Beauty as Blessing?

Embodying Joseph and King David

Yael Rooks Rapport

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Graduate Rabbinical Program

New York, New York

January 29, 2015

Advisor: Professor Sharon Koren

Summary - “Beauty as Blessing? Embodying Joseph and King David”

Yael Rooks Rapport

Rabbinic Thesis, 2015

While it is often overlooked, an appreciation of the description of a biblical character’s beauty can provide essential insight into their narrative. This thesis aims to flesh out the physical descriptions of two out of eleven “beautiful” characters of the Hebrew Bible: Joseph and King David. These two characters prove exceptional in that both are male, the biblical gender designation less frequently described in embodied contexts, and both act as protagonists in their given story cycles, a circumstance in which a typified biblical “hero” would be more likely to be described in deed instead of appearance. Yet for both, the description of their physical beauty is essential to understanding their characters and the characters of those influenced by them.

This thesis traces the embodiment of both of these characters through biblical text, *midrash*, Medieval commentaries, Castilian Kabbalah, and contemporary academic research. It follows the exegetic messages of each character’s description individually before uniting them in a holistic understanding of the *sefirotic* emanations each represents on the Kabbalistic “Tree of Life”. What we learn from these descriptions of David and Joseph is that men, too, can be beautiful and desirable; they can also be vulnerable, diminutive, objectified, and undervalued. And in no way does this exclude them from acting as leaders, warriors, rulers, heroes, and embodiments of the Divine. Where we engage with the ongoing dialectic that surrounds their beauty from its first mention through the ages, we shatter our preconceived notions of aesthetics, gaze, power, divinity, masculine, and feminine.

Introduction

An Absence of Biblical Physicality

When we recall and discuss the stories of our ancestors, we speak exclusively about what they *did*, and not what they *looked like*. With everything we know about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Moses- we have not the faintest idea what they looked like at all. Our text does not tell us if they were tall or short, fat or thin, fair or dark complexioned. While it is often overlooked, an appreciation of the description of a biblical character's beauty can provide essential insight into their narrative.

It is well-attested that the laconic nature of biblical narrative rarely wastes words on physical descriptions. As Athalya Brenner eloquently puts it:

> By and large, the Hebrew Bible is reticent about physical descriptions. This is well in keeping with the prevalent narrative and/or editorial preferences for brevity and economy, perhaps also with the somewhat deficient capabilities for plastic representations of living and especially human forms (as also evidenced by material culture remains of ancient Israel). This austerity may represent socio-sexual mores and conventions.[1]

There is, however, a limited class of biblical characters who are described physically, specifically as being "beautiful" of form (יפה תואר) or of appearance (יפה מראה). This semantic formula is used to describe eleven separate characters in the entirety of the biblical corpus. Though it appears infrequently, it serves as the most common physical

---

[1] Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 32.

descriptor used to embody any biblical character in the reader's imagination.[2] Though "יפה" is widely used throughout all books of the Hebrew Bible to describe subjects and objects alike, it carries a certain connotation that limits its semantic field when in specific reference to a human being.[3] In the case of יפה תואר/מראה, the syntactic structure of descriptive noun has previously been seen as helpful for academic comparisons, and although in biblical Hebrew the semantic word field for "beauty" has several applicable terms, this study, will limit itself to selected texts which use constructions of the root יפה "to be fair, beautiful". This will serve as a linguistic limiting factor, primarily because "within the larger field of 'beauty' this root is the one used primarily of humans and is never used of deity.[4]"

Notably, this relatively small group of literary characters designated with such a description, all fall into either the family of Abraham (Sarah, in Genesis 12:11 and 12:14; Rebecca, in Genesis 24:16; Rachel, in Genesis 29:17; and Joseph, in Genesis 39:6) or the family of David (David, in 1 Samuel 16:12 and 17:42; Abigail, in 1 Samuel 25:3; Batsheva, in 2 Samuel 11:2; Tamar, the daughter of David, in 2 Samuel 13:1; Avshalom,

---

[2] Furthermore, though individuals are only occasionally described as "beautiful", no human character in the Hebrew Bible is every described as its opposite. The only references for "ugly" or "bad-looking" that appear in the text possess an inverse construction: the skinny cows which appear in Pharaoh's dream in Genesis 41:3 and 19 are described as "רע מראה" and "רע תואר", respectively. See Robert L. Hubbard, "The Eyes Have It: Theological Reflections on Human Beauty," *Ex Auditu* 13 (1997): 62.

[3] Stuart Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 17.3 (2009): 267.

[4] Hubbard, "The Eyes Have It," 58.

in 2 Samuel 14:25; Tamar, the daughter of Avshalom, in 2 Samuel 14:27; and Avishag, in 1 Kings 1:3-4)[5]. The books of Samuel are unique in that they contain the most embodied descriptions of appearance, and these descriptions are interrelated.[6] These characters and descriptions are identified collectively because they reference the physical appearance of an individual personage (unlike Job's daughters in Job 42:15), who is named (unlike a generic female captive, such as Deuteronomy 21:11), and whose story is canonized as part of the biblical period (unlike Queen Esther, as described in Esther 2:7).

Two particularly embodied biblical characters, one from each of these beautiful families, stand out as being exceptional according to several standards of this exclusive type. Both are male, the biblical gender designation less frequently described in embodied contexts. Both act as protagonists in their given story cycles, a circumstance in which a typified biblical "hero" would be more likely to be described in deed instead of appearance. Yet for both, the description of their physical beauty is evidently of import to the biblical author in "fleshing out" their characters and the characters of those influenced by them. These two central male characters are Joseph and King David.

Understanding Biblical Male Beauty

Though certainly uncommon in the biblical text, it is not altogether strange for any character, and specifically male characters, to be described as being "beautiful" or

---

[6] Michael Avioz, "The Motif of Beauty in the Books of Samuel and Kings," *Vetus Testamentum* 59.3 (2009): 342.

"handsome" (depending on the descriptive agenda of the vernacular translator). Scholars over generations have posited the rhetorical advantages of describing a character in such a presentation. Brenner writes that:

> The narrative coyness and/or compactness do not indicate that corporeality, appearances and physical beauty are not recognized as sexually meaningful. On the contrary, Beauty may be irrelevant to or redundant in a wife (Proverbs 31.30), but is a fundamental requirement in a lover (Song of Songs). Male beauty is important, especially in a political leader. Depictions of desirable, non-erogenous physical beauty features are for the most part conventionalized and similar for males and females. In males physical strength, stature and height are at times cited as added attractions; so does hair.[7]

She is not alone in her thinking. In "The Pleasing and the Awesome", Alfred James Loader writes, "Time and again we observe that the essence of beauty is that which impresses. It enchants by virtue of its inner force. Therefore males and females are captivated by its power exactly as subjects are captivated by the hold of powerful rulers over them."[8] Chaim W. Reines agrees, writing, "we find that Biblical and rabbinic literature reveals a refined aesthetic sense and a genuine admiration for beauty in ancient Israel… Beauty played an important role in the social life of the times, since it enhanced the prestige of the individual and was, therefore, considered an asset for high office holders (the king, high priest, members of the Sanhedrin)."[9]

---

[7] Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, 34.

[8] James Alfred Loader, "The Pleasing and the Awesome," *Old Testament Essays* 24.3 (2011): 664-5.

[9] Chaim W. Reines, "Beauty in the Bible and the Talmud," *Judaism* December (1975): 107.

We as readers of text might automatically assume that the implications of beauty for male leadership and power are inexorably intertwined, but contemporary thinkers have uncovered impressive amounts of interpretive material when these threads are separated. Stuart Macwilliam turns many of these classical understandings on their heads with his new appreciation of how biblical gaze might function in our understanding of these "beautiful" characters, both male and female:

> It was second-wave feminism that characterized female beauty as objectified by male gaze, as a signifier of male power and commodification… But what about male beauty? What is its function in the daily enactment of gender and sexuality? In the past, overt interest in it has been ambiguous; until recently it has generally been portrayed not so much as directly sexually attractive but as the embodiment of masculine power (Dutton 1995).[10]

Macwilliam's thoughtful criticism of the purposeful bias and treatment of traditional commentators on this subject will prove central in later deconstructions of textual interpretations of our primary subjects, but for now his introductory point of how we have always uncritically viewed the "purpose" of male beauty should be taken into account.

The Biblical Source for Joseph

Joseph's Beauty in Genesis 39:6

An evaluation of Joseph's outward appearance is offered in the second clause of Genesis 39:6:

וַיְהִי יוֹסֵף יְפֵה תֹאַר וִיפֵה מַרְאֶה

---

[10] Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," 266.

“And Joseph was of beautiful appearance, and beautiful to look upon.”

Joseph is the only man in the entire Torah where we are given any hint of his physical appearance. Immediately following this description of Joseph’s uncharacteristic beauty is the introduction of a character whose gaze is fixed on him, though their relationship is forbidden. Seemingly a direct response to Joseph’s good looks, the following verse reads:

וַיְהִי אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַתִּשָּׂא אֵשֶׁת אֲדֹנָיו אֶת עֵינֶיהָ אֶל-יוֹסֵף; וַתֹּאמֶר שִׁכְבָה עִמִּי

“And it came to pass after these things, that his master’s [Potiphar’s] wife cast her eyes upon Joseph: and she said, ‘Lie with me.’”

Joseph becomes a non-volitional object of another’s desire through their gaze. Potiphar’s wife is forbidden to Joseph because of her relationship to his master and the power she holds as head of household. Though he has made no direct or intentional action that the text makes us aware of, Potiphar’s wife is too consumed with her lust to care about Joseph’s consent or the consequences of her actions. After Joseph refuses his mistress’ advances in Genesis 39:8-9, she continues to harass and pressure him. In verse 12, she physically catches him in an empty room, grabs his garment and repeats her demand. Joseph is able to escape, but he leaves his garment in her hand. Then, in verse 13 “כִּרְאוֹתָהּ”, “in her seeing” that he had fled her presence and all that remained was his clothing in her hand, Potiphar’s wife changes her agenda. Rather than bring Joseph to her bed, she plots to bring him to ruin, and her false testimony to her husband and staff lands Joseph in prison. “רְאוּ”, “See!”, she exclaims in verse 14, “He has brought in a Hebrew man to us to mock us- he came to me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice.”

Joseph is taken to the prison where the king's prisoners are kept, but even this apparent setback becomes a golden opportunity. For God is with Joseph, even in prison, and Joseph is perfectly positioned at the right place at the right time rise to the most powerful position available in all of Egypt. In a story where everything seems to happen exactly as it should, we cannot ignore that it is Joseph's uncharacteristic beauty that causes this whole sequence of action and effects the entire unfolding of Jewish history as we know it. But is Joseph's beauty a blessing or a curse?

Modern Scholarship on the Biblical Text

Most modern understandings of verse 39:6, which specifically mentions Joseph's appearance, are largely centered around its narrative importance in advancing the plot. As Hubbard comments:

> We remain in the dark as to what about Joseph attracted Potiphar's wife… For the most part, biblical statements about beauty amount to unsupported claims — or at least claims which leave more unsettled questions than they answer. Further, they are fundamentally impressionistic, designed to quickly create a general impression or to highlight one or two traits rather than to paint a portrait of the person in the reader's mind… In any case, the writer only mentions beauty to advance the plot of the story being told.[11]

There is also a prevalent trend that identifies physical beauty as a hallmark of Divine favor, a further indication of God's love and attachment Joseph specifically, in addition to other biblical characters. James G. Williams suggests:

> It is probably a truism that in myth and epic literature, the beauty of a main character is a sure sign of divinity or of providential guidance. This seems to work out without exception for biblical personages (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel,

---

[11] Hubbard, "The Eyes Have It," 61.

> Joseph, David, Bathsheba, Judith, Esther). The words *yapeh* (fair, beautiful) and *yopi* (beauty) are never used to describe someone who is not favored by the God of Israel, no matter how desirable he or she may seem otherwise.[12]

In this sense, Joseph's beauty might be called a “blessing”, in that it is an effective, yet relatively abstract factor in the unfolding of the story and of God’s eventual plan for Joseph and the Children of Israel. But Macwilliam questions this premise, rightly calling it “overgeneralized”, saying, “The ideological signification of beauty in the case of Joseph in Genesis 39 is both more ambiguous and more interesting than Williams’s type-scene formulation would suggest.[13]” His argument is narratively sound: while Joseph and other characters such as Sarah and Rebecca *eventually* enjoy good fortune and Divine favor, in an *immediate* sense, at the moment when their beauty is made mention, it indicates danger and direct peril. For Joseph specifically, “Beauty then signifies danger — the danger of temptation. Yet the text does not expressly say that Joseph is tempted; that interpretation is added by the reader, perhaps in line with what is ‘naturally’ expected in performativity.[14]” In direct contrast to the previous understanding, when read in this way Joseph’s beauty might act more like a “curse”. It is a highly specific personal trait that places Joseph in clear danger through no overt action of his own. Joseph’s beauty, as illustrated purely by the biblical text, causes him to be treated as object rather than subject in his own story.

---

[12] James G. Williams, “The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type Scenes” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980): 115-116.

[13] Macwilliam, “Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible,” 272.

[14] Ibid., 273.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of *midrashim* and commentaries read Genesis 39:6 in line with our first two representations: either that Joseph's beauty is a handy plot device with which to attract the notice of Potiphar's wife and advance the story, or that it is a illustrated sign of God's favor, in line with his ability to interpret dreams. Macwilliam's asserts, however, that the breadth of those interpretive possibilities is purposely narrowed. By identifying an embedded cultural agenda at play, he challenges us to read these interpretations critically and expand our exegetical perspective:

> I suggest that male beauty is uncomfortable for male writers and readers because it runs counter to a proper performative function. Appreciation of it by other males is problematic, because on the one hand it places the object of the male gaze in a female, passive position, and on the other it puts the male gazer under suspicion of illicit desire. And, of course, there is no direct female gaze in the Hebrew Bible; there is no female voice and no articulated female desire, except where it is pathologized as perverse [like Potiphar's wife][15]… In the rare cases where male beauty does show itself, it is my contention that we should view with suspicion the analysis of its function offered by generations of (male) commentators. My suspicion is that their various attempts to explain away the sexual desirability of the male body are (unconsciously) driven by an ideologically masculine agenda, which leads them to overlook some plausible alternative exegetical insights.[16]

Macwilliam offers us fair warning that when we consider historical interpretations of this verse through the media of *midrashim* and traditional *parshanut*, we are subject to the assumptions and blinders of the era from which our source is derived. But in reading

---

[15] This author would like to note that there may be some who, in disagreeing with this assertion, would cite the female narrator of the Song of Songs, and while that discrepancy is valid in this author's eyes, it does not fall under the purview of her thesis. Mr. Macwilliam's larger point is both innovative and well reasoned, and it furthers the argument at hand.

[16] Ibid., 270.

these stories as denizens of a postmodern age, we have the opportunity to consider the clear limits of these sources and strike out beyond them. We begin with a foundational overview of Joseph's physical representation in classical sources such as *midrash*, *parshanut*, and Castilian kabbalah, noting where an author's cultural agenda may be in effect and attempting to insert contemporary questions and understandings of gender, aesthetics, and power into the ongoing interpretive tradition.

Midrashic Interpretations on Joseph's Beauty

Joseph's Beauty vs. Rachel's Beauty

There are a few relevant *midrashim* that inform our contextual understanding of Joseph's physicality. Some play on the mention in 37:3 that "Israel loved Joseph more than all his children", which precipitates the gift of Joseph's famous "כְּתֹנֶת פַּסִּים/colorful coat". *Bereshit Rabbah*, a classical collection of *aggadic midrashim* written in the early 5th century CE, attributes this paternal preference to Joseph's maternal likeness:

"Said Rabbi Isaac, 'Throw a stick up in the air, it will land on the root [from which it came].'[His mother was beautiful, so was he].' So because it was written 'But Rachel was of beautiful form', therefore: 'Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking'[17]"

Commentators and *midrashists* alike have picked up on the identical linguistic construction of Rachel's beauty and that of her son's. In Genesis 29:17, we read:

וְרָחֵל, הָיְתָה יְפַת-תֹּאַר וִיפַת מַרְאֶה

---

[17] *Bereshit Rabbah, Parashah* 86, Genesis 39:1-7, 86:6:4, Jacob Neusner, trans., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*. Vol. 3. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1985), 225.

“And Rachel was of beautiful appearance, and beautiful to look upon.”
The masculine construction of this identical phrase in 39:6 is an exact echo, strengthening the case that Jacob’s love for this particular son is in no small way influenced by the startling similarity he might have witnessed between Joseph and his beloved wife who died too young.

In reading commentary on this perfect echo of our chosen verse, what is truly striking is how dissimilar the context of the commentary appears given Genesis 29:17’s mirrored construction. When describing Rachel in Genesis 29:17, it seems you can hear the commentators striving for Technicolor. One after the other, they refine the exact meaning of the terms used to describe her, mining their biblical lexicons for the perfect parallel prooftext that will focus their understanding. When this description is in reference to Joseph, the exegetic material focuses exclusively on abstract content, such as an implication of vanity, or a narrative device to move the story forward. When it comes to his mother, however, the commentators imagine her in concrete, graphic detail, embodying her in a way that the plain *p’shat* reading of the text does not.

Rashi focuses on the two subject nouns of this portion of the verse: “*appearance/*תֹּאַר: That is the form of the countenance, an expression similar to ‘he fixes it (יְתָאֲרֵהוּ) with planes (בַּשָּׂרָד)’ (Isaiah 44: 13), ‘conpas’ in Old French, outline, shape. *to behold/*מַרְאֶה*:* That is the shine of the countenance.[18]” Rabbi Samuel ben Meir

[18] Rashi on Genesis 29:17, s.v. תאר and מראה.

(רשבם/RaSHBaM), Rashi's grandson, also cites this same Isaiah verse, but focusing on a different clause: "*beautiful of appearance*: Like "he fixes it (יְתָאֲרֵהוּ) with the compass (וּבַמְּחוּגָה)" (Isaiah 44:13); pattern of the nose and the forehead and the mouth and the cheeks.[19]" As well as using these phrases to meditate on the proportionality of Rachel's facial features, Rashbam also imaginatively illustrates her coloring, indicating that the phrase וִיפַת מַרְאֶה/*beautiful to behold* suggests that Rachel might have possessed "white and rosy"[20] complexion- perhaps similar to what we in modern times would call "peaches and cream". Ibn Ezra uses a different prooftext to help define what "beautiful of appearance" might mean, saying it is "like 'they drew' (see Joshua 15:9 [וְתָאַר הַגְּבוּל'/the border was drawn']): every organ/feature, like eye and the nose and the mouth — beautiful, and *to behold* everything was beautiful. Or: *to behold* — the facial appearance on the eye.[21]" Radak is perhaps the most graphic in his description, commenting that "*Rachel was beautiful of appearance and beautiful to behold,* without any defect in the whole. And the *appearance* of the shape of her face and the rest of her limbs and the height of her body, and *behold* — that the skin that was white and pink, and the black hair, *and he loved her.*[22]"

---

[19] Rashbam on Genesis 29:17, s.v. יפת תאר and ויפת מראה.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibn Ezra on Genesis 29:17, s.v. יפת תאר and מראה.

[22] Radak on Genesis 29:17, s.v. רחל היתה יפת תאר ויפת מראה.

The classical commentators' selective view on interpretations of Joseph's embodiment as either morally deficient or narratively required stand in stark contrast to the eager and cacophonous chorus of voices when the opportunity comes to imagine his mother Rachel's physical form. The answer to this quandary may lie in the chronological unfolding of the story; since we as the readers have already been presented with a variety of notions about Rachel's appearance, we could assume that Joseph was physically similar. But much more likely would be the commentators' reticence to engage in the same imaginative vision when it comes to Joseph because he is a male character rather than a female character. Despite being given the exact same physical description, word for word, as a female character, the exegetes are made uncomfortable by the notion of turning Joseph into an object instead of a subject, even when he is treated as such by another (female) character in the text. As Macwilliam suggested, such an appreciation for Joseph's beauty would place him, as an object of male gaze, into a "female, passive position", and possibly put the commentator as a male gazer "under suspicion of illicit desire."[23]

Noting the eerie similarity between the embodied description of Rachel and Joseph, Macwilliam also puts forward his own modern exegesis which further complicates the matter of Joseph being viewed as a beautiful male character in comparison to a beautiful female character, and the entire notion of how beauty may be considered as a sign of blessing in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 39, Divine favor for

---

[23] Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," 270.

Joseph is an explicit theme that frames both the beginning and end of the chapter that finds Joseph in Potiphar's house. We might be tempted to read the mention of Joseph's beauty as yet another symbol of Divine blessing as readers have in the past, with this story as well as others in which characters are described as beautiful. When this signal's phrasing is considered in its wider context with a connection to Rachel, a physical mark of such favor might infer a legacy of God's preference for her offspring. But this reminder of Rachel's beauty might equally highlight her painful end, as well as the fates of the only other beautiful female characters mentioned in the text thus far, who were thrust into immediate danger because of their good looks. If we see Joseph in this context, as supported by the narrative progression of the text, his character becomes beautifully complicated:

> Joseph's beauty, then, is ambiguous. On the one hand, the narrator may well intend for us to understand by it a sign of divine favor; on the other, both by its narrative consequences and by its identification with Rachel's beauty, it also signifies vulnerability and danger, just as female beauty often does. It is in this second signification, shared with female beauty, that Joseph's beauty runs counter to the norms that dictate how masculinity is to be performed.[24]

We do have the opportunity to see Joseph's beauty running counter to his masculinity in these classical texts when he is explicitly connected as being "his mother's child". But no *midrashim* or commentator takes the opportunity to explore what that might look like or what that might mean for Joseph as a character or the story he inhabits. Instead, where Joseph's character is concerned, this womanly trait can only mean one thing in a male context: vanity.

---

[24] Ibid., 275.

Joseph's Vanity: Beauty as Negative

The vast majority of *midrashim* on the subject of Joseph's beauty highlight a number of negative aspects that come with this mark of Divine and paternal preference. The rabbis use this opportunity to build out the readers' understanding of Joseph's "youthful" habits, including his vanity. The most oft-quoted *midrash* which makes an appearance in commentaries and compilations alike, comes first in *Bereshit Rabbah* when elaborating on verse 39:6:

> It is like a parable of a strong man who sat in the marketplace and was penciling his eyes and styling his hair and swaggering about. He said, "I am a real man!" They said to him, "If you are such a man, here is a bear - go and overpower it!"[25]

Much of the exegesis offered by classical commentators on Joseph's physical appearance references this *midrash* specifically as a basis for their gloss, beginning with Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, better known by his acronym רשי/RaSHI, active in Southern France in the early 10th century. In his commentary on Genesis 39:6, he says : "As soon as Joseph found himself [in the position of] ruler, he began eating and drinking and curling his hair. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: "Your father is mourning and you curl your hair! I will incite the bear against you." Immediately afterwards"his master's wife lifted up her eyes.[26]" Rashi had already foreshadowed his negative notion of Joseph's vanity back in Genesis 37:2, by bringing forward the *midrash* from Genesis Rabbah 84:7, suggesting that when the text says that Joseph was a "נער/youth" it was hinting at his childish bad

---

[25] *Bereshit Rabbah, Parashah* 87, Genesis 39:7-23, 87:3:2, Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 229.

[26] Rashi on Genesis 39:6, s.v. ויהי יוסף יפה תאר ויפה מראה.

habits of “fixing his hair and touching up his eyes”[27]. Joseph’s attention to his appearance in these *midrashim* is a youthful characteristic which typifies him as vain and immature. Macwilliam’s reading on this *midrash* makes it out as a typical example of “the sense of rabbinic unease at the idea of masculine beauty,” saying, “the ascription of beauty to a man makes the commentator feel so uncomfortable that he immediately turns it into a moral failing on the part of the unfortunate Joseph.[28]” The agenda of this interpretive strategy seeks to categorize Joseph’s beauty as a pure vanity, a personal fault of Joseph’s that is retrojected back in his story so that is always a part of his character, supported or not by the biblical text. This could be viewed as a net negative on the part of the traditional texts, leading to a “blame the victim” mentality which would suggests that Joseph must have done something to “deserve” his assault. But it also sets Joseph up as a flawed character with a chance to be redeemed for his past indiscretions; an interpretive pathway which has been so successful that we now remember Joseph as most righteous among our ancestors rather than the most beautiful or the most vain.

Joseph Withstands Temptation

Though Potiphar’s wife goes unnamed in the biblical text, being described only by her station and association, the later midrashists, like the 13th century authors of *Sefer HaYashar* and *Midrash HaGadol,* call her “Zuleika”. There are several *midrashim* which describe in greater detail the lengths Zuleika went to in order to seduce Joseph. One of

---

[27] Rashi on Genesis 37:2, s.v. והוא נער.

[28] Macwilliam, “Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible,” 274-5.

these later *midrashim* from *Sefer HaYashar* simulates a conversation between the Zulieka and her maidservants, when the latter are concerned for their mistress' apparent poor health ever since Joseph's employment:

"I am in such a way because he is always in my house, and I see him day in and day out, coming and going in my house. I am weakened and will I not die from this?" And they said to her: "These things are true because who could look at this form in his house and restrain himself from it?"[29]

One popular *midrash* that comments on the extreme effects Joseph's appearance had on others can be found in several *aggadic* sources spanning from as early as the *Midrash Tanchuma* to as late as *Midrash HaGadol*. *Sefer HaYashar* in particular relates an incident where Zuleika invites the women of Egypt to her home to make an object lesson of why Joseph's beauty drives her to distraction. She has Joseph serve them citrons, with sharp knives to peel the skins, and every woman present falls completely under his spell:

And all of them cut their hands with the knives which were in their hands and all of the citrus fruits which were in their hands, filled with blood: And all the women noticed their hands and behold they were filled with blood and their blood fell over all their clothes.[30]

Though more florid details emerge in later retellings, the powerful content of certain images, such as the shedding of blood, the smell of citrus, and the sight of Joseph's beauty remain constant.

However desperate and devious his mistress may have been, most *midrashim* show Joseph unmoved by her wiles. However, one notable exception appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sotah* 36b, where the sages suggest that it was not so easy

---

[29] *Sefer HaYashar*, ed. Benjamin Harz, (Berlin: 1923), קנט. Author's own translation.

[30] Ibid.

for Joseph to withstand his mistress' advances. The sages ask: "How was it with Joseph [that he sanctified the Name]?" The answer comes in the form of a collaborative *midrash*, with each scholar adding to the telling:

> As it is written: And it came to pass about this time, that he went into the house to do his work. R. Johanan said: This teaches that both [Joseph and Potiphar's wife] had the intention of acting immorally. 'He went into the house to do his work' — Rab and Samuel [differ in their interpretation]. One said that it really means to do his work; but the other said that he went to satisfy his desires… 'And she caught him by his garment, saying' etc. At that moment his father's image came and appeared to him through the window and said: 'Joseph, thy brothers will have their names inscribed upon the stones of the *ephod* and thine amongst theirs; is it thy wish to have thy name expunged from amongst theirs and be called an associate of harlots?' (As it is written: 'He that keepeth company with harlots wasteth his substance.'[31]) Immediately his bow abode in strength — R. Johanan said in the name of R. Meir: [This means] that his passion subsided. And the arms of his hands were made active — he stuck his hands in the ground so that his lust came out from between his finger-nails.

The Talmudic scholars blame the fact that Joseph had only two sons, rather than twelve like his father, not on his near-miss of a moral misstep, but on the fact that his procreative powers were diminished because "his lust came out from between his finger-nails." However, Benjamin's sons "were given names on his own account", and the sages go on to provide etiological narratives connecting the names of Benjamin's sons listed in Genesis 46:21 to experiences in the life of Joseph. The last one, "אָרְדְּ/Ard", the text suggests may have commemorated Joseph's good looks, saying "because his face was like a rose/וְוֶרֶד."

---

[31] Proverbs 29:3.

This is certainly the minority opinion of most *midrashim,* which collectively paint an image venerating Joseph, who despite his initial vanity proved his mettle in this test of wills. But it seems his resistance only made him more beguiling to Potiphar's wife, no matter his public or private denunciations. It was, perhaps, so unbelievable to the readers of the biblical text and of these *midrashim* that Joseph could have withstood the veritable onslaught of temptation which Zuleika represented, that the rabbis had to answer this explicit question with another *midrash* found in Genesis Rabbah. As is typical when answering a particularly pointed question which could be construed as doubtful or outright heretical, the rabbis put it in the mouth of a *matrona,* a Roman noblewoman, a *midrashic* character who conspicuously might not understand the full weight of such a query's implications:

> A noble lady asked R. Yose, "Is it possible that Joseph, at seventeen, in his full vigor, could have done such a thing {acted with such self-restraint}? He produced for her a copy of the book of Genesis. He began to read the story of Reuben {and Bilhah} and Judah {and Tamar}. He said to her, "If these, who were adults and in their father's domain, were not protected by the Scripture [but were revealed by Scripture in all their lust], Joseph, who was a minor and on his own, all the more so [would have been revealed as lustful, had he done what the lady thought he had].[32]

Kabbalistic Understandings of Joseph's Beauty

The primacy of Joseph's proven virtue in the face of temptation, whether or not he brought such a trial on himself, was central in the rabbinic and later kabbalistic creation of myth and representations of Joseph as a *Tsaddik,* the most righteous of all our ancestors. Joseph's role as such an archetype might even have been prefigured by his

---

[32] *Bereshit Rabbah, Parasha* 87, Genesis 39:7, 87:6:4, Neusner, 234.

beauty. As Chaim Reines writes, "The rabbis believed that the beauty of great spiritual personalities signified their wisdom (*Kohelet Rabbah* 8:1). And they reckoned beauty among the seven things (including wisdom, strength, wealth, long life, children, and honor) which are fitting for both the righteous and for the world at large (*Avot* VI, 8; Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 11:3; *Tosefta*, Ibid., 11:8).[33]"

By the 13th century, the *Zohar* too, ascribes particular significance to this momentary lapse in Joseph's behavior, recounting a similar construction of the *midrash*, but with its interpretation heightened to suggest mystical significance:

> Rabbi El'azar said,"*It happened after these things.*" What is this? As has been established: the place from which the evil inclination attacks, a rung *after the things*. For Joseph provided him an opening for accusal, dressing up, and adorning himself; so the evil impulse was poised to accuse: 'While his father mourns over him, Joseph is adorning himself and curling his hair!' Immediately the bear was incited and attacked him.[34]

The scale of Joseph's error in letting his guard down, however briefly, is expanded not only to the cosmic realm allowing the incursion of the Evil Inclination, but the very sanctity of the covenant of Abraham, which was brought into jeopardy:

> So heaven and earth, and all their powers stand on this foundational covenant, as is written: *Were it not for My covenant day and night*… (Jeremiah 33:25). Therefore one should be careful of this, as has been established. So it is written: *Joseph was handsome and good-looking* (Genesis 39:6), and immediately afterward: *His master's wife raised her eyes to Joseph.*…[35]

---

[33] Reines, "Beauty in the Bible and the Talmud," 102.

[34] *The Zohar*, ed. and trans. Daniel C. Matt, Vol.1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 157.

[35] Ibid., 158.

Daniel Matt's commentary on this Zoharic passage additionally reads: "*be careful of this*… Careful and restrained in sexual behavior, since human sexuality mirrors and affects the divine realm. Here, according to Rabbi El'azar, Joseph's preoccupation with his own looks led to his near seduction, as indicated by the sequence of verses…[36]"

Furthermore, as the centrality of this story proliferated in the rabbinic imagination, Joseph was no longer merely Joseph, but stood in as a symbolic signifier for something greater. The *Zohar*'s gloss on this episode treats Zuleika as an incarnate of the Evil Inclination, the demonic accuser, who ascends daily to testify against humanity before the Holy One, symbolized by Joseph.:

> What is written? *Though she spoke to Joseph day after day* (Genesis 39:10). *Though she spoke* — for he ascends and accuses every single day, declaring before the Holy One many acts of evil, many slanders, in order to destroy the inhabitants of the world.[37]

The notion that Joseph might give into the Evil Inclination, "to lie with her", brings with it a host of interpretive possibilities when Joseph is considered to be the embodiment of God. Were he to accede to her request, it could mean giving her "control, to dominate the world…But the blessed Holy One has compassion on the world, the world remains in existence.[38]" Inversely and importantly, Joseph's refusal to give in to this Evil Inclination is symbolic of God's favor in keeping the world outside the reach of shadow, for God "feels compassion for the world.. and dominion does not prevail until he [the evil

---

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 162-3.

[38] Ibid.

inclination] is empowered.[39]". The metaphor is furthered by the Kabbalistic understanding that Egypt is the locus of the *Sitra Ahra*, the demonic realm into which Joseph must descend.

In an interesting reversal of a commonly accepted theme, rather than equating Joseph's beauty to his mother based on their parallel physical descriptions, the *Zohar* explains that Joseph was the "image of his father", in that they were "nearly identical"[40]. When Joseph's role in his story elevates him to an embodiment of the Divine, it is of crucial importance that Joseph is the spitting image of his father, and not his mother. Where Joseph is representative of God's righteousness as "*Tsaddik*", his father is "*Tiferet*" the representative embodiment of God's glory. The category of "*Tiferet*" also carries a connotation of Divine beauty, so it is important that Jacob also be known as beautiful- though the biblical text does not provide this description in the way it does for Joseph. Jacob being the source for Joseph's beauty, as the *Zohar* describes, brings both characters closer to God, God's emanation, and God's embodiment, which will be examined further in the context of the *sefirotic* realm.

However, even in this empowered view of Joseph as God's embodiment in a war against the Evil Inclination, Joseph's comely appearance is given as a negative attribute.

---

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 91.

The gloss closes this narration with a callback to the famous *midrash* referenced from Genesis Rabbah to *Midrash HaGadol*, saying:

> When it sees no one standing against it, it is the way of the Evil Inclination to wage war with him immediately: "She caught him by his garment, saying 'Lie with she'." "She caught him by his garment," because when the Evil Inclination obtains mastery over man, he first adorns and mends his clothes and curls his hair, as it is written: "She caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me'" and cleave to me.[41]

Contemporary Reading of Parallel Stories: Joseph & Potiphar's Wife, Tamar & Amnon

The case has been eloquently made for the recognition of the presence of literary allusion in biblical poetry and prose by Robert Alter. Alter writes that allusion "is not an embellishment but a fundamental necessity of literary expression"[42], and notes "the complex means used by the biblical writers to lock their texts together, to amplify their meanings by linking one text with another."[43] His distinct definition of biblical allusion involves "a pointed activation of one text by another, conveying a connection in difference or a difference in connection through some conspicuous similarity in phrasing, in motif, or in narrative situation. The marker for the allusion may be as economical as a single unusual or strategically placed word or as profuse as a whole episode parallel in situation to and abounding in citations from an earlier episode."[44]

---

[41] Ibid.

[42] Robert Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature,* (London: SPCK, 1992), 108.

[43] Ibid., 109.

[44] Ibid., 111.

Joseph and Tamar, the daughter of David, are distant cousins whose family bonds stretch over tens of generations. A young man in the pre-Exodus period, literally one of the Children of Israel, and a young princess of the united monarchy of an Israelite king, they represent wildly differing iterations of one people's identity. But though their stories appear in two separate sections of the Hebrew Bible, and though their destinies could not have been more different, they are inexorably linked. Joseph's rise to power is well-known, the subject of diligent religious and creatively secular study. Tamar's tragic downfall is shadowed, a painful narrative for those who know it. But each story becomes more powerful, more layered and nuanced, when seen through the lens of the other. Joseph and Tamar are remarkably similar; they are seen as beautiful, desired objects whose own desires are violated, to their shame. But as each is endowed with differing abilities as a literary character, for one an episode of trauma marks a beginning, and for the other- an end.

Tamar's shorter story, encapsulated in 2 Samuel 13, and Joseph's longer narrative arc spanning from Genesis 37-45, serve as one of Alter's primary examples of purposeful, artful biblical literary allusion. Joseph's story begins with an eruption of sibling rivalry and eventually comes to a successful reconciliation and conclusion. Tamar's violation is the tipping point of sibling strife. Following her rape by her half-brother, King David's dynasty is sent spiraling into bloody turmoil which ends with two of his beloved oldest sons dead, and the line of succession in grave jeopardy. For Alter, the verbal and structural allusion apparent in the Rape of Tamar prove that "the writer has shaped his

meanings by aligning his text with memorable moments in the inherited literary tradition that are at once parallel and antithetical to his own narrative materials."[45] But even more pointedly, "The story of Amnon and Tamar has its own coherence and thus may be easily read without reference to the Joseph story, but to do so would be to rob it of some of its deepest thematic resonances, to fail to see the full implications of the particular episode, of the collision of character and gender, and of the larger political plot."[46]

The first verse of 2 Samuel 13 reads:

ויהי אחרי כן ולאבשלום בן דוד אחות יפה ושמה תמר ויאהבה אמנון בן דוד

"And it happened thereafter that Avshalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister named Tamar, and Amnon, David's son, loved her."

In the very first sentence, all four main characters who will have a role to play in this unfolding dynastic tragedy are introduced: Avshalom, David, Tamar, and Amnon. Tamar's name is encircled by the men who define her destiny: Avshalom, her brother and avenger; David, her royal father- though he is only mentioned in relation to his sons and not his daughter; and Amnon, her half-brother and rapist. But the one quality which is ascribed solely to Tamar is her beauty, putting her in the same limited class of biblical characters as Joseph.

---

[45] Ibid., 117.

[46] Ibid.

Just as in the case of Tamar, Joseph becomes a non-volitional object of another's desire through their gaze. Like Joseph, the statement of Tamar's beauty is followed directly by the ominous mention of other eyes upon her. It is mentioned in the same verse that Amnon, another son of David loved Tamar, but in 2 Samuel 13:2 we read that this love is driven by sickness:

ויצר לאמנון להתחלות בעבור תמר אחותו כי בתולה היא ויפלא בעיני אמנון לעשות לה מאומה

"But Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill on account of his sister Tamar; for she was a virgin; and it was impossible *in the eyes of Amnon* to do anything to her." Amnon is stymied; he looks everywhere for a solution but cannot tear his eyes away from Tamar and sees no recourse for his desires. The gaze of their assailant follows both Joseph and Tamar throughout their stories. Potiphar's wife is forbidden to Joseph because of her relationship to his master and the power she holds as head of household. Though he has made no direct or intentional action that the text makes us aware of, like Amnon, Potiphar's wife is too consumed with her lust to care about Joseph's consent or the consequences of her actions. Amnon's directive to Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:11 is almost a perfect echo of the Egyptian mistress' terse command - "Come lie with me, my sister". This echo is picked up in Robert Alter's analysis. He writes:

> In the Joseph story, that is, the high moral satire of the concupiscent Egyptian lady is pointed up by a structure of contrastive dialogue in which she has only two words as the language of her desire, while he is full of nervous volubility in reminding her of his status, his responsibilities toward his master, and the iniquity of consummating such an act of betrayal. In the story of Amnon and Tamar, the assailant is again laconic in lust … while the assailed one, Tamar, speaks eight words for every one of his- as she desperately tries to ward him off by reminding him of the baseness of the act and the shame that will attach to her,

raising the possibility that he can have her legally if he asks it of the king, their father.[47]

Unlike Joseph, however, when Tamar enacts the echoed scene her story spirals downward towards a despair she never escapes. When she enters an empty room with her attacker; when he issues his odious command so reminiscent of Potiphar's wife; when she clearly and vehemently voices her refusal; and when her attacker takes hold of her, they are in perfect concert. Both Joseph and Tamar essentially are seen, but not heard; their assailants have no interest in what they say- only possessing their beautiful forms. But Tamar does not have Joseph's strength, and where he eludes his assailant, in verse 14 she is literally overpowered: "ויחזק ממנה ויענה וישכב אותה", "he was stronger than she, and ravished her, and lay with her." Like Potiphar's wife, following their encounter Amnon radically changes his agenda. But his change of heart follows in the wake of completed action and not unsatisfied desire. Amnon's shift is explicit in the verse that immediately follows: "Then Amnon hated her with an overwhelming hatred; for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her." Like Joseph, Tamar is forcibly ejected from the domain of her attacker, but because of the basic difference from which there stories diverge, the prison which she is thrown into carries a lifetime sentence. Because she is a woman, because she was unable to escape her attacker and because her inherent value as a person is so intrinsically entwined with what he stole from her, Tamar's fate is worse than death. There is no pathway to redemption and

---

[47] Ibid., 114-115.

reconciliation that she can take. In her own words of verse 13: “And I, where shall I carry my shame?”

Tamar strips herself of her clothing, as Joseph had been twice in his story. The connection between them is unmistakable at this point, since both are described as being garbed in a כתונת פסים, “a garment of many colors”. As it appears in verse 18, this mention may at first glance be an unnecessary or extraneous detail about what the virgin daughters of the monarchy wore at this time. But, as Ora Horn Prouser points out, “While each use of clothing may be symbolic on its own, the use of dress as a whole is literary in character, paralleling, focusing, and enriching the narrative text… The loss of clothing is generally devastating, humiliating, or a sign of poverty.”[48] This colorful garment is a visible, outward sign that defines them and their status: as princess, as favorite son. Tamar and Joseph are the only characters in the whole of biblical literature to be described as wearing such a garment, and in both their stories that garment ends up torn, bloodstained, and ruined, along with the role that it symbolized for them. After Tamar visibly and visually destroys her appearance so that no one can mistake her despair, her brother Avshalom appears, and brings her into his house. But Tamar’s end is not Joseph’s. The final words of her story in verse 20 read:

ותשב תמר ושממה בית אבשלום אחיה

---

[48] Ora H. Prouser, “Suited To the Throne: The Symbolic Use of Clothing in the David and Saul Narratives,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21.71 (1996): 28-30.

“So Tamar remained desolate in the house of her brother, Avshalom.”

The text does not mention if, like Joseph, God was with Tamar during her interminable time of imprisonment. We are left to assume that Tamar lived the rest of her life alienated and alone. Her story simply stops there. No mention of her occurs thereafter, not even following the death of her brother who brought her into his house.

At the end of his story, it appears that Joseph as a character succeeded in a place where Tamar could not. Following his traumatic incident, it is Joseph’s words that begin to matter, rather than his appearance. Joseph from the very start of his narrative had always been full of words and dreams that carried great importance, but it is only during his time in prison that others began to take his words seriously, which eventually enable him to reach a seat of great power. Tamar, very literally, is never heard from again. But her name lives beyond her, and takes on new meaning. It is of interest to note another point of connection between Tamar and Joseph, in that Tamar’s namesake is the courageous female figure who took control of her own destiny and gave birth to Judah’s twin sons Pharez and Zerah. The story of that Tamar interrupts Joseph’s narrative arc, and appears in full in Genesis 38- the chapter before his encounter with Potiphar’s wife. Following the story of our Tamar, in the next chapter, 14:27, a mention is made of Avshalom’s family:

ויולדו לאבשלום שלושה בנים ובת אחת ושמה תמר היא היתה אשה יפת מראה

“Three sons were born to Avshalom, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a woman beautiful to look upon.”

Tamar's ending is carried forward by another Tamar, who inherited her aunt's outward beauty. But for the sake of this Tamar, whose story goes unrecorded, we hope that she also inherited the blessings of her cousin Joseph and the determined courage of her namesake, to make a life for herself that ended happily, one where she acted as a subject- rather than an object.

The Biblical Sources for David

As previously mentioned, the books of Samuel stand out particularly in this context from the rest of the Hebrew Bible by the sheer number of embodied characters presented to the reader. Though not every character is described with יפה תואר/יפה מראה, the hallmarks of our narrowed semantic field, several are described as being good-looking in a general sense, as well as being exceptional in comparison to the general population. As Clines describes it:

> Beauty is not generally a state to which a man who does not have it can aspire, but obviously it is very desirable, in the world of the David story, for a man to be beautiful. Beauty is to be seen, at the least, in bodily shape, in the eyes, in the skin color, and in the height. The language used here is not some diffused notion of "good looks", but reflects some quite precise and analytical thought about what makes a man beautiful… it is an aspect of "real manhood" for which a man can expect praise and admiration.[49]

---

[49] David J. A. Clines, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity," in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 222.

King David, Israel's "favorite son"- in many ways much like Joseph - occupies the center of this story cycle in both a narrative sense and an aesthetic one. David is surrounded by beauty; genetically speaking his brothers are understood to be well-favored physically, his wives are quite striking - in some cases they are "chosen" for their beauty (Bathsheva, Avishag) - and his children are notably beautiful, both male and female alike. David's leadership position is undoubtably enhanced by his and Saul's immediate impression of outward appearance. A particularly apt contemporary comparison would have us understand that "the house of David is the Kennedy clan of its time.[50]" But despite this preponderance of beautiful people populating these stories, the message the text presents on physical beauty is inconsistent. What makes David so well-favored is explicitly stated not to be his outward appearance (in fact, rather than making him extraordinary, in this cast of characters it nearly makes him ordinary). The moral the text points to again and again is God's incomparable ability to see to the heart of a person or a matter, rather than the surface presentation. However, given the repeated and relatively positive motif of beauty in these stories it appears that outward appearance cannot be ignored. How should a reader interpret the text's mixed message that looks are not a clear indication of character, when all the characters are clearly good looking?

David's Beauty in 1 Samuel 16:12

David's first physical description comes with his introduction in 1 Samuel 16:12. The chapter begins with God's command to the prophet Samuel to actively seek out and

---

[50] Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," 283.

anoint the next king of Israel, since King Saul has fallen out of favor for acting on his own and not following his directed orders regarding the Amalekites in Chapter 15. At great risk to his own life, Samuel goes the place and the family where God indicated he will find the chosen king. When Samuel reaches Bethlehem and finds Jesse, the father of Israel's future king, what follows might be described in modern parlance as a "Cinderella story". Initially, Samuel is taken with Jesse's oldest son, Eliav, but God quickly dismisses his choice in 16:7, saying:

אַל תַּבֵּט אֶל מַרְאֵהוּ וְאֶל גְּבֹהַ קוֹמָתוֹ כִּי מְאַסְתִּיהוּ כִּי לֹא אֲשֶׁר יִרְאֶה הָאָדָם כִּי הָאָדָם יִרְאֶה לַעֵינַיִם וַיהוָה יִרְאֶה לַלֵּבָב

"Do not pay attention to his looks and to the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For not as a mortal sees [does God see]. For a mortal sees with the eyes, and the Eternal sees with the heart.[51]"

One by one, seven of Jesse's sons pass before Samuel with the same result: all are rejected. Samuel asks if Jesse has any more sons and is informed that the youngest is tending the sheep. He is sent for on Samuel's command, and in verse 12 we are first introduced to David:

וַיִּשְׁלַח וַיְבִיאֵהוּ וְהוּא אַדְמוֹנִי עִם יְפֵה עֵינַיִם וְטוֹב רֹאִי

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה קוּם מְשָׁחֵהוּ, כִּי-זֶה הוּא

"And he sent and brought him. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes, and good looking.

---

[51] Author's own translation, supported by Robert Alter's translation informed by the Septuagint. See Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 96.

And the Eternal said, 'Arise, anoint him, for this is the one!'[52]"

Samuel anoints David as King of Israel at that very moment, and we are told in the following verse that "the spirit of the Eternal gripped David from that day onward[53]", never to leave him during his lifetime.

It seems evident by their explicit mention in the texts that David's looks do in fact constitute an important character trait its writer found worthy of mention. Hubbard supports this understanding, saying:

> We quickly learn that David "was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome" (1 Sam 16:12). Literarily, this terse description aims to highlight the two traits which the narrator either wishes us to know about, or which he deems to be David's most striking and memorable features (or both). Like Esau (Gen 25:25,30), David is "ruddy" (*admoni*), and ambiguous term which either means "red-haired" or "fresh-complexioned" (Cant 5:10). This feature distinguished David's looks from those of most Israelites who probably were dark-haired and olive-skinned… I must add, however, that "beautiful" (*yapeh*) evaluates the perceived, impressive quality of David's eyes rather than describes their actual physical features. Hence, we can only speculate as to the source of their beauty {color, spacing, sparkle, "bore into one's innermost thoughts"}… Whatever the case, the important point is that Israel found David's unique reddishness and attractive eyes winsome and appealing, and the narrator read them as physical symptoms both of divine favor and David's internal merit (see 1 Sam 16:7). David's very singular look flashed the divine signal which singled out the young man for leadership.[54]

Though such embodied descriptions serve to introduce us to many characters in this story cycle, the placement of description is actually quite peculiar. The presence of such

---

[52] Author's own translation, supported by Alter, *The David Story*, 97.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Hubbard, "The Eyes Have It," 60.

specific details of David's physical appearance immediately following the explicit exhortation from God to Samuel, in essence "not to judge a book by its cover", seems like a direct contradiction. This conflict in messaging has been investigated by many modern scholars. Macwilliam lays out the particulars of the narrative inconsistency:

> The selection of David as king (1 Samuel 16) is allegedly the biblical *locus classics* of the idea that male beauty denotes divine favor. …The immediate juxtaposition of David's beauty and Yhwh's instruction seems to justify Gordon's comment that 'David was handsome — doubtless to be interpreted as a sign of divine favour' (1986:150), and McCarter's verdict that 'divine favor usually has physical symptoms' (1980:276). But there are complications about the narrative. It is not so much the curious wording of v. 12, although no one seems too sure of the exact force of אדמוני ('ruddy'), and Hebraists scratch their heads over the construction of עם–יפה עינים…But more important than this linguistic puzzle, there is a real tension in the text. The problem of seeing a link between David's beauty and his selection as king lies in the reaction to Eliab's brief candidature in vv. 6-7... We seem to have a situation in which Yhwh's rejection of good looks as a basis for assessing human worth conflicts with the notion that David's good looks are a sign of divine favor. Attempts by commentators to square this circle are particularly unconvincing.[55]

As the reader continues in the story, understandings of David's character deepen through multiple introductions, all of which include some sense of the physical, but the inconsistency of messaging remains largely unresolved.

David's Beauty in 1 Samuel 16:18

Just six verses later in the same chapter, we are provided with another introduction of David, though the scenery has shifted. Immediately following David's anointing when God's spirit clings to him so tightly, the next verse (16:14) informs us that God's spirit has departed completely from King Saul. An "evil spirit" now terrifies

---

[55] Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," 276-7.

him, seemingly in its place, and the servants of his palace suggest that a harp-player may be able to soothe him when the spirit takes hold. Verse 18 has one of these unnamed servants suggesting David specifically by name and by reputation:

וַיַּעַן אֶחָד מֵהַנְּעָרִים וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה רָאִיתִי בֵּן לְיִשַׁי בֵּית הַלַּחְמִי יֹדֵעַ נַגֵּן וְגִבּוֹר חַיִל וְאִישׁ מִלְחָמָה וּנְבוֹן דָּבָר וְאִישׁ תֹּאַר וַיהוָה, עִמּוֹ.

“Then one of the young men answered, and said: ‘Look, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlememite, one who is skilled in playing, a valiant fellow, a warrior, prudent in speech, attractive, and the Eternal is with him.’[56]”

Following this highly detailed, highly complimentary reference, Saul brings David to court, where he is loved by Saul (16:21), favored by him (16:22), and finds success in banishing the evil spirit whenever he plays (16:23).

The unstinting praise from an unnamed second-party source does lead the reader to fall in love with David, just as Saul did. Where his first introduction in 16:12 points to his beauty as perhaps the only knowable reason that he is chosen by God, in this introduction to David we are provided with a whole host of reasons (his beauty being one of them) why he should be favored by Saul and by us as readers. As Loader puts it: “he, as a young shepherd (1 Sam 16:18), is described as “a man of good build” combined with other attractive traits, such as well-spokenness, military prowess and musicality. The highly stereotyped presentation of what makes a young man attractive can justifiably be

---

[56] Author’s own translation, supported by Alter, *The David Story*, 98-99.

called a summary of the ideal Israelite *kalokagathia* for young men.[57]" From this description, it appears that David has everything it takes to be a well-beloved and highly successful king of Israel, so much so that even the current king of Israel is completely taken by him. His musical gift is what qualifies him for the job at hand and gets him through the palace door, but he clearly has much more to offer.

There is no question that being a "valiant warrior" is a necessary skill required for kingship in the militaristic age of ancient Israel, and that being "prudent in speech" is a desirable quality in any leader- but what advantage does David's "attractive" physique bring him as a candidate? Is its only service to visually signify that "the Eternal is with him"? Reines suggests that more could be at stake:

> In antiquity… good looks were considered an asset for men in public life. This was especially true of the king, since a comely appearance would enhance his prestige among the people. Thus, it is said in a hymn of praise of a king, "Thou art the most beautiful of men" (Psalms 45:3). It is said of David that he had beautiful eyes and a fair complexion, a fact that apparently attributed to his popularity.[58]

Brenner also explicitly mentions this connection, saying:

> …it would appear that physical beauty is not only sexually relevant, but also politically and socially relevant, since it is often equated with wholesomeness and health. It would seem that whereas female beauty determines private socio-sexual behavior, thus may have political consequences, male beauty may and does at times have political significance in and by itself. It can function as either sexual motivation and/or a symbolic mark of social and political excellence…But in the case of males, their physical beauty- especially tallness and hair, and also of eyes (David, 1 Sam 16:12)- is a signifier of their socio-political destiny in the

---

[57] Loader, "The Pleasing and the Awesome," 656.

[58] Reines, "Beauty in the Bible and the Talmud," 106.

> public domain. Beauty is one of the features that lends their governing credibility. According to this model (whose applicability is not universal), the leader is perfect in every respect, corporeal as well as spiritual.[59]

Male beauty as linked to leadership ability is a well attested connotation on which biblical writers could depend. It is certainly a device which readers of this particular story could identify, having seen it before with the first king of Israel- Saul.

When Saul is introduced by the text in 1 Samuel 9:2, it is immediately after God relents and tells Samuel to heed the collective demand of the Israelites and "make them a king" (8:22), against better Divine judgement that a king will only bring the people sorrow. The following chapter opens with the parentage and personage of this heir-apparent. Saul's introduction in 9:2 is also marked by physical description, but it is much more general. The verse reads:

וְלוֹ-הָיָה בֵּן וּשְׁמוֹ שָׁאוּל בָּחוּר וָטוֹב וְאֵין אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל טוֹב מִמֶּנּוּ מִשִּׁכְמוֹ וָמַעְלָה גָּבֹהַּ מִכָּל-הָעָם

"And he had a son whose name was Saul, a fine and goodly young fellow, and no one of the Israelites was goodlier than he- head and shoulders taller than all the people.[60]"

As the vernacular translation indicates, though the connotation is positive, Saul's representation is specifically non-specific. "Goodly" or "fine" as indicated by the word "טוב", may very well suggest that Saul was "good/fine looking"- but the meaning is uncertain. It could be indicating that Saul was "good tempered", or "well behaved", or "well thought of", or simply "nice". The semantic field is so wide for the word "טוב" that

---

[59] Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, 43-50.

[60] Author's own translation, supported by Alter, *The David Story*, 46.

without any additional syntactic or semantic nuance there is no way to tell if it refers to appearance, temperament, behavior, or intentions. We are meant to get a favorable impression, but it seems to be purposely fuzzy. This text is capable of singing a character's praises in unstinting detail, and it chooses not to do so here.

What the text does indicate, however, is a notable physical characteristic that does appear to be outwardly positive. Saul is certainly tall, there is no one else in Israel who makes it past his shoulders. So too is Eliav, David's oldest brother, who is rejected by God as the future king despite "the height of his stature" (16:7). Impressive height would make for an impressive king, perhaps according to Samuel's calculations when he mistakenly thinks that he is meant to anoint Eliav and swiftly receives a Divine reprimand. But David, apparently, is not very tall- or at least he is not tall enough to note since it goes unmentioned in what is otherwise a very exacting physical description. He is also referred to as "הַקָּטָן" by his father in 16:11, and though this could be fairly translated as "the youngest", it does also carry the connotation of "the little one". David's comparatively diminutive stature is further played upon in his third introduction, where he described in size relative to the giant Goliath and explicitly relative to Saul.

Furthermore, while David's looks have the ability boost his selection as king, it is explicitly not his only redeeming quality. In his second introduction, the fact that David's beauty is mentioned deep in the midst of a long string of positive attributes differentiates him from Saul completely. As Avioz points out, "Contrary to the description of Saul,

where the external appearance is among the only things that the narrator indicates in his favor in I Samuel 9, with the case of David beauty is only one of many traits. The continuation indicates that in the case of David there is a correlation between external "good" and success in the role as leader.[61]" The contrast between Saul and David's physical descriptions belabors the dual meaning of the text's message on beauty: a person's outward appearance may suggest good favor and good fortune, but it is not enough to guarantee it. It is what the heart knows rather than what the eyes see which serves as the true measurement of one's character.

David's Beauty in 1 Samuel 17:42

This point and accompanying comparison is brought to its coda in an almost hyperbolic representation with David's third introduction in 1 Samuel 17:42. Goliath, the champion of the Philistines, is challenging the whole of Saul's army to single man-to-man combat, with the fate of the war at stake. Goliath is a giant, "whose height was six cubits and a span" (17:4), whose coat of mail weighed "five thousand shekels of brass" (17:5), and "the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam; and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron" (17:7). This most graphically embodied character is a monster, more enormous than we could ever imagine - but just in case we would like to try - the text measures him down to the point of his spear, eagerly waiting to bring his full weight and force on any opponent's foolhardy frame.

---

[61] Avioz, "The Motif of Beauty in the Books of Samuel and Kings," 350.

Though chronologically we have already been introduced to David twice before through different characters' eyes, he is once again given a full biography detailing his parentage, his role in his family, and how he sets out from home not as a soldier but as a bearer of food for his brothers in the service of the king (17:17-20). David is the one, who with eloquent speeches professing both his bravery in battle with lions and bears and his humble attitude before God, offers to fight Goliath (17:26-37). Saul is concerned for David, at first refusing to let him fight, saying ,"You are but a youth, and he is a man of war from his youth" (17:33). Eventually though, Saul relents and outfits David in his own battle garb, his brass helmet and his armor (17:38-39). But David is not used to such apparel, and some translations suggest he is even unable to walk in it[62], being made for Saul's size rather than his smaller frame. He hands it back, and chooses instead to approach the battle field dressed in his usual shepherd's garb, with his sling and five smooth stones (17:39-40).

The readers are then given one more physical description of David in verse 42, this time from Goliath's birds-eye view:

וַיַּבֵּט הַפְּלִשְׁתִּי וַיִּרְאֶה אֶת-דָּוִד וַיִּבְזֵהוּ כִּי-הָיָה נַעַר וְאַדְמֹנִי עִם יְפֵה מַרְאֶה

"And the Philistine looked and saw David, and he despised him, for he was a youth, and ruddy with beautiful looks.[63]"

---

[62] From the Septuagint text in Alter, *The David Story*, 107.

[63] Author's own translation, supported by Alter, *The David Story*, 108.

This description, employing the specific semantic category of "יפה מראה" used to describe Joseph and others, still describes the beauty of David's outward appearance, but to his detriment. David is too "pretty", too "boyish" to be taken seriously, and his features are the source of Goliath's disgust. As Macwilliam puts it:

> …most of the description of David's beauty found in 16:12 is repeated as an explanation of Goliath's contempt for David's military potential… Goliath sees in the pretty boy David no serious challenge to his own military power and the description of David is in marked contrast to that of Goliath himself at 17:4-7… This contrast in masculine looks may offer a clue to solving the problem of 1 Samuel 16. The same contrast can be explored in the description of David's predecessor, Saul.[64]

Even though David is good-looking, and even if good looks might get you far as an ancient Israelite political leader, David's looks are unconventional. He is not tall, he is not brawny; he looks immature and his comment-worthy coloring is not the Israelite norm. This is the second time that David has been diminished and devalued by human gaze, but the text continues to demonstrate that his true value is the one assigned by God. Saul may have looked every inch the king, but it was not enough to keep him in God's favor, and therefore in power. "The important point about Saul *vis a vis* David is not only are his conventionally masculine looks in contrast to David's boyish beauty, but that also, like Goliath (a sort of maxi-version of Saul), Saul fails, while David succeeds… It is the hyper-masculinity of Saul (and Eliab) that seems to be subverted in [ch 16] v. 12, a subversion underlined by Goliath's downfall.[65]" David's beauty both supports the traditional narrative, that those favored by God have characteristically beautiful exteriors,

---

[64] Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," 277.

[65] Ibid., 278.

while at the same time undermining it, both in that a person's exterior is not on its own sufficient and is just as likely to be recognized as undervalued.

Parshanut and Commentary on David's Beauty

The coherent theme which emerges from commentators' glosses on David's three physical descriptions is in concert with this theme of beauty acting as a mark of favor, while requiring further evidence of ability for leadership. In David's first introduction, outward appearance leads the prophet Samuel to categorically overvalue Eliav, David's older brother, and undervalue David, God's choice.

Samuel the Prophet Judges Books By Their Covers

Chapter 16, verse 6 relates Samuel's ambiguously spoken or unspoken reaction when presented with the oldest of Jesse's sons, where he thinks, "Surely, before the Eternal is God's anointed." RaDaK provides some additional considerations that may have been part of Samuel's possible inner monologue:

> *that he said, "Surely, before the Lord is His anointed."* — interpretation: if with his heart or with his mouth, that he thought this is the king that God had commanded him to anoint, considering that was the oldest of Jesse's sons. And furthermore, because he saw he was handsome and tall like Saul, and he thought that the Holy One, blessed be He, chose among beautiful and tall and shapely people for kingship, in order to [inspire] fear the people, and therefore it is said of Saul "You will see, for God has chosen him for there is none like him amongst all the people" (1 Sam 10:24); and so he is like him, thought Samuel: for a possessor of height and shapely beauty- he is chosen by God for kingship, in order that the people will fear him, and it will provide that his heart is good and true…[66]

---

[66] Radak on 1 Samuel 16:6, s.v. ויאמר אך נגד יי׳ משיחו.

However, God's emphatic retort shaming Samuel for his superficial suppositions is also worthy of comment. Rashi suggests that the reason Eliav was rejected before God was based on his negative character traits, a facet of his personality which the reader will not encounter until the next chapter: "because he is an irascible person, as it is stated: 'And Eliav's wrath was kindled against David' (see 17:29).[67]" In that verse, Rashi picks up on rapid-fire interchange that occurs between David and Eliav in 1 Samuel Chapter 17, before David confronts Goliath. When David first comes to the Saul's army camp and hears about the challenge issued by the giant Philistine, he reacts aggressively, challenging the people's fear by asking, "For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should have taunted the armies of the living God?" (17:26). Eliav hears what David is saying to the gathered populace, and grows angry at his brash younger brother. He questions why David is present in the camp in the first place when there are sheep to be herded, and belittles David for his behavior, saying "I know your presumptuousness, and the naughtiness of your heart- You have come down so that you might see the battle![68]" (17:28). In typical youngest brother fashion, David chafes against Eliav's put-down by complaining "What have I now done? Was it not but a word?" (17:29), and continues to question and agitate until he is brought before King Saul. Rashi picks up on this subtle mention of sibling rivalry and brings it forward to Eliav's detriment. If he was so unkind and callous to his younger brother, who ended up being in the right, what kind of king would he make and how could Samuel have known? On the clause in 16:7 where

---

[67] Rashi on 1 Samuel 16:7, s.v. כי מאסתיהו.

[68] Author's translation with support from Alter, *The David Story*, 106.

it reads “for it is not as mortals see”, Rashi writes into God’s retort: “Even though you called yourself ‘seer,’ for you said to Saul, “I am the seer,” (see 9:19), here I inform you that you do not see.[69]”

Downplaying David’s Appearance

When David himself is brought before Samuel and is described according to his outward appearance, the commentators do not have much to say about his looks. RaDaK largely focuses on the grammar of the description rather than its contents, saying, “*with beautiful eyes*: like “beautiful eyes”; like “fig-trees with the first-ripe figs” (Nahum 3:12) — like “first ripened”. And *good looking* — there in קל, like “צורי” (Ezekiel 27:17); “חולי” (Deuteronomy 7:15), and thus “לֹא-תְשׁוּרֵנִי, עֵין רֹאִי/ The eye that sees me shall behold me no more” (Job 7:8). And this story is to inform you that he was suitable for kingship because he is good looking.[70]” Rabbi Joseph Kara, a French commentator who was a student and colleague of Rashi’s, focuses more on the effect David’s beauty might have had on Samuel specifically, given the prophet’s expectations:

> …*good looking* as it has been interpreted for us, because he was a young man ruddy, with beautiful eyes. And when Samuel saw that he was a youth, he thought to himself: Is this fitting for the kingdom? The Holy One, Blessed Be, said to him: It is not as you have deduced, rather *Arise*, *anoint him*, *for this is he* that I saw in his sons a king for Me. Here the Holy One, Blessed Be, realized that the sight of flesh and blood has nothing compared to the sight of the Holy One, Blessed Be: there in what Samuel thought would be fitting for the kingdom, the Holy One, Blessed Be, was fed up with him; and what chastened Samuel when

---

[69] Rashi on 1 Samuel 16:7, s.v. כי לא אשר יראה האדם.

[70] Radak on 1 Samuel 16:12, s.v. עם יפה עינים.

> he saw a young man ruddy, with beautiful eyes- him the Holy One, Blessed Be, chose.[71]

In David's second introduction from 1 Samuel 16:18, where positive attributes of his character have been vouched for before it is reported to King Saul that he is also beautiful, Kara considers the positive political ramifications of good looks. He writes, "And if you say: "The masses will not accept him to go out before them to war, considering he is not good looking"; therefore it is said: *and attractive*.[72]" In conjunction with his going out for battle, Kara sees good looks as an advantage to unite loyal followers. But his opinion appears to be the minority in that many interpreters consider good looks to be antithetical for a soldier.

David's Looks Are Not What They Seem

Once again, this notion that the reach of David's experience and abilities are belied by his attractive physical demeanor comes up in commentaries on David's third introduction, when he is viewed by Goliath. In direct contrast to Kara's understanding, Rabbi Joseph Kaspi, a French Provencal scholar active in the late 13th century, cannot imagine a soldier who would fit such a description. On David's description in 1 Samuel 17:42, where he is again called "ruddy" with "beautiful looks", Kaspi comments, "This is not a matter of a man of war who withstands heat in the day and ice in the night,[73]" as

---

[71] Kara on 1 Samuel 16:12, s.v. טוב רואי.

[72] Kara on 1 Samuel 16:18, s.v. גיבור חיל ואיש מלכמה ונכון דבר.

[73] Kaspi on 1 Samuel 17:42, s.v. ואדמני עם יפה מראה.

one would expect a soldier to do. RaDaK ties in David's tender age as well as his fresh features as factors that raised Goliath's ire, causing him to hate the young man as soon as he laid eyes on him:

> *and ruddy with beautiful looks*— as we already interpreted (1 Sam 16:12) that he was beautiful; and behold not in this the same for the sake of it, for see also that he was a youth, but in this it is for the sake of ruddy with an attractive appearance, according to what he thought in his heart, that he could not possibly be a man of war; for the one who regularly goes to war, his beauty does not stand with him, because the travails arrive more outside in the seasons of war as ice, and as rain, and as dryness and as heat wave.

The opinions of those who view David, whether it is prophet or king, family or foe, are consistently overturned when he is seen in action. Counter to their expectations, immediately after David is described as beautiful, he is also chosen to be God's anointed, the only one in the kingdom who is able to soothe its tortured ruler, and the military champion of all Israel. Whether it is in stature, status, or simply superficial- David does not look like what any character expects. David is a case in point for looks not being all that they seem, but it is because of his beauty that he faces lower expectations rather than higher expectations in terms of his contributions. David's appearance is identified as a device for commentators to further the message of 1 Samuel 16:7, that "For not as a mortal sees [does God see]. For a mortal sees with the eyes, and the Eternal sees with the heart."

Midrashic Interpretations on David's Beauty

Despite a substantial *midrashic* corpus that fills out the life of King David as a man, a musician, a poet, and a warrior, very few sources refer to his physical appearance. As we have seen from the traditional *parshanut* on the verses which mention his beauty, none of them reference any *midrashim*, preferring instead to focus on interpreting the *p'shat*, surface level of the text. Despite how explicit and detailed David's features feature in his introductions, the sages seem significantly less interested and invested in exploring his physicality, even than they were with Joseph. Perhaps the notion of placing King David, a celebrated military hero and Israel's once and future king, as the object of gaze might have feminized his character in a way that was culturally unacceptable[74].

David the Redhead/אדמוני

The majority of *midrashim* focus on David's unusual reddish coloring, deemed worthy of comment in two of his three introductions. One common theme first sourced to *Bereshit Rabbah* points out a parallel between David and the only other "reddish" character described in the whole of the Hebrew Bible- Jacob's hirsute twin brother Esau, who is described as such at his birth in Genesis 25:25. Such a parallel would not bode well for David, as Esau is regularly vilified in *midrashic* and rabbinic texts. On Esau's coloring the text elaborates:

> Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said "It is as if he were destined to shed blood," and therefore when Samuel saw David was a redhead, as it is written (1 Samuel

---

[74] Remember that the overwhelming majority of the iconic representations we have passed down of King David originate in Christian art. For a fascinating, brief consideration of David's masculinity in iconic sculpture, see Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," 278.

> 16:12) “And he sent and brought him. Now he was ruddy…”, he was afraid and said “This one too will shed blood like Esau!” The Holy One, Blessed Be, said to him, “‘with beautiful eyes’ (1 Samuel 16:12) - Esau killed his own will and consent, but this one [only] kills on the orders of the Sanhedrin.”[75]

Other later *midrashim* suggest that David’s coloring was an enviable trait, despite its unfortunate allusions. *Midrash Tehillim,* from the 11th century, asks after another minor character from the Davidic saga known as Doeg the Edomite. Doeg does not figure largely in these early stories, though Rashi attributes David’s second introduction to Saul as Doeg’s words, but his name raises a question. Why does he call himself “Edomite”, spelled in Hebrew as אדומי, which without vowels might be translated as “The Red”. The *midrash* ties this back to David’s unique coloring:

> Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani maintained, “It was because of his jealousy of David, who was called “The Red”- as it is written, “Now he was ruddy with beautiful eyes (1 Samuel 16:12).” And not only was he jealous of him, but also the descendants of his tribe were jealous of him…[76]

Creative and varied as these *midrashim* are, none of them are picked up by the commentators, who prefer to focus on the implications of David’s looks as a whole, rather than any specific feature. But in later interpretations, David’s individual physical attributes, especially his coloring, open doorways into deeper understandings of his character and his relationship to God.

Kabbalistic Understandings of David’s Beauty

---

[75] *Bereshit Rabbah, Parashah* 63, Genesis 25:19-34, 63:8:6, Jacob Neusner, trans. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis,* Vol. 2 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1985), 357.

[76] *Midrash Tehillim,* Psalm 52:4, William G. Braude, trans. *The Midrash on Psalms,* Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 478.

In later kabbalistic interpretations of David, his reddish coloring is seen to be a distinct advantage and an opportunity for mystical interpretations regarding his role as God's anointed. Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, a 13th century Castilian kabbalist, writes about King David extensively in his influential treatise on the Holy Names of God and their s*efirotic* counterparts called *Sha'arei Orah*, or "The Gates of Light". In it, Gikatilla considers David's description in 1 Samuel 16:12 as a beautiful distillation of his regal persona and personal character:

And he was *ADMoNiY* (red-cheeked), bright-eyed, and *TOV ROi* (a good-sight). (1 Sam 16:12) *ADMoNiY* is the essence of the drawing forth of judgement which is called *ASH ADuMah* (red fire); "with bright eyes" is the essence of the loving-kindness of Abraham which is the essence of the eye of loving-kindness, which is the eye of the world; *TOV ROi* is *TiFERet Ya'AKOV* (Jacob's glory) upon which *TOV* [God's goodness] depends.[77]

He also expressly delineates David's description of being "אדמוני/reddish" from Esau's, in concert with his understanding of these aspects of judgment and compassion which made up David's character:

> You may ask, in regard to Esau, isn't it written, "The first one came out *ADMoNiY* (Gen 25:25)?" The redness of Esau has no good mixed in and no beauty, rather he is totally red like "a hairy mantle all over", while of David it is written that "he was red with bright eyes". One learns from this that Esau, the wicked, inherited the sword and the spilling of blood, while David inherited the kingdom in full measure, which is to render acts of loving-kindness, mercy, justice and righteousness as well as stern acts of judgement, and even to kill in accordance with the law. This is the essence of what is said of Esau:
> "And the first came forth ruddy, all over like a hairy mantle; and they called his name Esau. (Gen 25:25)."
> Of David it is written: "David was red-cheeked, bright-eyed, and a good sight. (1 Sam 16:12)" Thus David embodies judgement and mercy, thus you will find it written regarding David, "And David dispensed judgements and righteousness to all his people. (2 Sam 8:15)" The judgement came from being *ADMoNiY*; the

---

[77] Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, *Gates of Light: Sha'are Orah*, trans. Avi Weinstein (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), 117.

> righteousness came from his being bright-eyed and a good sight. Therefore when David clothed himself with the attributes of an *ADMoNiY* he would wage the war of the Lord against the Lord's enemies and his sword would not return empty. When he would dress with the attributes of one who is "bright-eyed", he would provide for Israel and do compassionate deeds with a generous eye. Thus it is written: "A good eye is to be blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor. (Proverbs 22:9)" When he would dress in the garments of "a good eye", he would fathom the depths of Torah, seeing its mystery, yearning to taste its flavors, and he would say: "The Torah of Your lips is better for me than thousands of silver and gold pieces. (Ps 119:72)" He would hunger, yearn and say: "Open my eyes that I may see the wonder of your teaching. (Ps 119:18)"
> He would maintain the Torah with the trait *TOV ROi*.[78]

For Gikatilla, each aspect of the embodied description of David's exterior in 1 Samuel 16:12 connects with a deeper aspect of his inner character, and to a metaphysical aspect of God personified in him as God's anointed, an ideal representative of the Divine on earth. David is a warrior, as symbolized by his reddish complexion, directly connecting him to the color which illustrates God's inclination towards *Din*/Justice; a provider, as symbolized by his beautiful "bright" eyes; and a devoted scholar, as befits the author of the Psalms, symbolized by his "good looks" both outwardly and inwardly to the depths of the word of God. The outer presentation is in perfect harmony with the inner orientation, in which a first look can speak volumes about this ideal king of Israel. For Gikatilla, a kabbalist who seeks out the interplay between the surface, simple meaning of words of Torah text, and a deeper understanding of the profundity of God's creation in a metaphysical sense, every aspect described in David is a key to understanding an aspect of the Divine, and coming in closer communication with his Creator.

---

[78] Ibid., 117-118.

Joseph and David in the Sefirotic Realm

Joseph and David are ideal characters to contrast, not only because of their exceptional physical descriptions and the nature of the role they play as protagonists in their biblical stories, but because of their shared kabbalistic characterizations. Both Joseph and David are identified as the personification of two adjacent *sefirot* in the kabbalistic Tree of Life, the ten emanations of the infinite Divine arranged in a closely intwined hierarchical order through which God's presence and creative power can be felt in the world. This is the theosophic manifestation of the unending Godly expression of *Ein Sof,* a central understanding of Kabbalah since the dawn of its proliferation as a method of access to the ineffable plan that unifies the cosmos. In the *sefirotic* system, Joseph is the biblical character representing *Yesod*, also known as *Tsaddik,* the righteous Eternal foundation, and David is representative of *Malchut,* also referred to as *Shekhinah*, God's dominion and felt presence in the world. *Tsaddik* and *Shekhinah* are the 9th and 10th *sefirot* respectively, making them the "lowest" of the ten emanations, not in importance - but in proximity to the earthly realm rather than the heavenly domain. In being adjacent, as well as their closeness to the mortal world, *Tsaddik* and *Shekhinah* have a deeply intertwined relationship to one another, adding another meaningful interpretive layer to the interplay between these two characters over time. To better understand the interconnected nature of these two *sefirot*, it is important to observe them each first in the singular, especially the nature of their identification with their attributed biblical character.

Joseph as Yesod/Tsaddik

The Hebrew word צדיק literally means “a righteous person”. This notion of a righteous individual is essential to the stability of the world, acting as the “foundation” on which the entire system balances. As it is described in *Sefer haBahir*, one of the earliest works of Kabbalah dated to mid 12th century Provence, the *Tsaddik* and its associated *sefirah* is of singular importance to both the upper and lower realms:

> The Holy One, blessed be He, has one righteous man in His world, and he is very precious to Him, because he maintains the whole world and he is its foundation… He is loved and treasured above, loved and treasured below; feared and sublime above, feared and sublime below; comely and accepted above, comely and accepted below; and he is the foundation of all souls.[79]

Over time, Joseph began to be described as a *Tsaddik* for his upright action and personal discipline when struggling with a manifestation of the Evil Urge. The idea is not that the *Tsaddik* is totally immune to temptation, a super-man who is completely divorced from his desires, but quite to the contrary. As Gershom Scholem puts it: “He is the one who strives to fulfill the Law and who succeeds, at the very least, in making his merits outnumber his transgressions,” with the notion that “a man is judged by the majority of his deeds.[80]” In this sense, Joseph is very much a *Tsaddik*, for though he was not devoid of personal failings as filled in by the *midrashim* and later commentators, at the time of his greatest test he did not succumb to temptation, and instead went to prison without complaint, and his star later ascended to shine over all Egypt. Scholem does insert the

---

[79] S*efer ha-Bahir S 105; M 157,* from Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah,* (New York: Schoken, 1997), 94.

[80] Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead,* 89-90.

point, however, that while Joseph's is the archetypical story describing a *Tsaddik*, a fuller definition might encompass more than his narrative would suggest:

> Even though the struggle with the Evil Urge generally includes the righteous man's resistance to sexual temptation, such resistance does not play a crucial part in the rabbinic definition of a *Tsaddik*. Joseph, the prototype of such steadfastness, is often referred to by the title "Joseph the Righteous" (Yosef ha-Tsaddik), but this epithet is likewise applied to many other biblical characters, in whose lives such sexual trials were not a factor.[81]

It is also worthy of note that in this description of the *Tsaddik* given by the *Bahir*, he is presented specifically as "comely and accepted above, comely and accepted below". This aspect of physical description certainly is in line with Joseph's outward appearance, but while presented as a positive attribute in this sense, it might also be understood as a potential source of his transgressions, namely his vanity.

From their inception, the hierarchy of the *sefirot* are also described as being reminiscent of the structure of the human body. Though the ordering and placement varies a bit over time (in *Sefer haBahir* the *sefirah* of *Tsaddik* was the 7th *sefirah* instead of the 9th, which had it in correspondence to human legs), starting with the Zohar in the late 13th century, this *sefirah* has been associated with the seat of male potency, the phallus and the testicles.[82] In a more metaphoric sense, the placement of this *sefirah* is marked as occupying the position between upper and lower realms, both mediating and harmonizing the flow of "the Divine fullness'" into the world, as well as being the "the

---

[81] Ibid., 91.

[82] Ibid., 93.

'channel' by which all the brooks and rivers of the upper *Sefirot* pour into the sea[83]", the sea being the final *sefirah, Shekhinah,* which acts as "the pool into which life flows, from which it then disperses to all the lower beings according to their nature and needs.[84]" This placement also correlates undeniably well with the story of Joseph's temptation, in that his battle with the Evil Urge (and/or his own desires) was sexual in nature. This sexual symbolism present in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is purposely poured into the textual basis for the understanding of this *sefirah*:

> In terms of the mirroring of the structure of the *'Adam Kadmon* {the original androgynous human being} in the human body, the ninth *Sefirah* not only corresponds to the phallus; it is also, by reason of this allocation, the site of circumcision, the sign of the covenant… The *Tsaddik* is the one who guards and keeps it within these boundaries; he chains this drive, which flows from the river of life, within the limits of the Law, thus maintaining its sacred nature. Hence this *Sefirah* in particular was linked to "Joseph the Righteous," who in Gikatilla, and especially in the Zohar represents the ninth *Sefirah* of *Yesod*.[85]

Given the close relationship between this *sefirah* and the one following, the final *sefirah* of *Shekhinah,* the sexual metaphor extends as well. While *Tsaddik*/*Yesod* is understood to be the masculine element, *Shekhinah/Malchut* carries a feminine connotation. As the two *sefirot* come into relationship, their connection is meant to be understood as a supernal representation of sexual union on a cosmic scale. This allusion to this sacred union between masculine and feminine *sefirotic* elements may be traced back as early as the *Bahir*, and continues to be developed throughout the intellectual history of Kabbalah[86].

---

[83] Ibid., 96.

[84] Ibid., 103.

[85] Ibid., 106.

[86] Ibid., 98.

Understanding that each of these *sefirot* individually, as well as the entire system in its totality, are meant to represent emanations of the limitless Divine, Scholem elucidates the implications that arise with such an interpretation:

> The ancient problem of tension between the Creator God and the Procreator God, reemerges here quite naturally at the center of Kabbalistic theosophy, namely, in the symbolism of the *Tsaddik*. In contrast with the gods of myth, the biblical God is often described as being creative, yet not engaging in any sexual activity—precisely what the *Tsaddik* of the Kabbalah exhibits in his union with *Shekhinah*.[87]

When this new interpretive overlay is combined with what we already know of Joseph's embodied character from the biblical text as well as *midrashim* and traditional commentary, a new image of his character begins to emerge. Joseph's beauty is essential to his destiny, for if he had never been approached by Potiphar's wife, he never would have had the explicit opportunity to act a a *Tsaddik* in the mortal world. Having lived out this Divine emanation in the biblical text, Joseph's "flaws" are seen as essential to his development. His beauty is magnified both inside and out by the lens of his purity and discipline in withstanding the advances of a "foreign woman" and keeping his "covenant" with God undamaged. The salience of this symbol cannot be undervalued, according to Elliot Wolfson in his article "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol". Wolfson writes:

> The secret of the Lord given to those who fear sin is the holy covenant of God, the *berit qodesh*, that is, the *sefirah* that corresponds to the phallus, *Yesod*. The secrecy and concealment of this particular emanation is emphasized by Moses de Leon in his Hebrew theosophic writing as well. Thus, for example, in *Sefer ha-*

---

[87] Ibid., 108.

> *Rimmon* he wrote that *Yesod* is "called secret (*sod*) for its matter is secrecy, a hidden mystery of the Creator". The process of circumcision, the removal of the foreskin and the uncovering of the corona, is a disclosure. In the disclosure of the phallus, through the double act of circumcision, the union of the masculine and the feminine aspects of God is assured. "When the holy sign [*Yesod*] is uncovered it overflows and the bride [*Shekhinah*] … then stands in completeness and her portion is illuminated."[88]

As a result of this encounter, Joseph transcends beyond his own body, according to Rabbi Chayyim Vital, a disciple of Isaac Luria's from the 16th century. In Vital's presentation of Kabbalah, a *Tsaddik* is one who has tamed their passions, and achieved the purification of the physical body and its transformation into "pure form". "This is the level of the righteous," he writes, "to refine their bodies and make it into form.[89]" The rabbis now grow comfortable with the notion of Joseph as an embodied character when they see it as a trial to be overcome. Joseph cannot be without flaws, or the power of his transformation would not be as potent. This understanding of what it is to be a *Tsaddik* continues to be developed through generations of Kabbalists. A Hasidic interpretation from the 18th century elaborates on the "descent of the *Tsaddik"*: "A righteous man falleth seven times and riseth up again." (Prov. 24:16), as the biblical verse says; but when he rises, he raises the community along with himself. The descent of the *Tsaddik* is the great adventure, without which he cannot perform his mission.[90]"

---

[88] Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 45.

[89] Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead,* 118.

[90] Ibid., 138.

David as Malchut/Shekhinah

The association of the kingship indicated by the 10th *sefirah*'s title of *Malchut* in concert with David's station is an easy leap to make. This is the *sefirotic* emanation most intimately associated with King David, the one that the kabbalist Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla identified as the presence of God which cleaved to David from the time of his anointing throughout his life. The power of this *sefirah,* according to his treatise on Divine Names, the *Sha'arei Orah*, emanates through the Divine appellation "Adonai" or "יהוה". This is the name that David uses most often to refer to God if he is considered (as Gikatilla understands him to be) the author of the Psalms. Gikatilla elaborates on the relationship between David and this named emanation:

> This is also the attribute which avenges the covenant that Saul never fulfilled completely [i.e. the annihilation of AMaLek]. Wearying of Saul, [the attribute] gave this power to David and it was named MaLCHUT BeiT DaViD [the Kingdom of the House of David]. It was the attribute that was David's constant companion, waging his wars and rising victorious against his enemies… She cleaved to David, and it was from her that David inherited the kingdom that David supplicated and appealed to, saying,
> I called to you, O *YHVH*,
> To *ADoNaY* I made my appeal. (Ps 30:9)…
> This was also the attribute for whom he longed:
> *ADoNaY,* all my desire is before Thee; and my sighing is not hid from Thee. (Ps 38:10)
> …Throughout all his trials he cleaved to this attribute, as he himself attested:
> In the day of my trouble I seek *ADoNaY*; with my hand uplifted, [my eye] streams in the night without ceasing; my soul refuses to be comforted. (Ps 77:3)[91]

But David's character is also deeply entwined with the emanation of *Shekhinah*, a feminization of the Eternal's felt presence on earth and another name for this same

---

[91] Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, 26.

sefirah. Arthur Green meaningfully synthesizes both the tension and connection that come from this pairing:

> The association of David with *shekhinah* may seem strange to the modern reader. How is it that this most masculine of Biblical heroes is the human embodiment of the female? But we should recall that *shekhinah* is also frequently designated as *malkhut*, the "kingdom" of God, and that God's kingdom is represented on earth by the House of David. The medieval David is also more frequently the Psalmist than the warrior, and as Psalmist he is depicted as longing for God, calling out for divine closeness, very much as *shekhinah* does in her exile.[92]

The name for this feminine aspect of God's presence comes from the Hebrew root ש.כ.ן, which carries the connotation of dwelling or settling. Another form of the same root משכן is the Hebrew word for "tabernacle", the first "dwelling place" created expressly for the Divine Presence to settle while the Children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness. Though *Shekhinah* is not given as a name for God in the biblical text, it comes into common usage during the rabbinic period in reference to God's presence.[93] This dual notion of both the Divine itself and a dwelling place for the Divine are encompassed in the kabbalistic concept, and it is this compound sense that recalls King David.

David's connection with the building of the first Temple in Jerusalem is inherent, even if he was not its eventual architect. In *Sha'arei Orah,* Gikatilla elaborates on this relationship between David and this specific "indwelling" of the Divine:

> So, the *SHeCHINaH* roamed like an itinerant from place to place, as it is specified by the verse "I will dwell *among* you". Not "I will dwell below", but

---

[92] Arthur Green, "Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context," *AJS Review* 26.1 (2002), 31.

[93] Found in *Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 3:3 & 3:7; *Talmud Bavli Brachot* 6a, *Megillah* 29a, *Sanhedrin* 39a, *Shabbat* 12b.

> among you — just as an itinerate would. In other words, wherever Israel wanders, I will go with them and I will dwell among them, but not in a permanent place… Similarly, David was distressed because of this and so yearned to secure a fixed place for the *SHeCHINaH* in the lower world. This is the essence of the verse
> O, *YHVH*, remember in David's favor his extreme self-denial, how he spoke to *YHVH*, vowed to the mighty One of Jacob, I will not enter my house, nor will I mount my bed, I will not give sleep to my eyes, or slumber to my eyelids until I find a *place* for the *YHVH*, an abode for the mighty One of Jacob (Ps. 131:1-5).[94]

Second Chronicles 6:9 lays out God's edict that David would not be the one to build the eventual dwelling place for the Eternal. That honor would go to Solomon: "For you shall not build the house; your son, the issue of your loins, he shall build the house for My name." But the kabbalistic connection remains unbroken with the understanding the though David was not the builder, the design of the Temple sprung entirely from his inspired vision. Gikatilla continues:

> What did David do? … He arranged the whole plan, the Sanctuary, its houses, its stores, its stairways, the rooms, the Temple court, the hall, the shrines, the rest of the Temple's plan, its courtyard and its chambers— all information he received through the holy spirit; the size of every place, the measure of all the silver, gold, the precious gems and any other measurement he required whether it be weight, size or shape. Everything was arranged in concord with the system and in accord with SHeCHINaH's needs. As it is written,
> "David gave his son Solomon the plan of the porch and its houses, its storerooms and its upper chambers and inner chambers…" (1 Chron 28:11-19).
> So, there you see that David, peace be with him, designed the form of the Temple and the weight of each and every object; everything by word of the Blessed God, and everything was a plan from the chariot of the upper world [where the SHeCHINaH dwelled] in order to prepare a throne and a dwelling for the SHeCHINaH. Solomon then came afterward and built the Temple, arranging all the plans and the forms just as David, peace be with him, arranged. The the SHeCHINaH descended and resided in the House of eternity.[95]

---

[94] Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, 25.

[95] Ibid.

David's close relationship with the *Shekhinah* in designing the most befitting setting in which it could reside cements this textual association, even beyond the already established connection to its counter-title of *Malchut*. David is served by this emanation and also acts as its servant. It provides power and inspiration for all his endeavors, from the military to the poetic, and in return he creates for it a home.

But the explicitly feminine element that is associated with this *sefirah* cannot be ignored, nor is it wholesale by kabbalist sages. The name itself, *Shekhinah*, is in the feminine, and in contrast to all the other *sefirotic* emanations of God in the Tree of Life, this one specifically carries a connotation of nurturer, mother, bride, and daughter.[96] In the bodily schema of *'Adam Kadmon*, this lowest *sefirah* functions as a "canal", the only *sefirah* connecting the *sefirotic* realm from which God's blessing and creative energy overflows to the mortal world. But this "canal" is not explicitly a vaginal canal, and the texts draw short of defining *Shekhinah* as a holistically female personification of the Divine[97].

The overt masculinity of David's persona (as well as the overarching masculine significance of the other *sefirot*) contribute to this feeling of contrast and tension in the totality of the *sefirah*'s presentation. However, as we have learned from the textual presentation of David's appearance, though he embodies many masculine qualities in

---

[96] Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead,* 160.

[97] Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 80-81.

character, his physique does not fit the traditional expectations of statuesque, masculine beauty. Perhaps, therefore, he is an ideal candidate to embody an emanation of God which is unexpectedly un-masculine. Scholem likens this "problem" of "male aspects within a female character" as being similar in context to the character of Wisdom in kabbalistic literature, suggesting that the theme of gender-blending was not singular in this sense[98]. Elliot Wolfson describes *Shekhinah*'s relationship between Upper and Lower realms, that "In the aspect of overflowing, the queen becomes king and the open womb symbolically assumes the role of a phallus; thus one of the most common and influential symbols of the feminine Presence is King David. The appropriateness of this symbol is not due to a feminization of David, but a rather the masculinization of the Shekhina.[99]" Wolfson's extensive study of gender in kabbalistic symbolism provide us with a new understanding of *Shekhinah*'s role and relationship to *Tsaddik*, and therefore the connection between David and Joseph, our two chosen characters.

The Relationship Between Tsaddik and Shekhinah, Between David and Joseph

In his groundbreaking 1995 work *Circle in the Square*, Wolfson lays out a well supported argument for "Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth". In this article, he suggests that the symbolism of the *sefirot Tsaddik* and *Shekhinah* are more deeply connected than has previously been understood- not only to the point of sacred union between masculine and feminine elements of the Divine, but that they

---

[98] Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead,* 144.

[99] Wolfson, *Circle in the Square,* 103.

complete a single image of Divine masculinity in toto. In his articles, Wolfson provides a number kabbalistic manuscripts dating from as early as the 13th century which explicitly designate these *sefirot* as collectively constituting one phallic entity. One such description of the *sefirotic* pleroma reads: "The Foundation is called the Righteous (Saddiq)… and it corresponds to the phallus (berit) and it is the one that unites the secret of circumcision for it is joined to the Kingdom (Malkhut), which is the tenth that is the crown ('Atarah).[100]" The Hebrew word "*atarah/*עתרה" which designates the *Shekhinah* in this description most commonly means "crown", but is also the technical name for the corona of the male phallus. Wolfson comments further:

> The divine potencies *(sefirot*) are circumscribed within the shape of an anthropos. That the sex of the anthropos is male is obvious from the explicit reference to the penis. By contrast, no mention is made of a corresponding feminine form or even of the female genitals. The aspect of the divine that corresponds to the feminine, the tenth gradation, is linked anatomically… to the corona of the penis…of the single masculine form.[101]

When considering Wolfson's conclusion in concert with the embodied symbolism of Joseph and David, a greater understanding begins to emerge. Taking into account the kabbalistic context, a fair reading would indicate that the personifications of Joseph and David combine to definitively make the anthropos of the Divine emanation fully male. With the forcible inclusion that Joseph's most explicit value lay in the self-possession of his manhood, and the emphatic insistence that David be associated not only with the masculine attributes of the lowest *sefirah*, but also be fully representative of its female

---

[100] Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 80-81.

[101] Ibid.

one as well, these two characters unite to symbolize the the most overt male symbol- a phallus, and a substantial one at that.

But both Joseph and David's beauty makes their biblical characterizations slightly subversive, especially in the contexts of how their stories were traditionally read. As Macwilliam summarizes:

> It does seem that men reading the Bible have jumped to one or other of two unjustified conclusions when encountering these rare descriptions. One strategy is to detach beauty from earthy physicality by describing it as a sign of divine favor — transforming sex into a halo. The other strategy might be called the gigolo maneuver: when you see an attractive man, beware, he's up to no good. When we turn to the texts themselves, however, the function of male beauty is more subtle than one might expect… Joseph's beauty signifies vulnerability as much as divine favor; David's undercuts the conventional picture of male beauty = muscle…[102]

The biblical text seems to make no such judgments when it comes to these descriptions of male beauty, specifically. The only conclusions that can be drawn are that (1) beauty is genetic (where there is one beautiful family member, others follow, like Joseph and his mother or David and his children); (2) beauty engenders an opportunity to turn one who should be treated as a subject into an object, be they male or female (as Joseph is objectified by Potiphar's wife in parallel to the manner in which Tamar is objectified by Amnon, and David is objectified by Goliath); and (3) such objectification is not a true judge of character, as only God can determine (as God's presence shifts Joseph's worth from his looks to his words, and David's looks to his deeds).

---

[102] Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible," 285.

Those *midrashim* that do build out a sense of David and especially Joseph's beauty make a calculated effort to keep from glorifying their appearance. In the case of Joseph, such *midrashim* are explicitly to his detriment, suggesting a history of vanity which leads them to "blame the victim" in his assault. When the commentators employ such *midrashim* in pursuit of their exegesis, they do so in a way that is markedly different than the presentation they give to the beauty of women, and only in the service of a furthered narrative point, rather than an opening for multiple understandings of beauty's role in a character's development or in God's plan for the human project. Beauty is a misleading indicator, especially in the case of David, for other characters and for the reader about the true value of an individual.

But with the entrance of Kabbalah as a method of symbolic study, and specifically the notion that God can be known and accessed through multiple emanations personified by multiple biblical characters, understandings of Joseph and David's beauty begin to change. Beauty becomes an invaluable aspect of Joseph's persona, because while it is still a net negative, it is absolutely essential for this character to have been imperfect and very much embodied. Joseph rises above his bodily demands to answer instead to the demands of his soul. His beauty is then necessary to firmly place him in that body, and to make his struggle personal and identifiable. David's beauty is a rich repository of symbolic attributes, similarly drawing him closer to the Divine. David's beautiful eyes, fair complexion, and good looks should be read instead as a list of merits for the perfect king-

heavenly and earthly. He is just, but kind; a warrior and a provider; steeped in Torah but compassionate for the daily life of humanity.

But a kabbalist reading of these beautiful attributes also leads to the eventual overwhelming reiteration of perfect masculinity, a presentation which is not truly true to the context of the biblical portrayals of both characters. Though neither story's narrative explicitly questions Joseph or David's masculinity, the inclusion of these physical embodied descriptions make them different markedly from all other male protagonists in the entire corpus of the Hebrew Bible. When the reader is presented with such physical attributes, especially with the language of יפה תואר/יפה מראה, it makes Joseph and David the only exceptions to what would otherwise be exclusively the realm of women. This complicates the notion of beauty more generally in the Hebrew Bible by their inclusion, as it complicates the notion of masculinity. For what we learn from these descriptions of David and Joseph is that men, too, can be beautiful and desirable; they can also be vulnerable, diminutive, objectified, and undervalued. And in no way does this exclude them from acting as leaders, warriors, rulers, heroes, and embodiments of the Divine.

If we read these men as beautiful, it deepens our understanding of them as characters as well as symbols for both the place they come from and the place we inhabit today. Where we engage with the ongoing dialectic that surrounds their beauty from its first mention through the ages, we shatter our preconceived notions of aesthetics, gaze, power, divinity, masculine, and feminine. Should we notice where this theme is

celebrated and when it is avoided or ignored, we have the opportunity to observe and learn from how these values were presented in other times and other places. When we open up this conversation with our contemporaries in our own time, we offer up an opportunity to question, reshape, and reintroduce these concepts- which continue to hold cultural interest and resonance. Who knows whose voices we might hear, what contributions we may discover, and what these characters might embody today.

Bibliography

Primary Hebrew Sources

1. *Midrash HaGadol.* Margolit, Mordecai, ed. Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997.
2. *Mikra'ot Gedolot Ha-Keter* : *Sefer Bereshit*. Vol. 2. Cohen, Menachem, ed. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1999.
3. *Mikra'ot Gedolot Ha-Keter* : *Shmuel 1 & 2*. Cohen, Menachem, ed. Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1999.
4. *Sefer HaYashar.* Benjamin Harz, ed. Berlin, 1923.
5. *Talmud Bavli*. Steinsaltz, Adin, ed. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2010.

Primary Sources in Translation

1. *Bereshit Rabbah*. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis*. Vols. 2 & 3. Neusner, Jacob, trans. Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1985.
2. *Midrash Tehillim. The Midrash on Psalms.* Vol. 1. Braude, William G. trans. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
3. *Sha'are Orah*. Gikatilla, Joseph ben Abraham. *Gates of Light : Sha'are Orah*. Translated by Avi Weinstein. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994.
4. *Zohar. The Zohar*. Vol. 1. Matt, Daniel C., ed. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.

Secondary Sources

1. Alter, Robert. *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.
2. Alter, Robert. *The World of Biblical Literature*. London: SPCK, 1992.
3. Avioz, Michael. “The Motif of Beauty in the Books of Samuel and Kings.” *Vetus Testamentum* 59.3 (2009): 341-59.
4. Brenner, Athalya. *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 1997.
5. Clines, David J. A. *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1995.
6. Green, Arthur. “Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context,” *AJS Review* 26.1 (2002): 1-52.
7. Hubbard, Robert L. “The Eyes Have It: Theological Reflections on Human Beauty,” *Ex Auditu* 13 (1997): 57-72.
8. Katz, David A. “Rabbinic Conception of Beauty.” Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 1981.
9. Loader, James Alfred “The Pleasing and the Awesome,” *Old Testament Essays* 24.3 (2011): 652-67.
10. Macwilliam, Stuart. “Ideologies of Male Beauty and the Hebrew Bible.” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 17.3 (2009): 265-87.
11. Prouser, Ora H. “Suited To the Throne: The Symbolic Use of Clothing in the David and Saul Narratives.” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 21.71 (1996): 27-37.

12. Reines, Chaim W. “Beauty in the Bible and the Talmud.” *Judaism* December (1975): 100-07.
13. Scholem, Gershom. *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*: *Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*. New York: Schoken, 1997.
14. James G. Williams, “The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type Scenes” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 17 (1980): 107-119.
15. Wolfson, Elliot R. *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism*. Albany: State University of New York, 1995.