Madam Potiphar’s Boy Toy: No Laughing Matter

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Abstract

In some contexts, the verb root ts-kh-q correctly translates as laughing, toying, or dallying. In Genesis 39, Madam Potiphar’s use of the verb letsakheq (verses 14, 17) to characterize Joseph’s intent toward the household and towards her specifically best translates as “to insult.” It is not “to toy,” nor is his presence a laughing matter.

Many readers of Genesis are familiar with the outline of chapter 39. Briefly stated, Joseph is newly arrived in Egypt; he now is part of Potiphar’s household. He prospers there. Before too long Madam Potiphar attempts unsuccessfully to engage Joseph sexually. When rebuffed, she accuses Joseph of inappropriate behavior. He then is sent to prison.

Early in Genesis 39, after the narrative explains that Joseph proves to be a highly capable and successful servant, the text notes that he is “well built and handsome.” In the next verse, the wife of his master, Madam Potiphar “cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me.’ But he refused” (Gen 39:6-8). When she tries again, even as she takes hold of his garment, he runs away from her. Scorned, in her rage she fabricates a story that he tried to force himself upon her. She calls her household servants and states that Joseph acted inappropriately, she insinuates that he tried to seduce – or possibly to rape – her. Then, when her husband Potiphar returns, she complains to him as well. Central to her allegation is the word letsakheq (ts-kh-q) used in verses 14 and 17.

Potiphar brought a Hebrew “to __ [letsakheq] us” (verse 14)
The Hebrew whom you brought came . . . “to __ [letsakheq] me” (verse 17)

This article considers, within the framework of this particular episode, what might be the most appropriate translation of the verb letsakheq? Illustrating the difficulty of finding the best choice, it presents a number of variants offered by different translators. Next follows an analysis of the major characters in this drama. Then the article looks at the different ways the crucial verb is used in other places in the Bible. Finally, a decision is rendered as to the best choice in the present chapter.

With a limited narrative, one can only speculate on Madam Potiphar’s actual thoughts. Further, there is insufficient information as to her role in the house, and to what extent there was conflict with Joseph. Yet, by reading below the surface one seeks to understand how these biblical characters are portrayed in relation to each other, and what the biblical author meant to convey.
When considering the text of Genesis 39, editors have chosen different words to translate *letsakheq*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“to toy”</td>
<td><em>The Torah: A Modern Commentary: Revised Edition;</em> <em>The Torah: A Women’s Commentary</em>²</td>
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<tr>
<td>“to dally”</td>
<td><em>The Contemporary Torah – CJPS; TANAKH/NJPS</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>“to sport”</td>
<td><em>Tanach - ArtScroll</em>³; <em>New International Version [NIV]</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>“to make sport”</td>
<td><em>New American Bible</em> (NAB)</td>
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<td>“to play around”</td>
<td><em>The Schocken Bible, Volume I, The Five Books of Moses</em> (Everett Fox)⁴</td>
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<tr>
<td>“to have his play”</td>
<td><em>The First Book of the Bible Genesis</em> (Benno Jacob)⁵</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘to play’</td>
<td>*Genesis: Translation and Commentary (Robert Alter)*⁶</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“to make love”</td>
<td><em>Genesis, The Anchor Bible</em> (E. A. Speiser)⁷</td>
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<tr>
<td>“to make a mockery”</td>
<td><em>New English Bible [NEB]</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“to insult”</td>
<td><em>Genesis: A Commentary (Gerhard Von Rad);</em> *New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]; The Jerusalem Bible; Genesis (Berit Olam series)*⁸</td>
</tr>
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Most of these examples suggest an amorous aspect for the translation of the word *letsakheq*: to toy, to dally, to sport, to play around, to make love. At issue is not whether “to toy” (dally, etc.) has possible sexual overtones. It does. *Toy* has an antiquated and little used verbal definition, which is to be ardent, or to be affectionate or passionate with someone.

It is in this sense (“to toy” with her) that the title of this article refers to Joseph as Madam Potiphar’s “Boy Toy.” Indisputably, Madam Potiphar wants “to toy” – to have a sexual alliance with Joseph. She would like to regard him as a Boy Toy. A difficulty is that Joseph does not wish to accept this role. Further, contrary to what she appears to say to her husband Potiphar, he (Potiphar) likewise did not intend this to be Joseph’s role in their household.

To toy, to dally, does not make sense in the way that Madam Potiphar frames her words in chapter 39. This article therefore challenges the translation of *letsakheq* as “to toy” (dally, make love, etc.)

**Joseph**

At the beginning of the Joseph lifecycle (Genesis 37-50), Joseph is seventeen years old, a brash and self-centered teenager, who alienates his family. Some time later, perhaps months or even a few years later, Joseph is off in the countryside visiting his brothers. They take him and sell him...
into bondage, to a caravan of traders traveling to Egypt. Chapter 37 concludes with the comment that Joseph had been sold in Egypt to Potiphar (Gen 37:36).

Chapter 38 is an interlude, dealing with the life of Joseph’s older brother Judah, and Judah’s daughter-in-law, Tamar. Chapter 39 begins with much the same information that concluded chapter 37, that Joseph is now a slave in the house of “Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief prefect—an Egyptian official.”

Several years pass by. He is now in his twenties. Joseph establishes himself as a reliable, organized, and trustworthy servant. He rises in power. He becomes something like the major domo of the Potiphar household.

The narrative explains that God is with Joseph (mentioned five times in verses 2-5), and that God “lent success to everything [Joseph] undertook, [therefore, Potiphar] took a liking to Joseph. He made him his personal attendant and put him in charge of his household, placing in his hands all that he owned . . . [Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph’s hands and, with him there, [Potiphar] paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate” (Gen 39:3-4, 6).

Joseph well understands that what God gives, God can take away, and likewise what Potiphar gives, Potiphar can take away. Joseph comprehends that he is beholden to both God and his human master. In terms of Madam Potiphar, it is not in Joseph’s own interest to do a great evil and sin against Potiphar much less against God.

Joseph rejects Madam Potiphar’s requests, and does so with high-minded morality. “Look, with me here, my master gives no thought to anything in this house . . . He wields no more authority in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?” (Gen 39:8-9). A verse later, the text explains that despite her daily sweet-talk, “he did not yield to her request to lie beside her, to be with her.” He chose not to be her Boy Toy.

Potiphar

Potiphar is “a courtier of Pharaoh,” in Hebrew a s’ris Paroh—which has the possible meaning of being a “eunuch of Pharaoh.” Potiphar may have been a courtier, but if he was a eunuch, it might cast a different light on why Madam Potiphar “cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me.’” Even if Potiphar is not a eunuch, the text in Genesis suggests, or at the very least allows, for an interpretation that Potiphar did not spend much time with his wife. Potiphar “paid attention to nothing save the food that he ate.”

Madam Potiphar
It is easy to dismiss Madam Potiphar as a systematic scheming and seductive figure. She fits the negative stereotype found in Proverbs, which warns against the smooth tongue of a foreign woman. A contemporary woman scholar describes her in unflattering terms. “She is a seducer and a negative deceiver . . . self-serving, spiteful, and hypocritical. Potiphar’s wife is the stereotypical sexually potent, evil woman.” Yet, there may be more to this plot.

Madam Potiphar’s interest in Joseph may not be driven by lust, much less love, but rather more practically by her desire to have a child. She lives in a world where “children were a woman’s status and in which childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor (see [Gen] 16:2; 30:1-2; 38). Childless wives were humiliated . . .” That this has to be considered as a real possibility can be argued by the juxtaposition of chapters 38 and 39 in Genesis. In Genesis 38, another foreign woman, Tamar, desperately seeks to become pregnant. She does so in a way that both achieves that goal, and supports her as a strong and independently minded woman.

Madam Potiphar may be seeking the same results. Within rabbinic tradition, while many sources condemn her, there also are those who credit her with good intentions. Her choice is the servant Joseph, clearly a capable and intelligent man. To his credit, he has risen to an important position in the household. As a foreign slave, presumably he would have less social contacts than would a native Egyptian. Consequently, his sharing with friends a possible liaison with Madam Potiphar is less likely.

To regard Joseph as a sperm-donor, however, would seem to preclude the possibility that Potiphar is a eunuch. If Potiphar was unable to provide seed, his wife could hardly find herself pregnant and attribute this to her husband. It would be clear that she committed adultery.

On the other hand, if Potiphar were a eunuch, and he wanted Joseph (or someone else) to serve as a surrogate husband for his wife, Madam Potiphar would not have had to seduce Joseph.

In any case, when Madam Potiphar approaches Joseph, he spurns her advances. While this may be to his moral credit, from the viewpoint of Madam Potiphar, it is an insult. Though the line would be penned centuries later, the description still is apt: “Heav’n has no rage, like love to hatred turn’d, Nor Hell a fury like a woman scorn’d” (William Congreve, The Mourning Bride, III.8).

Potiphar’s Response
Potiphar’s response to his wife’s accusation about Joseph’s behavior is to become enraged. He sends Joseph away to the “prison, where the king’s prisoners were confined.” The text is ambiguous as to the object of Potiphar’s anger. Was he furious at Joseph? At Madam Potiphar for her behavior? At the knowledge that he will have to send Joseph away? At himself, that he
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has been so busy that he did not pay attention to what was happening in his own household, and so matters got out of hand?

It is significant that Potiphar does not order the castration or death of Joseph, but merely sends him to a kind of royal prison. This “lenient” reaction strongly suggests that he does not believe Madam Potiphar’s accusation. Yet, he would seem to have little choice but to send Joseph away.

The verb letsakheq
This verb, letsakheq, from the root letters tsadhe heth qoph, is used in the Bible in a variety of ways. It is a very elastic, elusive, and flexible verb.

What would she mean that Joseph has been brought into the household “to toy/dally” [letsakheq] with either the household at large, and/or “to toy/dally” with her?

If “to toy/dally” were the correct translation, then the most obvious possibility is that Joseph is there as a kind of sexual plaything. He is there as a bisexual, to “service” men and women. Or, perhaps either only as a homosexual, to service the male servants, or perhaps Potiphar alone. Or some combination thereof. Alternatively, he is there as a sexual entertainer.

Yet, such an explanation does not ring true.

If Joseph was brought into the Potiphar household to be a sexual plaything, why would he – how could he – balk at Madam Potiphar’s asking him to lie with her?

What is much more likely is that the translation of letsakheq as “to toy/dally” (sport, make sport, play around, have his play, play, make love) is simply incorrect in this context.

Words made up of the root letters tsadhe heth qoph, with the exception of direct references to the name of Isaac/Yitskhaq (which literally means, “he will laugh”); appear only fifteen times in the entire corpus of the Hebrew Bible. Most instances, twelve of them, appear in Genesis. The additional references are once in Exodus, once in Judges, and once in Ezekiel.

The majority of the words based on these root letters appear in the chapters before the birth of, and then the early years of Isaac. In these narratives there are numerous puns using the letters tsadhe heth qoph. They are tied to laughter. Sometimes this is joyful laughter; at other times, it is the laughter of incredulity or possibly mocking laughter.
When Sarah gives birth she says, “God has brought me laughter [tskhoq]; everyone who hears will laugh [yitskhoq] with me” (Gen 21:6). [Note: the only other use of this verb in its qal or “simple” verbal form is in Ezekiel 23:32, litskhoq – derision, translated in NEB as “mockery” and NIV as “scorn.”]

The remaining connection between the life of Isaac and this crucial verb is in Genesis 26:8. There it is translated as fondling, if not the actual act of intercourse itself. “Abimelech king of the Philistines . . . saw Isaac fondling [metsakheq] his wife Rebekah.”

The verb used in Genesis 39, letsakheq, in Hebrew grammar is in the piel, or “active” state. This same verb, in this particular binyan appears only a few other times in the Hebrew Scriptures, most notably in Genesis 21:9 (“Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham [metsakheq] playing.” The other examples are these:

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<th>Scripture</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genesis 19:14</td>
<td>kemetsakheq</td>
<td>as one who jests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exodus 32:6</td>
<td>letsakheq</td>
<td>to dance (or perhaps to revel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges 16:25</td>
<td>vayetsakheq</td>
<td>let him dance</td>
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</table>

Each of these translations, laughing, playing, jesting, fondling, dancing, or perhaps, reveling do not make sense in terms of Madam Potiphar’s accusation. In her mind, Joseph’s presence in the house is no laughing matter. He was not brought there by Potiphar to laugh, to play, to jest, to dance, or to revel.

Rather, in her view, by giving Joseph so much power in the household, Potiphar has raised this Hebrew slave to be in a position where he can order around and criticize the other servants, and even criticize, or at the least deny requests that emanate from Madam Potiphar herself. As Joseph stated, Potiphar “wields no more authority in this house than I,” and the only thing that has been withheld from him is Madam Potiphar because she is the master’s wife.

Joseph is in a position to say “no” to her requests, and he does just that!

Madam Potiphar’s remarks, both to her servants and to her husband contain an additional layer of xenophobia. She is also castigating Potiphar for bringing in a foreigner – a Hebrew – into their household. Potiphar added insult onto injury by raising this foreigner to a position of considerable power.

She is furious that in her own house, Joseph has more power than she does. An additional reason that she wants to seduce Joseph is to be able to blackmail him into submission.
Madam Potiphar’s anger reflects the challenges of the powerless versus the powerful, or the resentment that those with less power feel toward those with greater power. She feels undervalued and insulted that he has more authority than she does. Hence she projects her feelings unto him, accusing him of wishing to insult the Potiphar household, and her specifically. In one commentator’s words, she moves from “sexual desire to . . . hate.”

Consequently, the best translation of letsakheq in this particular context is “to insult.” Verse 14 then would read, “See, my husband [literally “he”] has brought among us a Hebrew to insult us!” Likewise, in verse 17, when Madam Potiphar confronts her husband she would say, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to insult me,” which is the exact translation found in NRSV.

Madam Potiphar uses letsakheq as “to insult” and not as some variation on sexuality. She understood that if she used it with its sexual connotations, a) it would draw attention to her earlier attempts at seducing Joseph – where she “cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me’” (verse 7). In addition, b) she understood the irony of accusing Joseph of desiring her, when it was she who desired him. Further; c) she still desired him, and hoped he would return to the household chastised; and d) if accused of sexual impropriety, Potiphar would have little choice but to have Joseph sent away, possibly castrated, and/or executed.

That letsakheq has other possible meanings, specifically that of a sexual nature, and which really speak to Madam Potiphar’s desire for Joseph, highlight the craft of the narrator’s art.

Conclusion
Madam Potiphar would have liked Joseph to be her Boy Toy. When that did not happen, she was angry and wished to punish Joseph, and perhaps as well to punish Potiphar for his inattention.

The verb letsakheq allows for multiple translations. These translations, depending on their context, range from some form of laughter, playing or entertaining, varying degrees of sexual congress, to a more negative meaning such as insulting, deriding, or demeaning. There is a famous, some would contend, a notorious Italian saying, “traduttore, traditore.” That is, “translator, traitor.” Translation is an art. Translation also is a matter of judgment and educated guesswork as to what is the right term at this particular juncture. Madam Potiphar’s remarks are quite pointed; she is enraged and insulted, therefore she seeks to punish Joseph for his refusal to lie with her. Unquestionably, she achieves that goal. Joseph is disgraced publicly. Further, Joseph is incarcerated. Earlier on, she wished to regard Joseph as a Boy Toy. That did not happen. Now what is foremost in her mind is to convey the message that she is angry with her husband that he has raised this Hebrew slave to a position where Joseph is able to say “no” to her demands, and thereby “to insult” her role as mistress of the Potiphar household.
Paragraph 1: Madam Potiphar’s Boy Toy: No Laughing Matter

Paragraph 6: Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations are taken from Jewish Publication Society translations, with the Genesis portions coming from David E. S. Stein, Revising Editor, *The Contemporary Torah* (CJPS) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006).


Paragraph 16: “My son, keep your father’s commandment; do not forsake your mother’s teaching . . . For the commandment is a lamp, the teaching is a light . . . It will keep you from an evil woman, from the smooth tongue of a forbidden [lit. alien] woman. Do not lust for her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes” (Prov 6:20, 23-5). The translation by the NRSV seems to have Madam Potiphar in mind. It reads, “to preserve you from the wife of another, from the smooth tongue of the adulteress.”

*Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 87.1 links Joseph and Madam Potiphar with another chapter in Proverbs, the young man and the harlot mentioned in Proverbs 7:7 ff.
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14 Sources condemning Madam Potiphar: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 35b, Sotah 36b, Midrash Genesis Rabbah 87.5, 7. On the other hand, there also are rabbinic traditions that suggest Madam Potiphar was pure in her motive. Madam Potiphar “saw by her astrological charts that she was to produce a child by him [Joseph], but she did not know whether it was to be from her or from her daughter.” Midrash Genesis Rabbah 85.2. The rabbis connect Potiphar with Potiphera, the priest of On, who is the father of Asenat, Joseph’s wife (Gen 41:50). Midrash Genesis Rabbah 86.3. As Potiphar will become Joseph’s father-in-law, so will Madam Potiphar become his mother-in-law.


15 Potiphar realized Joseph was innocent. Midrash Genesis Rabbah 87.9.

16 Placed within the wider context of the Joseph story, “one can see that the apparently negative effect of the wife’s accusation actually resulted in the positive elevation of Joseph into a position to help his own family, the descendants of Abraham, and thus ensured the continuation of the Israelite people.” Susan Tower Hollis, “Ancient Examples of the Potiphar’s Wife Motif,” Peggy L. Day, Editor, Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 32.

17 “[Potiphar] purchased him for the purpose of sodomy.” Midrash Genesis Rabbah 86.3.


20 Another stratum of this narrative is Madam Potiphar’s anger with her husband. The Hebrew words here are wonderfully ambiguous. When she tells Potiphar about the incident, the Hebrew phrase she uses is “ba elai” which can mean that Joseph “came in to her” to insult her, or it could be a euphemism for sexual penetration, “he came in to me.” Either way Madam Potiphar is blaming her husband for bringing this man into their household. See Sharon Pace Jeansonne, “Potiphar’s Wife,” The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar’s Wife (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 111-112.

21 Nahum N. Sarna points out that “she does not repeat to her husband her previously stated charge of attempted rape . . . Perhaps she secretly nourishes the hope that, by having Joseph incarcerated, she might be able to

22 Von Rad, p. 366.

23 Though he favors the translation “to dally,” in a commentary to this verse, Sarna writes that *letsakheq* “can also mean simply ‘to mock us, insult us.’” *JPS Torah Commentary - Genesis*, 274. Speiser comments that “the possible alternative ‘to toy with us’ is not favored by the context.” E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 303, n. 14.

24 As a secondary meaning, it could be “to laugh at us/mock us,” or “to laugh at me/mocking” (or deride, demean). It has this kind of meaning in Ezekiel 23:32.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


