Benjamin and Reuben as the “youngest brother” and “eldest brother”, NLT emphasizes and reinforces in the mind of the reader the web of relationships between Joseph and the group of men whom he was testing.

4. Fraternal Aggression (44.6b-9)

Finally, NLT’s version of the brothers’ response to the overseer’s accusation of theft seems rude to the point of arrogance, completely different from the humility implied by the Hebrew text.

First, they do not refer to the overseer as “my lord” (6b, 9b) or to themselves as “your servants” (7, 9a). When addressing Joseph’s servant, they use no vocative or identifying phrase, merely the pronominal subject of the verb; they merely refer to themselves as “we” and “us”. The respectful, if not obsequious, tone of the original is completely lacking.

³²It seems unlikely that this rendering was intended to avoid a passive verb, since NLT uses two passive verbs that are not in the Hebrew text: “Joseph’s word which he had said” becomes “as *he* [the servant] *was told*” (2b) and “these words” is “as he [the servant] *had been instructed*” (6b).

³³The suffix “x” refers [non-pejoratively] to the clause that is in NLT, but not in MT.

³⁴MT has *h’ an šim* (“the men”; 44.3); they are identified merely by verbal affirmatives in 44.7.

Secondly, their response seems rude. In order to make this more clear, here is NLT parallel to my own highly pedantic translation of their words:

[FCP]	NLT	
They said to him	“What are you talking about?”	7
“Why does my master speak words like these?”	the brothers responded.	
“Far be it from your servants to do anything like this!”	“What kind of people do you think we are, that you accuse us of such a terrible thing?”	
“If the silver which we found in the mouth of our sacks we returned to you from the land of Canaan,	“Didn’t we bring back the money we found in our sacks?”	8
“then how [why] would we steal from your master’s house silver or gold?”	“Why would we steal silver or gold from your master’s house?”	
“With whomever of your servants it is found—	“If you find his cup with any one of us,	9
he shall die,	let that one die.	
“and also we shall become my master’s servants.”	“And all the rest of us will be your master’s slaves forever.”	

Their opening question “What are you talking about?” could be a puzzled or quizzical request for information, but seems to be a rhetorical salvo, especially when followed by “What kind of people do you think we are ...?” And, when combined with the lack of an honorific (“my master”), it conveys quite a different mood and attitude—one of argumentative belligerence rather than fear and respect.³⁵

The brothers are not cowed by any aspect of their situation—their status as societal outsiders, the overseer’s authority, or the potential consequences for them. Far from it! Surly and rebellious, they dismiss even the possibility that the accusation might be true, so certain that it is false that they arrogantly wager all of their lives³⁶ (i.e., not just the life of the guilty one) against the charge of theft.

We must ask if this is a possible reading of these verses.

Of course it is. And it makes a far more dramatic story if they—self-righteous to begin with—become increasingly arrogant as sack after sack proves to have nothing but grain (and silver), only to be undone when the cup finally appears in Benjamin’s (Benjamin’s!) sack.

This reading *is* possible, but I believe that it is possible *only* if we read these verses without regard for the tone of the entire passage, the tone that is established by the author’s connection of this story with the drinking-party, by the brother’s passivity, by Joseph’s control of events and person, by our knowledge of the cultural setting of these events, and by the implicit tone of respect and deference in their actual speech.

³⁵Over a period of more than ten years, students with near unanimity (and without any prompting) identify NLT’s version of v. 7 as rude and insulting.

³⁶There is no need to except Benjamin from the group of speakers.

4. Summary: NLT

After an unspecified period of time, when the brothers decide that they are ready to leave, Joseph sets up his trap. He has apparently accepted their claim that they are brothers,³⁷ and, although he manipulates them in the end, their hostile response to his servant leaves the outcome of his test in doubt until the very end of the story. Like MT, NLT ends with the brothers returning to Joseph's house, their cocky arrogance shattered by the discovery of the cup in Benjamin's sack.

COMPARISON

The general outline of the story is the same, and in both versions the larger story ends with Joseph revealing himself to his brothers, summoning his father and family to Egypt, &c. And most aspects of the two versions are not only similar, but are well-clarified by NLT, such as noting that "they tore their clothing *in despair*" (13a), adding the words in italics in order to clarify a culturally opaque description.³⁸ And Joseph remains in control, finally. There is no doubt that NLT's version is more dramatic at several points. So it sounds like the same story.

But is it?

I think not. I believe that NLT's version of the events described in Gn 44.1-14 is quite different from the version that we find in MT, LXX, &c.

The major difference, in my opinion, is that Joseph becomes merely one character among several, acting alongside and in response to his brothers (although exercising the power of his office), rather than being *the* major character, manipulating and controlling events and persons to his own ends.

This difference between the versions of the story is merely underlined by other aspects addressed (above), such as the implicit chronological relationship between 43.34 and 44.1, by the use of relational terms, and by the brothers' response to Joseph's servant.

³⁷As has the narrator.

³⁸This paper deliberately avoids questions of lexical choice (e.g., "steward/overseer", "silver/money") and NLT's emphatic expressions (e.g., "*personal* silver drinking cup" (5a), "*all the rest of us ... slaves forever*" (9b)), which heighten the story's overall rhetorical tone.

CONCLUSION

Here, in NLT's translation of the story of Joseph's final test of his brothers, we have an illustration of a rendering that changes the tone of the story from that intended by its author.

Some may object that this point is neither important nor even significant—that any such differences are justified by the particular version's purposes, intended audience, &c. As long as Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in response to Judah's offer to redeem Benjamin—in other words, as long as the general outline of the story is the same, or at least, as long as it ends up in the same place, so to speak—why does such a minor difference as “tone” or “mood” matter?

How many “minor” or “insignificant” differences can exist before the overarching story begins to change? At what point have we begun to replace “representing” the text with “interpreting” it?

This is not—to reiterate—a critique of NLT *per se*, nor is it an attack on NLT's [original] rendition of this passage. Nearly any translation contains just as many potential examples of the same type of translational choices.³⁹ This story just happened to be the one that prompted the opening question: How many details can change before the story itself changes?

To ask it another way, at what point do translational choices begin to make one author's story into another version of the same events?

Or, to be blunt, whose story is it—the author's or the translator's?⁴⁰

Who owns the written story? Its author, who presumably knew what he intended to say, and so wrote it in a particular way? Its translator(s), who want to pass on their encounter with the “original” story to their readers in a form that allows it to be the same story that they read in the source language?

On the one hand, changing any detail, however small, changes a story. On the other hand, change is unavoidable in translation—regardless of the particular philosophy of translation being followed. Perhaps we should be extremely reluctant to change those details that can be controlled (i.e., aspects of the translation that are at the command of the translator, as opposed to those that are determined by, e.g., the structure or syntax of the receptor language), recognizing that few readers—whether they read for pleasure or study for benefit or proclamation—are able to refer to the text that underlies the version that we offer them.

The goal is both positive and negative. Positively, to enable readers to read the story “as it was written”, but allowing the necessary distances of language and culture. Negatively, to change as little

³⁹Had I based this study on NLT², there would have been just as many “positive” and “negative” notes, although they would not be the same.

⁴⁰We could also ask if the story belongs to the reader, but that is yet another question that cannot be addressed in this paper.

as we can lest we begin to unravel the story's warp from its woof, obscuring or even losing the picture, rather than merely changing its colours.

Rather than argue about “dynamic”, “functional”, or “complete” equivalence, or “virtually literal” translation, &c.—or claim that “At last!” or “Finally!” a truly accurate (trustworthy, &c.) translation has appeared—we could admit that our very best efforts really are only commentaries⁴¹ that aim at granting readers access to a foreign text.

Frederic Clarke Putnam
All Saints' Day MMV

⁴¹Perhaps it would be helpful to view translations of the Bible like Islam construes translations of the *Qur'an*. The “real” *Qur'an* exists only in Arabic; non-Arabic editions are considered “commentaries”. They are not binding, since they are not the words of 'Allah, but only the opinions of men.

APPENDIX A: PARALLEL TEXTS

FCP	NLT	V.
and-they-drank ⁴² and-they-became-drunk with him.	So they all feasted and drank freely with him.	32
	When his brothers were ready to leave,	
and-he-commanded the-one over his-household saying fill the-sacks-of the-men [with] food as they-are-able to- carry	Joseph gave these instructions to the man in charge of his household: “Fill each of their sacks with as much grain as they can carry,	1
and-put the-silver-of each-man in-the-mouth-of his-sack and-my-cup the-cup-of-silver	and put each man’s money back into his sack. Then put my personal silver cup	2
you-shall-put in-the-mouth-of the-sack-of the-youngest and-the-silver-of his-grain	at the top of the youngest brother’s sack, along with his grain money.”	
and-he-did according-to-the-word-of Joseph which he- said.	So the household manager did as he was told .	
the-morning became-light	The brothers were up at dawn	3
and-the-men were-sent-away they and-their-donkeys they left the-city not they-were-far	and set out on their journey with their loaded donkeys. But when they were barely out of the city,	4
and-Joseph said to-the-one over his-household rise chase after the-men	Joseph said to his household manager , “Chase after them	
and-overtake-them	and stop them.	
and-say to-them	Ask them,	
why have-you-repaid evil instead-of good	“Why have you repaid an act of kindness with such evil?”	
is-not this that-which he-drinks my-master from-it	What do you mean by stealing my master’s personal silver drinking cup,	5
and-he [surely] divines with-it [in-it]	which he uses to predict the future?	
you-have-done-wickedly what you-have-done	What a wicked thing you have done!”	
and-he-overtook-them	So the man caught up with them	6
and-he-spoke to-them the-words the-these	and spoke to them in the way he had been instructed .	
and-they-said to-him	“ What are you talking about?”	
why speaks my-master like-the-words the-these	the brothers responded.	
far-be-it for-your-servants to-do like-the-word the-this	“ What kind of people do you think we are, that you accuse us of such a terrible thing?”	7
if silver which we-found in-the-mouth-of our-sacks we- returned to-you from-the-land-of Canaan	Didn’t we bring back the money we found in our sacks?”	8
then-how/why shall-we-steal from-the-house-of your-master silver or gold	Why would we steal silver or gold from your master’s house?”	

⁴²English words are joined with a dash (-) to show that they represent a single morphological form in Hebrew.

who it-is-found with-him of-your-servants and-he-shall-die	If you find his cup with any one of us , let that one die.	9
and-also we shall-become of-my-master servants	And all the rest of us will be your master's slaves forever ."	
and-he-said	the man replied,	10
also now as-your-words	"Fair enough,"	
so he who it-is-found with-him he-shall-be for-me a-slave	"except that only the one who stole it will be <i>a</i> slave.	
and you [pl.] shall-be innocent	The rest of you may go free."	
and-they-hurried	They quickly	11
and-they-took-down each his-sack on-the-ground	took down their sacks from the backs of their donkeys []	
and-they-opened each his-sack	and opened them .	
and-he-searched with-the-eldest he-began and-with-the-youngest he-finished	Joseph s servant began searching the oldest brother s sack, going on down the line to the youngest.	12
and-it-was-found the-cup in-the-sack-of Benjamin	The cup was found in Benjamin's sack!	
and-they-tore their-clothes	At this , they tore their clothing in despair ,	13
and-he-loaded each on his-donkey	loaded the donkeys s again,	
and-they-returned to-the-city	and returned to the city.	
and-he-entered Judah and-his-brothers the-house-of Joseph	when Judah and his brothers arrived,	14
and-he he-still-was there	Joseph was still at home	
and-they-fell before-him to-the-ground	and they fell to the ground before him.	

8b	Didn't we bring back []
8c	Why would we steal silver or gold from your master's house?
9a	If you find his cup with any one of us , let that one die.
9b	And all the rest of us will be your master's slaves forever ."
10a	... the man replied,
10b	"Fair enough,"
10c	"except that only the one who stole it will be a slave.
10d	The rest of you may go free."
11a	They quickly
11b	took down their sacks from the backs of their donkeys []
11c	and opened them .
12a	... searching ...
12b	Joseph's servant began ... the oldest brother's sack, going on down the line to the youngest.
12c	The cup was found in Benjamin's sack!
13a	At this , they tore their clothing in despair ,
13b	loaded the donkeys again ,
13c	and returned to the city.
14a	... when Judah and his brothers arrived, []
14b	Joseph was still at home ...
14c	and they fell to the ground before him.

Words in do not directly represent an element of the Hebrew text.

APPENDIX D: THE PRETERITE CHAIN

		J	S	B	PRET.
3ms Q	he commanded the one over his house saying	PGN			1a
3ms Q	he did according to Joseph's word which he had said		PGN		2b
3ms H	he overtook them		PGN		6a
3ms D	he spoke to them these words		PGN		6b
3mp Q	they said to him			PGN	7a
3ms Q	he said		PGN		10a
3mp D	they hurried			PGN	11a
3mp H [dist.]	each lowered his sack to the ground				11b
3mp Q [dist.]	each opened his sack				11c
3ms D	he searched		PGN		12a
3ms N	the cup was found in B's sack				12c
3mp Q	they tore their clothes			PGN	13a
3ms Q [dist.]	each loaded his donkey				13b
3mp Q	they returned to the city		PGN	PGN	13c
3ms Q [cpd.]	Judah and his brothers entered Joseph's house			N	14a
3mp Q	they fell to the ground before him			PGN	14c

KEY Subject

PGN	verbal PGN affixes <i>only</i> (not [pro]nominal)	1	6	5	all characters
	distributive [as subject of a plural verb]			3	brothers (always)
N	explicit nominal identification			1	Judah

Totals 1 6 9

1. Joseph is the least common preterite subject; the brothers are the most common.
2. Joseph's single preterite activity, which is a speech (1a), sets the entire chain in motion; his second speech is disjunctively introduced, rather than by a preterite (4c).
3. The story moves from [largely] speech-events (1-10) to activity-events (11-14), all of which are set in motion by the preceding speech-events.

APPENDIX E: KINDS OF INFORMATION

QUOTE	NON-EVENT		EVENT		CL.
	IRREALIS	CIRC./SETTING			
			speech		1a
1b-2a					1b-2a
			action		2b
			natural event		3a
			passive action		3b
			action		4a
			irrealis		4b
			speech		4c
4d-5c					4d-5c
			action		6a
quote not recorded			speech		6b
			speech		7a
7b-9b					7b-9b
			speech		10a
10b-d					10b-d
			action		11a
			action		11b
			action		11c
			action		12a
			action		12b
			passive action		12c
			action		13a
			action		13b
			action		13c

			action		14a
			circumstance		14b
			action		14c

1. only speaks, and only to command; 14b, a circumstantial disjunctive clause, merely notes his [continued] presence.
2. The acts and speaks, but never at his own initiative, until (apparently) 10b-d.
3. The speak and act, but only in response to Joseph's directions; they are also the subject of the only passive verb (3b).
4. The only purely circumstantial statement is the disjunctive clause noting that Joseph "was still [in his house]" (14b).

APPENDIX F: "MAN"/"MEN" & "BROTHER(S)" IN GN 42-44

Genesis	Speaker	Addressee	Locus	Pronoun Refers to	Referent of "Brother" / "Man" / "Men"				
					Brothers	Joseph	Benjamin	Servant	Reuben
42.35	Narrator		"man"		"each"				
42.38	Jacob	brothers	"his brother"	Benjamin		Jos.			
43.3	Judah	Jacob	"the man"			Jos.			
43.3	Judah [Joseph]	Jacob	"your brother"	brothers			Benj.		
43.4	Judah	Jacob	"our brother"	brothers			Benj.		
43.5	Judah	Jacob	"the man"			Jos.			
43.5	Judah [Joseph]	Jacob	"your brother"	brothers			Benj.		
43.6	Jacob	Judah	"the man"			Jos.			
43.6	Jacob	bros/Jud	"a brother"				Benj.		
43.7	bros.	Jacob	"the man"			Jos.			
43.7	bros. [Joseph]	Jacob	"a brother"						
43.11	Jacob	brothers	"the man"			Jos.			
43.13	Jacob	brothers	"your brother"	brothers			Benj.		
43.13	Jacob	brothers	"the man"			Jos.			
43.14	Jacob	brothers	"the man"			Jos.			
43.14	Jacob	brothers	"your other brother"	brothers					Reu.
43.15	Narrator		"the men"		brothers				
43.16	Joseph	steward	"the men"		brothers				
43.17a	Narrator		"the man"					Svt.	
43.17b	Narrator		"the man"					Svt.	
43.17c	Narrator		"the men"		brothers				
43.18	Narrator		"the men"		brothers				
43.19	Narrator		"the man"					Svt.	
43.21	bros.	steward	"man"		"each"				
43.24a	Narrator		"the man"						
43.24b	Narrator		"the men"		brothers				
43.29a	Narrator		"his brother"	Joseph			Benj.		
43.29b	Joseph	brothers	"your youngest bro."	brothers			Benj.		
43.30	Narrator		"his brother"	Joseph			Benj.		
43.33a	Narrator		"the men"		brothers				
43.33b	Narrator		"man"		"each"				

Genesis	Speaker	Addressee	Locus	Pronoun Refers to	Referent of "Brother" / "Man" / "Men"				
					Brothers	Joseph	Benjamin	Servant	Reuben
44.1a	Joseph	steward	"the men"		brothers				
44.1b	Joseph	steward	"man"		"each"				
44.3	Narrator		"the men"		brothers				
44.4	Narrator		"man"		"each"				
44.11	Narrator		"man"		"each"				
44.13	Narrator		"man"		"each"				
44.14	Narrator		"his brothers"	Judah	other 10 bros.				

1. The anarthrous singular "[a] man" () is exclusively distributive ("each"); it occurs seven times (42.35; 43.21, 33b; 44.4, 11, 13).
2. The articular singular "the man" () refers to Joseph and to his servant, whether used by Jacob, his sons, or the narrator. Jacob and his sons refer to Joseph as "the man" when they are arguing about whether or not Benjamin will go to Egypt (43.3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 13, 14); the narrator uses it to refer to Joseph's servant (43.17a, b, 19). These are all of the occurrences of "the man" () in these verses.
3. The plural absolute "the men" () is used by both Joseph and the narrator. Joseph always calls his brothers "the men" (43.16; 44.1(*bis*)), except when he asks "the men" if Benjamin is "[their] brother" (43.29b).
4. The narrator consistently uses the terms "each" (lit. "a man") and "the men" to refer to the brothers until their return to Joseph's house (44.14). He calls Joseph's servant "the one over his [Joseph's] house" when Joseph addresses him (43.16; 44.1, 4) and once when the brothers approach him (43.19); he is otherwise called "the man" (43.17(*bis*), 19).
5. The term "brother" is restricted to two functions: it refers to Joseph and Benjamin in the discussion between Jacob and his sons (42.38-43.14), and to Benjamin at the moment when Joseph first sees him (43.29-30).
 - a. The narrator uses the term "brother" only three times, twice to refer to Benjamin ("his [Joseph's] brother" (43.29a); "your [Joseph's other brothers'] brother" (43.30)) and once to refer to "his [Judah's] brothers" (44.14) who returned to Joseph's house (i.e., all ten brothers, excluding Joseph). Apart from noting that Joseph "saw his brother Benjamin ..." (43.29a) and that "his [Joseph's] compassions became tender/warm over his brother" (43.30), the narrator does not use the term "brother".
 - b. At the emotional climax of the first part of the larger story of Joseph's self-revelation to his family, the narrator says that "Joseph lifted his eyes and saw *Benjamin, his [Joseph's] brother, the son of his [Joseph's] mother*" (43.29a).
 - c. The use of "his brothers" to refer to Judah's siblings (44.14) suggests a shift in perspective that supports the idea that this v. begins a new section of the story ("paragraph").