

The Case of Three Brothers: Biblical Reflections on Leadership

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship of three of Jacob's sons, Reuben, Judah, and Joseph. It explores the reversals of their fortunes as they jockey for the most important position, that of clan leadership. Ultimately, Judah, the most unlikely candidate, triumphs. Judah's success is eventually acknowledged by Jacob and clearly has God's blessings. The article also reflects on the potential reasons for this rise of Judah and suggests certain leadership qualities that can be gleaned from this story.

Jacob's Sons: A Family in Turmoil

A quick examination of Genesis' Patriarchal narratives (especially Gen 37-50) unveils the struggle for supremacy by three of the sons of Jacob: Reuben, Judah, and Joseph. The struggle nearly tore the fabric of family unity into shreds. At times the contest assumed near-fatal proportions. To compound the problem, the narrative plot of Genesis succeeds in camouflaging the struggle so well that most casual readers fail to grasp the intensity of the whole drama, while becoming enamoured by one of the brothers in the story.

To fully comprehend the nature of this struggle, it is essential to establish the relative ranking of the three brothers. Reuben was the firstborn, the first son of Jacob's unloved wife, Leah. In keeping with cultural norms of the period, Reuben was the natural heir to the family inheritance and the bearer of his father's name; he was the natural possessor of the birthright.

However, because of Jacob's special love for Rachel (the wife of choice), Joseph was seen as the heir-apparent by his father. Jacob went out of his way to establish this fact by making a special robe for Joseph (Gen 37:3-4). This was probably a royal robe (according to 2 Sam 13:18-19) or, alternatively, the coat may be viewed as 'a unisex garment and a product of ancient *haute couture*' (Alter, 1996, 209). This was a clear message to the sons that Joseph was the preferred heir, since in the heart of the father Joseph was the 'firstborn'.

Enter into the mix the name of Judah. His abrupt appearance in Gen 37 and 38 has caused no uncertain consternation among biblical scholars. Some have strenuously questioned the role of the Judah episodes in the midst of a seemingly seamless narrative about Joseph. Laurence A. Turner calls Gen 38 an 'interlude' which both 'heightens the suspense regarding Joseph's fate' and 'enriches the reading' of that story (Turner, 2000, 164). George W. Coats labels Gen 38 as an interpolation which 'functions as an intensification of the digression' in the Joseph story (Coats, 1983, 260). He also suggests that the story of Gen 38 'breaks into a firm unity in the Joseph story . . . and thus delays the pace of action in the Joseph story plot' (Coats, 1983, 273). By contrast, Robert Alter sees Gen 38 as an intrinsic part of the whole narrative and observes the presence of 'an intricate network of connections with what precedes and what follows' (Alter, 1996, 217). Judah's introduction, at first glance, appears to serve no meaningful purpose. He was not and could not be considered for any sort of inheritance rights within the family structure. He was Leah's fourth son and, in keeping with the ranking system of brotherly inheritance, would have been only fifth in line (assuming that Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Joseph outranked him). To underscore this fact, the narrator has Judah attempting to start his own clan in Gen 38.

The striking feature of these narratives is the manner in which the story unfolds. All three brothers are portrayed as going out of their way to court the father's affections in an apparent attempt to win his support for their leadership candidacy. Reuben had unscrupulously factored himself out of the equation through an indiscreet liaison with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine (Gen 35:22 see also 49:3-4). In Gen 37, Reuben unashamedly attempts to regain the father's favour, 'to ingratiate himself with Jacob', by trying to become

Joseph's champion (Turner, 2000, 162). However, this masquerade did not pan out as he had anticipated. When it failed, Reuben tried currying favour by offering his sons as guarantee for the life of the clan (see Gen 42:37). All to no avail!

Despite being Jacob's obvious choice, Joseph also did his best to ensure that the father does not change his mind. The narrator recounts how Joseph endeavoured to keep the father on his side by bringing 'evil' reports against his brothers (Gen 37:2). The text suggests that these were fabricated reports whose only real purpose was to ensure that the brothers were 'kept under his thumb'. The dreams which apparently validated his royal claims only added fuel to the fire. Joseph used these dreams to completely antagonise his brothers (Gen 37:5-11), unwittingly or otherwise, guaranteeing that the festering family feud turned into open warfare. To rub salt into the brothers' wounds, he even had the temerity to wear the special coat when he went to look for them at Dothan (Gen 37:23) even though his father's protection was not available at that juncture. His rollercoaster story, from this point onward, plots his life on a downward spiral which ended in ultimate failure to realise the very thing that Jacob had actually intended for him and which Joseph had sought after.

That brings us to Judah, who first appears in a leadership role by also suggesting a way to deal with Joseph (Gen 37:26-27). His stated intentions seem almost callous and calculating. Some have used this characterisation of Judah to maintain that Judah is sort of a dark horse, an enigma in the story. He certainly glides through the story almost unnoticed. Nevertheless, the narrative clearly puts Judah in contention for the coveted prize of clan leadership. He outwitted Reuben in the treatment of Joseph. He was unwilling to wait to be declared leader and chose instead to start his own rival clan. Eventually he succeeded where both Reuben and Joseph failed, winning the favour and acclaim of his father (Gen 49:8-12).

What accounts for this absorbing drama? How do we make sense of the failure to fulfil the call to destiny by both Reuben and Joseph? How do we account for the eventual success of Judah, apparently against all the odds?

Judah Trumps Reuben: An Unnoticed Conflict

In a recent (unpublished) paper, Kim Dohyung of Sheffield University has forcefully argued for the dramatic shift between Reuben and Judah (2009). In a rather perceptive analysis of the speeches made by the two brothers in Gen 37, he demonstrates the nature of Judah's success and the failure of Reuben (Kim, 2009, 2). The tussle for position between the two surfaced at the time of Joseph's visit to Dothan.

Keeping in mind the previous encounters between Joseph and his brothers, it is reasonable to assume that both Reuben and Judah inwardly chafed at the antics of their younger sibling. What is evident in the story up to this point is the fact that Jacob had chosen Joseph while Reuben had cut himself off from his perch as firstborn (Syrén, 1993, 131; 1 Chron 5:1). Somewhat surprising is the absence of any intimation regarding any prior attempt to grab power by Judah.

Joseph's visit to Dothan changed all that. The violent hatred of the brothers for Joseph nearly boiled over into murder. Both Reuben and Judah attempted to prevent this from happening (compare Gen 37:21-22 and 37:26-27). A careful analysis reveals the virtual synonymity between their speeches. Both offered an alternative to murder. Both attempted to avoid bloodshed. Both argued that brothers must not kill brothers. Both offered methods for disposing of Joseph (Kim, 2009, 5). Nevertheless, when the dust had cleared, Judah had come out on top. His suggestions had met with spectacular success while Reuben's had failed miserably (Turner, 2000, 162).

This reversal of Reuben's fortunes (in comparison to Judah's) did not stop here. Much later, in an effort to avert the devastation of a famine, both brothers again went head to head with similar proposals to ensure the survival of the clan (compare Gen 42:37 and 43:8-10). Again, it was Judah who came out victorious. By this point in the story, not only had Judah trumped Reuben, he had also succeeded in winning the complete trust and approbation of Jacob his father. According to Syrén, not only did Judah replace Reuben 'as spokesman before Jacob' (Gen 43:3-5, 8-10), he also replaced Reuben 'before Joseph' (Gen 44:16, 18-34); 'Judah supersedes Reuben' (Syrén, 1993, 132).

The reasons for this reversal of fortunes between Reuben and Judah are not spelled out. The conflict 'between Reuben and Judah remains hidden throughout Genesis' and its 'existence is never openly recognized and no confrontation is reported' (Syrén, 1993, 132). The reader is left in limbo to wonder the how's and why's of such a dramatic shift. Kim's suggestion that Judah succeeded because he practised leadership by presence, whereas Reuben failed because of absentee leadership (Kim, 2009, 7-9), is reasonable. Clearly the reversal or shift had occurred; Judah had trumped Reuben.

Judah Trumps Joseph: A Noticeable Conflict

While exploring this unfolding saga, we start to wonder whether such a reversal could also happen between Joseph and Judah. After all, Joseph was the 'chosen one', both by Jacob and God (or so it seems at first). In a previous article I had written on this subject (Fanwar, 2007, 14-31), I had demonstrated, via structural analyses of the Patriarchal narratives, that the story also contains a similar reversal between Joseph and Judah (Fanwar, 2007, 24-26).

Arguably, Joseph was used by God on the short term; he became a principal agent in the survival of the clan through a rather threatening famine. Moreover, Joseph occupies much narrative space and this has led some readers to mistakenly assume that he is the ultimate choice of God. Most readers are also fairly taken in by the apparent victimised existence of Joseph.

However, a close reading of the narrative uncovers a rather different tale. The question to ask is, 'How is the story of Joseph told?' John H. Sailhamer points out that Joseph's story is filled with 'reversals' (Sailhamer, 1992, 206). It is truly fascinating that every time Joseph is elevated in some way, the story is immediately followed by a de-elevation episode (Fanwar, 2007, 25-26). Joseph never stays elevated. This is not a moral indictment against Joseph but a narrative technique to highlight a simple narrative intent: Joseph is not the 'chosen one' despite appearances.

Furthermore, the content of Joseph's dreams in Gen 37 seems to foreshadow his divinely appointed ascendancy over his brothers. Joseph's own words in Gen 41 betray his understanding that God had bestowed upon him royalty and kingship. 'The irony of the narrative composition is that in the end such royal honor would not reside in the house of Joseph but in the house of Judah' (Sailhamer, 1992, 207; Gen 49:10).

Once again Judah triumphed over another major rival. On his deathbed, Jacob acknowledged this reality and established Judah as clan leader (Gen 49:8-12; see also Ps 78:67-68). The struggle between the three brothers, presented at the start of this article, has indeed come full circle.

Judah's Ascendancy: Narrative Clues

When first read, Judah's rise to prominence appears totally unexpected. However a close scrutiny of the narrative uncovers striking clues that point to Judah's divinely appointed role. One clue is the 'younger son' motif which is an integral part of Genesis. 'God's preference for the younger child' is a 'general principle' of the book (Wenham, 1994, 364). The 'triumph-of-the-younger-son motif' can be seen in the stories of Abel and Cain, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and Reuben, and Ephraim and Manasseh (Ibid.). Judah's triumph not only accentuates this theme but augments it; he was the unexpected younger brother.

Another clue pointing to Judah as the chosen of God pertains to the string of deception that runs through the patriarchal narratives. In commenting on the story of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38, Wenham points out that 'Jacob had deceived his father Isaac. He in turn was deceived by his son Judah, and now Judah himself is deceived by his daughter-in-law. In all three episodes, goats and items of dress are used in the deception' (Ibid.). It is Judah's story that echoes the story of his father and grandfather, and in this way the narrator sets Judah up in the hierarchy of the clan.

A third clue to Judah's prominence relates to the 'three-sons' concept (Sailhamer, 1992, 209). The redemptive family line in Genesis often involves three sons; the three sons of Adam, Noah, and Terah. In Gen 38 we learn that Judah had three sons. What is unique about these stories is the fact that in each episode the line is threatened through unfortunate circumstances involving the older brothers or two brothers with the remaining or last brother having to carry on the line. According to Gen 4, Cain kills Abel and Seth is left to pick up the pieces. Noah's story (Gen 9) is more complicated. Ham (the youngest according to Gen 9:24) commits a sin against his father and ends up cursed, while Shem is praised (the mention of Japheth appears incidental to the story). The story of Terah's family employs a similar narrative technique. One son, Haran, dies early in the story (Gen 11:27-28) while Nahor plays at best only a cameo role. It is Abraham who is left to carry on the line; he is chosen by God (Gen 12:1-3). Similarly, Judah loses his first two sons in tragic circumstances and is left with only one son, Shelah. Judah's refusal to marry Shelah to Tamar threatens the continuation of his line. Unlike the other stories, Judah's story takes a sharp twist that leads to a son he had with Tamar becoming the heir (see 1 Chron 2:3-17).

A fourth clue deals with the narrative specificity whereby only Reuben, Joseph, and Judah are mentioned by name in Gen 37. This is the first time that the sons of Jacob seriously interact with each other. While all the brothers play a role in this ugly incident, only these three are portrayed as primary players in the episode; the rest of the brothers serve merely as narrative foils. Here, the three go head to head (so to speak). By the end of the chapter, Reuben's plan had failed and Joseph had become a slave. Only Judah stands tall; his

plan had succeeded and his status enhanced.

Perhaps a less obvious clue concerns the way a chosen son is sometimes introduced in Genesis: *last*. In Gen 4 we first meet Cain, then Abel, and then Seth (in that order). In the genealogies of Gen 10-11, Japheth's lineage is introduced first, followed by Ham's, and then by Shem's genealogy (which is recorded after a lengthy interlude about the tower of Babel). It is in the Patriarchal narratives however that this literary device is used to great effect. In telling the story of Jacob's sons, the author first introduces Simeon and Levi in Gen 34. Their carefully executed deception and violent massacre of the Shechemites not only jeopardised the existence of the entire clan (see Gen 34:30) but led to them being 'cursed' by Jacob on his deathbed (Gen 49:5-7; Alter, 1996, 294). The next major episode involving Jacob's sons, Gen 35:21-26, highlights Reuben. His liaison with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine, led to his disqualification from the family inheritance (Gen 49:3-4). The next brother to be introduced is Joseph (Gen 37). His introduction carries with it a heavy dose of irony. The story clearly establishes Jacob's intention of making him the leader and there are narrative elements (his dreams; his miraculous survival in Egypt; etc.) that seem to imply that maybe even God had chosen him. However, subsequent texts (Gen 49; Ps 78) negate this possibility.

Judah is the last major character to be introduced in the Patriarchal Narratives (Gen 37-38). This narrative element clearly sets him up as the chosen leader, the heir to the promises and inheritance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the 'praise' of Jacob in Gen 49:8-12. Verse 8 is particularly instructive. The elaborate word play, alliteration, and rhyme in the verse differentiate the 'praise' Judah received from the 'curses' of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (Wenham, 1994, 476). The words in this verse, 'Judah, your brothers shall praise you', echo the words of his mother, Leah, at his birth: 'This time I will praise Yahweh' (Gen 29:35). The name Judah (Hebrew *yehudah*) is a derivative of the Hebrew root *ydh*, meaning 'to praise'. It is also quite unusual for a man to be praised and there are only three other passages in the Hebrew Bible where this happens (Job 40:14; Pss 45:18[17]; 49:19[18]; Wenham, 1994, 476). According to Alter, 'Judah now displaces the three brothers born before him' (Alter, 1996, 294) and obviously Joseph as well.

The leadership symbols, 'staff' and 'scepter', mentioned in verse 10 (see also Num 24:17; Ps 45:7[6]; Zech 10:11; etc.) further underscore Judah's rise to prominence. At the very least, 'Judah is being promised that' he and his descendants 'will lead all the tribes' (Wenham, 1994, 476-477). More importantly, the images of this verse have 'a distinctly Davidic coloration' (Alter, 1996, 294). The verse 'is predicting the rise of the Davidic monarchy' and perhaps 'the coming of a greater David', that is the Messiah (Wenham, 1994, 478). Judah's ascendancy is now complete and by Gen 49 he had superseded all potential rivals to clan leadership and inheritance.

Judah's Trump Card: A Salvific Nature

These reversals in the narrative call for some reflection on the nature of Judah. The characterisation of Judah is a complex one, and it is rather vexing to try and figure out the precise nature of Judah's rise to prominence. It is also difficult to penetrate the motives that underpinned his conduct or to detect the exact point in time when he achieved supremacy over his brothers.

Perhaps by examining more closely the main episodes of Judah's life we can garner some insight. There are four principal episodes involving Judah: the Joseph episode (Gen 37); the Tamar episode (Gen 38); the intercession with Jacob episode (Gen 43); and the Benjamin episode (Gen 44). A brief analysis of each episode may shed some light on the twists and turns that marked Judah's rise to leadership.

In Gen 37, both Reuben and Judah attempted to save Joseph from the murderous rage of the brothers. A comparison of their words, in verses 21-22 and 26-27 respectively, reveals that they had similar intentions. Yet it was Judah's plan that was accomplished. While Judah's motive is unclear, and his methodology highly unconventional, 'it was Judah's plan in chapter 37 which ultimately saved the life of Joseph' (Sailhamer, 1992, 219).

In each of the subsequent episodes of his life, Judah was engaged in some attempt to save life. In Gen 38, a situation arose, driven by Judah's lack of sound judgement, that threatened the life of his daughter-in-law, Tamar. When it was revealed that the situation had been of his own making (Gen 38:6-25), Judah quickly acted to correct the situation and assumed responsibility for Tamar's life and the life of her unborn sons (Gen 38:26-30).

The next major appearance of Judah is in Gen 43. The brothers' first trip to Egypt had been partially successful (see Gen 42). They had returned home almost unscathed (with the exception of Simeon, who ended up in an Egyptian prison [Gen 42:24]). Once the grain had run out, it became necessary to make the hazardous trip once more. During the first trip, in their anxiety to dissuade Egypt's vizier from pressing charges

of espionage, the brothers had alerted the vizier (who happened to be none other than Joseph) to the fact that they had another brother at home (Gen 42:1-13). At the start of the second trip to Egypt, they realised that it would be a futile undertaking without Benjamin. However, Judah was able to persuade his father to allow Benjamin to make the trip with them and offered himself as warranty for the safety of Benjamin (Gen 43:8-10). Jacob agreed with Judah's plan (Gen 43:11-14) even though he had earlier rejected a similar offer from Reuben (Gen 42:37-38). In this way Judah saved the life of the clan.

Once in Egypt, the brothers became victims of Joseph's manipulation which threatened the very life of Benjamin (see Gen 44). Judah stepped forward and attempted to persuade the vizier (Joseph) to spare Benjamin's life by offering himself as substitute for Benjamin (Gen 44:30-34). Again, Judah helped to avert a potentially life-threatening situation.

When the clan of Jacob finally migrated to Egypt, it was Judah who had become the defacto leader of the group (Gen 46:28). Jacob had, by this stage in the narrative, come to rely upon this son as his main support. On his deathbed, Jacob would proclaim Judah as heir-apparent of his inheritance and the leader of the clan, and perhaps much more (Gen 49:8-12).

It seems reasonable to suggest that it is Judah's salvific or redemptive nature that surely accounts for the reversals in the narratives. Judah's ascendancy over his brothers is more than mere coincidence. Judah's willingness to place himself at risk for the life of someone else made him the most suitable candidate for God's purposes. While most readers of the story fail to notice his gradual rise to prominence, God was certainly ensuring that Judah became not merely the clan leader but the ancestor of the Messiah himself (see also Num 24:17-19).

The ultimate tribute paid to Judah is found in Ps 78:68 which reads, 'God chose Judah'. Such is the assessment of Judah in later revelation.

Final Reflections

Judah's story compels some reflection upon the lessons of leadership that are embedded in it. First, Judah's leadership was based on presence; it was leadership by presence. Unlike Reuben, Judah stayed involved with situations and people (e.g., Joseph and Benjamin). Second, his leadership style was also redemptive or salvific in nature. Judah's prowess was not so much military or political, rather it was salvific. Judah's specialty was in learning how to put his life on the line for someone else's safety. Third, Judah became leader not so much because of any innate leadership quality but by virtue of divine will. He was chosen by God, and it was this choice that established his leadership. This is a formula that is consistently applied in Scripture and should remain the principal leadership concern for God's people today.

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