

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Eunuch, His Wife, and Their Slave: Genesis 39 in Esoteric Tradition

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Received: 05 May 2026 Accepted: 21 May 2026 Published: 09 June 2026

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Abstract

This article examines the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39 as part of a literary tradition in which texts with esoteric meanings were esteemed as high forms of narrative art meant to engage the audience in heuristic exercise. Like a riddle, the details of this account are carefully worded to allow the audience to wander astray from the correct interpretation. But solving this riddle allows us to view a major narrative development in the book of Genesis, a series of events and consequences that lead to Israel's enslavement in Egypt. A deeper look at the story and its opaque elements, this article challenges the traditional interpretation of Joseph and Potiphar's wife and demonstrates the importance of reevaluating stories in broad cultural canons, especially those that reinforce stereotypes about women, foreigners and other traditional non-hero types.

Keywords: Genesis 39, Potiphar's Wife, Joseph, Unconscious Bias, Gender, False Accusation, Rape, Esoterica.

1. Introduction

The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39 has long been viewed as one of false accusation. Sold into slavery, Joseph encounters the sexual advances of his new owner's wife. The protagonist rebuffs the woman's many seduction attempts until one day, while her husband is away, she tries to coerce Joseph and in doing so pulls off his cloak. Although Joseph flees the scene, Potiphar's wife remains at the house and tells of their encounter. Her report lands Joseph in jail.

On the surface, this seems like a straightforward tale of false accusation. But, the story has a remarkable twist that most never notice; a slick trick with the words of Potiphar's wife. The jilted woman spoke the truth. Joseph is innocent of the crime we think she accused him of but guilty of the actual offense.

In this article, I will discuss the traditional interpretation of Joseph's plight and suggest that we reevaluate this story as if it were a riddle and put aside the assumptions that its many interpreters have held. The story is rife with elements meant to test the reader. Words with

multiple meanings appear peppered throughout, any one of which may change the reader's perception of what is being depicted. I will evaluate these potential hazards pointing out the several traps that a vast body of interpreters have fallen for, those which have led to an almost unanimous misunderstanding of this text. Finally, I will show how the story sheds light on the larger narrative scheme of Israel's migration to Egypt.

2. A Riddle Disguised as Biblical Prose

Ask any priest, rabbi or minister how the biblical hero Joseph landed in jail in Egypt and you will almost invariably hear that he was falsely accused of trying to rape a woman. That his accuser — the wife of Potiphar — made sexual advances toward him on multiple occasions and he had rejected her time and time again. That she tore the clothes off Joseph and spewed lies about him when he fled. That the jilted woman supported her story with incriminating evidence: the garment he left behind. This is the oldest and best known interpretation of this very old story. But it's wrong.

Citation: Amanda Walls. The Eunuch, The Eunuch, His Wife, and Their Slave: Genesis 39 in Esoteric Tradition. Journal of Religion and Theology. 2026; 8(2): 47-52.

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The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is among the most artfully crafted in ancient literature. You won't notice its finesse in translation. The original Hebrew contains several words that have more than one meaning and may be construed various ways. This variability gets lost in translation. Translators make interpretive decisions—they have to. But the story, in its original language, allows for a false interpretation based on the predictable assumptions one might make about the situation it portrays.

To demonstrate my point, I'll borrow a brain-teaser from a charming 1950s movie, *Desk Set*. Its scene portrays an efficiency expert, Richard Sumner (Spencer Tracy) administering a "personality questionnaire" to Bunny Watson (Katharine Hepburn), the head of the reference department for the Federal Broadcasting Network. Sumner presents Watson with the following conundrum and a word of advice—*never assume*.

A detective broke into an apartment to discover a couple, Harry and Grace, lying on the floor dead. Beside them was a small pool of water and some fragments of broken glass. Above them, on a sofa, was a pet cat, its back arched. The detective concluded, without further investigation, that the victims had died of strangulation. How was this conclusion possible?

Never assume—Watson muses. And, as if by fey revelation, she correctly arrives at the answer. Grace and Harry, she inferred, were not people; they were goldfish.

This kind of riddle is designed to reveal the participant's implicit bias. There are, of course, other riddles of this type; like the one where the surgeon is the boy's mother. The story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is a lot like these, but the problem is magnified; it has been passed down to us along with an interpretive history based on wrong assumptions people have been making for millennia.

Perhaps the most egregious of the assumptions that we have inherited from prior interpreters is that Potiphar's wife lied. This assumption goes back at least to the first century when Roman Jewish historian Josephus asserted it in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. This line of interpretation has persisted virtually unchallenged into modern times. Ron Pirson's "The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife" (2004) stands out as an exception. That the woman lied and other assumptions continue to get the better of us today, so that we have profoundly misunderstood the story.

I suggest that we apply a different approach to the account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Let's heed Sumner's advice to *never assume* and take into consideration the full potential of several of the story's elements. By doing so we'll see that all the details combine to shed new light on the narrative.

3. The Riddle Explained

The basic story in Genesis 39, paraphrased without the old assumptions, goes like this. A well-to-do Egyptian man, Potiphar, has recently purchased a slave, Joseph. Joseph catches the eye of both Potiphar and his wife. Potiphar promotes Joseph to a high position of authority in his house and puts him in charge of everything. Potiphar's wife makes several overt sexual advances toward Joseph, all of which he refuses. One day, while Potiphar and the men of the house are away, the woman once again attempts to seduce Joseph. She orders Joseph to sleep with her, grabbing him by his garment. Joseph scrambles to escape. He comes out of his clothes and, leaving them behind, flees, presumably naked. Left holding Joseph's cloak, Potiphar's wife waits for her husband to return home. Meanwhile, she talks about the incident with some of the people of her house. When Potiphar arrives, she tells him what happened. Incensed, Potiphar throws Joseph in jail.

Even when the account is sketched in this neutral way, it may be hard to understand what is happening here without falling back on old assumptions. But the Hebrew hides more clues to help us make sense of the story.

Take the initial term used to identify Joseph's Egyptian owner, Potiphar. Gen 39:1 calls him a *sērīs par'oh*. Most translations render this as Potiphar being an officer in Pharaoh's court. But this is too general. The word *sārīs* identifies Joseph's wealthy Egyptian owner quite specifically as a eunuch. *Young's Literal Translation* is the only English Bible version I am aware of to indicate this. The choice to omit this in many translations may come from the assumption that a eunuch would not be married. But marriage is about much more than sex. Marriage, in antiquity as today, implies family. Eunuchs were not excluded from societal expectations regarding family structures. And they grew their families in the same ways modern couples who experience infertility do, through adoption, surrogacy, or donor.

To Potiphar and his wife, Joseph would have been an ideal donor. Note how the Genesis text emphasizes that Joseph was handsome and well-built and successful at whatever he did (v.3-6). An added benefit was that he

could never actually rival Potiphar, the royal servant of Pharaoh, in terms of social position.

Potiphar noticed Joseph immediately and made him the head of his house. Repetition of the phrase “he gave him everything he had” three times in v.4-6 underscores that Potiphar expected Joseph to perform every essential duty of the house. Every essential duty. Given Potiphar’s status as a eunuch in Pharaoh’s service, we may infer that Joseph’s responsibilities would have included the one that Potiphar himself could not perform, tending to the family’s reproductive needs.

Such a scenario recasts the motives of Potiphar’s wife, and of Joseph, too. Rather than trying to cheat on her husband, Potiphar’s wife was trying to coax the skittish young Joseph (who is only 17 years old in Gen 37:2) into performing the duty with which Potiphar has tasked him. But, Joseph rejects that responsibility and invokes his sense of moral outrage (v.9b): “And, how can I do this great wrong and sin against God?” It is noteworthy that Joseph does not suggest that the deed would injure Potiphar. Instead he worries about offending the deity: it would be a sin to have sex with another man’s wife. Once again, if we look to the Hebrew, the first half of this verse contains a double meaning that clues us in to the story’s meaning. The Hebrew reads that Joseph stated either “nothing is withheld from me but you because you are his wife” or that “he [Potiphar] has withheld nothing.” Either interpretation may be valid because the verb ‘withheld’ (*hšḥ*) may be read as transitive (Gen 20:6; 22:12, 16; 1 Sam 25:39; 2 Sam 18:16; 2 Kgs 5:20; Ps 19:14; Ps 78:50; Job 7:11, 30:10; Job 38:23; Prov 10:19, 11:24, 13:24, 17:27, 21:26, 24:11, Ezra 9:13) or intransitive (Jer 14:10; Ezek 30:18; Ps 19:14; Job 16:5; Is 54:2; Is 58:1; Job 33:18), and both “Potiphar” and “nothing” are potential subjects here.

Mrs. Potiphar on the other hand seems resolutely to think that Joseph is supposed to have sex with her and she repeatedly asks him, day after day (*yôm yôm*, v.10), until he flees. Shrewd interpreters will point out, as an indication that she was sneaking around on her husband, that the last time she asks Joseph to go to bed with her, her husband and all the other men of his house are away (v. 11). And yet, there are people at her house when she tries to seduce Joseph. In fact, she summons them to hear her accusation against him. To whom, then, is she speaking?

On this question, the Greek translation of the text signals how this section of the story was difficult for readers to parse. The Hebrew says that Potiphar’s

wife spoke to “the men/people of her house.” In the Septuagint, the wife instead addresses “those of her house”. Possibly, the translator made an emendation, having noticed that in v. 11 all the men of Potiphar’s house had gone away. Alternatively, the translator may have stumbled on the near-homonyms in Hebrew, mistaking *men/people* (Hebrew, *’nšy*) for ‘women/wives’ (*nšy*) bolstered by the reasonable assumption that “the people of the woman’s house” were, at least mainly, other women, perhaps female servants or additional wives of Potiphar. The masculine plural is used in instances of mixed gender groups, even those that are predominately female. In any case, it is significant that Joseph had not left the house with Potiphar’s men. The possible implication is that he stayed behind with the people of the woman’s house because that’s where he belonged. The Talmud records a disagreement over the implications of the fact that Joseph remained at the house, with Rabbis Yoḥanan and Shmuel each asserting that Joseph’s intent was sexual (Sotah 36b:11).

This brings us to the woman’s accusation. On the day of the incident, Potiphar’s wife tried once again to seduce Joseph. This time, she grabbed his cloak, which he promptly came out of in an effort to run away. She kept the garment as evidence and presented it, first to the people of her house and then to her husband. This may seem to justify the interpretation that she accuses Joseph of attempted rape. But that’s not actually what she says.

The woman makes two similar statements, one to the people of her house and one to her husband, Potiphar. A fairly standard translation, the New Oxford Bible, renders her first statement, made to the people of her house (v.14-15), this way:

See, he came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice; and when he heard me raise my voice and cry out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.

The same translation relates that she says separately to her husband (v.17-18):

The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me; but as soon as I raised my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me, and fled outside.

Two words in her accusation merit special attention: *šḥq* and *qr’*, translated above as “insult” and “cried”. These appear in statements to both audiences. Mrs. Potiphar asserts that her husband had brought Joseph to *šḥq* and that she *qr’* when he she saw him.

The story's author has already punned with the root *shq* (Gen 18:13-15; 26:8). The root is the basis for the name, Isaac, who happens to be Joseph's grandfather. In the woman's speech the word is rendered most often to mean *mock* or *ridicule* (above "insult"). The verb elsewhere means *play*. Occasionally it is translated with sexual connotations (the JPS uses "dally"), and even before the story of Potiphar's wife, the verb has appeared with sexual meaning. It is used to describe Joseph's grandfather, Isaac, and grandmother, Rebecca, canoodling (Gen 26:8). 'Fool around' captures the full range of its meanings.

Accordingly, what the standard interpretation takes as the woman blaming her husband for bringing Joseph to mock everyone may instead be read as a claim that Potiphar brought Joseph to fulfill a sexual duty. Potiphar, after all, is a eunuch. We previously noted that the woman's first audience may have been made up of other women, perhaps female servants or additional wives of Potiphar. This supports and clarifies her claim that "He [Potiphar] brought a Hebrew [Joseph] to fool around with *us* (Gen 39:14)."

The second significant verb in these statements has been equally misunderstood. The woman states, "He [Joseph] came to me to lie with me..." and that she "called" (*qr'*) in Joseph's presence. The translation above renders the verb *qr'* as "cried" to convey that she screamed when she saw Joseph approach. But in fact *qr'* never means to scream. In prose, it always has a more neutral sense, i.e., to *call*, *name*, or *summon*. The additional phrase "in a big voice" in verse 14 may have influenced the translator's decision. But the phrase "called in a big voice" occurs in the Bible always with the equally neutral sense of saying something aloud (1 Kgs 18:27, 28; 2 Kgs 18:28; Is 36:38). Note also that in verses 15 and 18, she states that "when I lifted my voice (*harîmôtî qôlî*) and called" Joseph ran away. The idiom *harîm qol*, *lifted a voice/sound*, is also neutral. It needs modifiers to determine a positive or negative connotation. It appears with *bêtêrû'â*, "in shouting" (Ezek 21:27; and in Ezra 3:12 with *běsimhâ* "joyful") and *lēsimhâ*, "for joy" (1 Chron 15:16).

If the author had meant to convey that the woman testified to having screamed or cried out in distress, the obvious choice would have been the verb *š'q*, which invariably means this. And it is *š'q* (not *qr'*) that appears as the Bible's legal term of art, in the case of a man trying to rape a married woman (Deut 22:27). The biblical philology points to a crucial twist in our assumptions about the story: Potiphar's wife

didn't claim that she screamed when she saw Joseph. Rather, she claimed that she summoned him. Joseph's garment was proof that he had been there, but, when pressed to do the deed, he ran away. We may posit her comment that Joseph was there "to lie with (her)" expresses her expectation, which did not align with Joseph's intention.

As for her statement to Potiphar: most English translations rearrange her words in order to form an allegation of attempted rape. The Oxford translation above inserts punctuation to accomplish this without changing the Hebrew word order. But ancient Hebrew did not have punctuation! What she actually says, without modification, is:

The Hebrew servant whom you brought to fool around (*shq*) with me came to me and when I lifted my voice and called (*qr'*), he left his garment with me and ran outside (Gen 39:17).

I suggest that the author carefully crafted the woman's statements be interpreted as either an allegation of attempted rape or insubordination, depending on what assumptions one makes.

Ever since ancient historian Josephus accused Potiphar's wife of falsely claiming rape, the standard interpretations of the story have literally twisted the woman's statement into an accusation that Joseph tried to bed her. Even iconic medieval exegete Rashi, while maintaining this interpretation, points out that the reader must reorder her words to get what she had intended to say. But, if we examine her words exactly as she said them, without tweaking the syntax, we see that what she tells her husband is entirely consistent with what took place. She doesn't accuse Joseph of attempting to rape her. She accuses him of abandoning his duty. And, of that, Joseph is guilty.

This resolves another conundrum in the standard interpretation—the matter of Joseph's punishment. From the point of view of the story's early audiences, it was common practice for a man who raped a married woman to be put to death (Deut 22:25). Although no law codes survive that could give us a sense of what the penalties might actually have been in Egypt, the Bible's audience would have expected punishment, swift and severe—all the more so for a slave in a foreign land. So, for a supposed accusation of attempted rape, why is Joseph jailed? The woman would have had evidence (Joseph's garment) and witnesses (those she summoned would have heard her if, in fact, she had screamed). A likelier penalty for Joseph in this scenario would have been corporal

or capital punishment. The punishment Joseph did receive, imprisonment, does not fit the crime of attempted sexual assault; it better suits the crime of insubordination.

4. Conclusion Genesis 39 in its Narrative Framework

The interpretation that finds Joseph guilty of insubordination rather than attempted rape fits best within the story, and, it resonates within the larger sequence of events that precede it. Surrogacy, a crucial theme in this interpretation, factors in the births of Israel's progenitors, going back to Joseph's great-grandparents, Abraham and Sarah, and their Egyptian slave and surrogate, Hagar (Genesis 16). Residing now in Canaan and unable to have children of her own, Sarah arranges for her Egyptian servant to be her surrogate (Gen 15:2-3). Abraham and Sarah had lived in Canaan for ten years when Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham (Gen 15:3, *lě'îššâ*, "as a wife or woman") for the sake of having a child (Gen 15:2, *'ûlay'ibbaneh mimmennâ* "perhaps I will be built up from her", "built up" *'ibbaneh* punning on the word *ben*, which is *son*). Their coupling produces offspring. But Sarah spurns Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. Ishmael is expelled. And, in an elegant narrative parallel, Ishmael's sons carry Joseph off from Canaan and sell him in Egypt (Gen 39:1). There, in Hagar's homeland, Joseph's situation mirrors hers almost exactly. Now Joseph, like Hagar, is a slave in a foreign land pressed to fulfill a sexual role. From this vantage, we see a sequence of seemingly unrelated events over four generations coalesce.

But this richly textured narrative has been flattened by two thousand years of translations and exegeses. As the common interpretation recounts it, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is one of the oldest accounts of false accusation in Western literature. This, I charge, is a faulty reading resulting from implicit bias. It has stuck for millennia because it suits longstanding stereotypes about gender and sexuality, and plays to readers' prejudices about the innocence of protagonists and the deceptiveness of foreigners.

You may wonder why the Bible would present the story equivocally. There's a relatively simple explanation for this. It lies in a theme that runs through many of the stories in Genesis. That theme is deception. No one explains this better than Richard Elliott Friedman in "Deception for Deception" (1986). A deft and wonderfully readable exposition that typifies Professor

Friedman's scholarship, the article focuses on the chain of deceptions within the stories about Joseph's family. Friedman points out that several times the character who falls prey to deception does so because that individual jumped to the wrong conclusion.

This motif of deception goes back to Genesis 3, the garden of Eden. The very first deception involves the snake, the shrewdest of all animals (Gen 3:1, "shrewd" from *'arûm*, *naked*, resonating with *visible* or *obvious*), a metaphor symbolizing seeming truth. A snake sheds its skin creating a dupe an empty likeness, falsehood.

What you see is not always what you get. The snake told Eve the truth; yet, she was deceived. Eve inferred too much from the sly creature's words. She wrongly asserted that God told her man not to eat from or touch the tree of life or they would die. In fact, the man had only been told not to eat the fruit, not that he couldn't touch it. The snake's reply, "you will surely not die; but, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods knowing good and bad" turned out to be true. And so, the woman and her partner were exiled, never to return, because she inferred there would be no consequence.

So as with the deception stories leading up to Joseph and Potiphar's wife, those involving Joseph's brothers tricking Jacob into thinking Joseph was dead (Genesis 37), Tamar outwitting Judah (Genesis 38), Rachel hiding her father's teraphim from him (Genesis 31), Laban tricking Jacob into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (Genesis 29), Rebecca and Jacob working together to make Isaac believe that Jacob was Esau (Genesis 27). In all of these stories, the target is presented with a particular scenario and allowed to draw an incorrect conclusion based on seeming truth. The same may be said for the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Only, this time the mark lies outside of the action in the narrative frame. It's the reader.

Genesis 39 resembles the kind of riddle that reveals implicit bias—like the one where Grace and Harry are a couple of pet fish or where the surgeon is the boy's mother. The mistakes someone might make in evaluating these riddles are obvious. So, too with Joseph and Potiphar's wife; but, instead of being posed as a riddle, the story was recorded in a narrative framework that does not unambiguously reveal the solution.

And why would a heuristic game such as this appear in the Torah? Because to craft a story in which mutually exclusive interpretations can be derived is a triumph of literary artistry. It occasions multiple

opportunities for interacting with the text; for poring over, for discovery, for witnessing its illumination of other stories and for realizing its significance within the bigger picture of Israel's migration to Egypt.

There is much to learn from revisiting and critically evaluating long-established interpretations of ancient texts, which are often rooted in widespread and persistent stereotypes that predate us but continue to shape what we see. We lost nothing by hearing out Joseph's accuser. Joseph is still vindicated of any wrongdoing. The hero walks away untarnished from an honest report. And we have gained perspective that matters.

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