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Judah's Redemption

Mark Mangano

Who is the firstborn and will he receive all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto? Who will receive the father's blessing? The answers to these two questions are of great interest to the writer of Genesis and therefore to its reader. In this essay, these two questions will prove vital to our exploration of Judah's redemption in the Joseph story (Gen 37–50).

A series of curses intrudes upon the beginning of the Bible—**five** to be exact. In Genesis 3 first the serpent (v. 14) and then the ground (v. 17) are cursed. The serpent is cursed because of its role in leading both Eve and Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. The ground is cursed as a direct result of Adam's defiance of the one commandment he was given to keep. In Genesis 4.11 Cain is placed under a curse because he took Abel's life. The curse upon the land is mentioned again at 5.29. Finally, Canaan (the father of the infamous Canaanites!) is cursed (9.25) because his father, Ham, saw his father (Noah) naked and gossiped about it, or was guilty of a homosexual act, or guilty of an incestuous act with his mother.

Sin had left its ugly stain upon the people and landscape of these early chapters of Scripture. The reader can see it . . . feel it . . . indeed, hear it. The word *cursed* echoes through these early chapters just as the sound of a judge's gavel when banged against his bench echoes throughout his courtroom.

All of a sudden, in what is essentially the call of Abram, the Lord pronounces blessing upon Abram, his family and all peoples of the earth, matching stride for stride the advance of cursed sin and death. **Five** times the Lord will use some form of the verb *to bless*. Listen: "I will make you into a great nation and I will *bless* you; I will make your name great, and you will be a *blessing*. I will *bless* those who *bless* you . . . and all peoples on earth will be *blessed* through you" (12.2–3, emphases added).

The rest of the Bible narrates the story of divine blessing upon the peoples of the earth through this one family. However, in order for this to happen, Sarai, Abram's wife, must give to Abram a child, if not children. But she is barren (11.30; 16.1), unable to have children. "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (18.14). No, of course not.

Abram and Sarai, both later renamed Abraham and Sarah, become parents to Isaac, who, in turn, will become father to twin boys—Jacob and Esau. Though Esau was born first, he is usually mentioned last because he despised and sold his *birthright* to Jacob (25.33–34) and the *paternal blessing* he was to receive was wrested from him by his cunning and deceptive brother (to say nothing of their manipulative mother Rebekah).

Traditionally, by order of birth, the firstborn received the birthright. According to custom, the firstborn received a double portion of the father's wealth (Deut 21.17). So, in a family of two children, the firstborn would receive two-thirds of that wealth ("a double portion"), with the remaining one-third going to the younger child. This could be a sizeable difference in inheritance, depending, of course, upon the father's wealth. When Esau despised and sold his birthright, he literally gave away a future wealth to satisfy a temporary hunger. (Now *that* is impulse buying!)

Fearing impending death, Isaac wanted to give his blessing to his son Esau before it was too late. No one has to be reminded of the importance of a father's word (or, for that matter, a mother's word) spoken as

blessing upon a child (Prov 25.11). But through a cunning and deceptive ruse, Jacob received the verbal blessing intended for Esau. The ruse involved Jacob, dressed as Esau, presenting Isaac with a tasty meal. After eating, Isaac would then offer words of blessing upon the one he assumed was Esau. This deception was made possible by the fact that Isaac could no longer see (Gen 27.1). Since Esau was a hairy man, Jacob covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with goatskins just in case Isaac touched him (vv. 22–23). Then Jacob donned some of his brother’s clothes so that Isaac would catch the smell of Esau (v. 27). Finally, Rebekah prepared the food in a way that pleased Isaac’s taste.

Failed eyesight, duped with respect to touch, smell, and taste, only the sense of hearing remains. At the crucial moment of deception, Isaac, confused by the voice he hears, asks, “Are you really my son Esau?” To which Jacob replies, “I am” (v. 24). The betrayal is now complete; it is a sickening moment—a son has deceived his father and simultaneously has betrayed his brother. If we remind ourselves that the plan was masterminded by Rebekah, then we also have a mother betraying her son and a wife, her husband. This story is told so masterfully that every reader can see, touch, smell, taste, and hear the sin perpetrated against both Isaac and Esau. Yet, in spite of these despicable acts, Jacob walks away the “blessed” son.

Naturally the narrator turns our attention to this “doubly blessed” son. As the narrator tells the story, in rapid succession Jacob is blessed with wives (Leah and Rachel), handmaids (Bilhah and Zilpah), the famous twelve sons, a daughter (Dinah) and increased flocks and herds.

With the next generation now on the scene, the identity of the firstborn and the blessed son come back into focus. The firstborn was Reuben, identified as such by Jacob himself: “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength” (49.3; see also 35.23). Though he was born first he disqualified himself from the benefits of being firstborn. Genesis 35.22 succinctly tells of the indiscretion: “Reuben went in and slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah, and Israel [= Jacob] heard of it.” First Chronicles 5.1–2 narrates the same event and its consequences. “He was the firstborn, but when he defiled his father’s marriage bed . . . he could not be listed in the genealogical record in accordance with his birthright.”

Simeon and Levi were born second and third respectively, but they disrespected the Shechemites and were dismissed accordingly (see Gen 34 for the details). Jacob responded to his sons, “You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in the land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed” (v. 30).

Who is fourth in line? Judah. The relevant part of his story is found in Genesis 38. The placement of this story at this point in the narrative, within the Joseph Novella (Gen 37–50), is, at first blush, surprising. This Judah story appears to interrupt the just-introduced Joseph story. Though the thoughtful reader could suggest dramatic tension or suspense as the rationale for the placement of this Judah story, or appeal to the importance of shared vocabulary (notice the words *go/went down* at 37.35 and 38.1 or the word *recognized* at 37.33 and again at 38.26), or the importance of a shared theme—deception through clothing (compare 37.31–35 with 38.14–16)—or even a contrast between Tamar and Potiphar’s wife (compare 38.26 with 39.7, 10), the story still seems to be an intentional interruption of the Joseph story. But looks can be deceiving. Judah will play a very prominent role in the developing Joseph novella. With respect to Genesis 38, that role will be seen as both continuation and contrast or, if you will, more-of-the-same and that’s-more-like-it, culminating in the “redemption” of Judah.

To the story! First, with respect to Judah, the plot quickly unfolds as follows: Judah marries. His wife conceives and gives birth to three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. She dies. Second, with respect to these three sons, the plot also unfolds quickly. Er marries Tamar. He dies. According to ancient custom, a living brother is to take Tamar as wife. Onan does. He also dies. According to that same ancient custom, another living brother is to take Tamar as wife. And this is where the plot slows way down.

Judah has married off two sons to Tamar and both have died. The reader knows the reasons for these deaths (see 38.7 and 10), but Judah may not be so knowledgeable. Judah may be assuming that Tamar is bad luck! In fact, Judah says to himself about Shelah, “He may die too, just like his brothers” (v. 11).

When Tamar saw that she was not given to Shelah as wife or, if you prefer, a man (Shelah) was not given to her as husband, she takes matters into her own hands. This is the point at which the lives of Tamar and

Judah significantly and irrevocably intersect. When Tamar learns that her father-in-law is headed to Timnah to shear his sheep, she also travels to Timnah, where she disguises herself, leaving the impression that she is a prostitute. Not realizing that the woman is his daughter-in-law, Judah propositions her. Tamar accepts the offer, making Judah her man. Later, when the details of this sordid story are sorted out, Judah says of Tamar, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah” (v. 26).

Let us review. Reuben is disqualified due to sexual indiscretion: he violated a sexual barrier. Levi and Simeon are disqualified: they violated a covenantal trust. Judah is disqualified: he had sexual contact (incest) with his daughter-in-law. So, who is Jacob’s fifth son? Who did receive the right of the firstborn, that is, a double portion of Jacob’s wealth? The answer: Joseph.

For two reasons this choice makes the most sense. First, Joseph was born first to Jacob’s beloved Rachel. Genesis sets the stage for this decision. Sarai, Rebekah, and Rachel all struggled with infertility, but eventually gave birth to Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, respectively. Though not born first to their fathers, Isaac and Jacob rose to prominence (over Ishmael and Esau). Now the same can be said of Joseph. Second, and most importantly, Joseph saved the entire family from the ravaging effects of famine. In Joseph’s own words: “God sent me ahead of you to preserve a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (45.7; see also 50.20).

Look at a map of ancient Israel, noting tribal distributions. Ephraim and Manasseh are on the map. Who are they? They are not children of Jacob, but rather two of his grandchildren: they are the sons of Joseph. These two represent the double portion of landed wealth! First Chronicles 5.1–2 affirms: “He [Reuben] was the firstborn, but when he defiled his father’s marriage bed, his rights as firstborn were given to the sons of Joseph son of Israel [Jacob]; so he could not be listed in the genealogical record in accordance with his birthright, and though Judah was the strongest of his brothers and a ruler came from him, the rights of the firstborn belonged to Joseph.”

As the Joseph novella begins (prior to the events narrated in Genesis 38), Judah acts in ways that are morally reprehensible, adding to the overall negative assessment of his character. In Genesis 37.4 the narrator tells us that all of the brothers, including Judah, “hated [Joseph] and could not speak a kind word to him” (see also vv. 5, 8 and 11). Their hatred led them to a plot to kill Joseph. “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him” (v. 20). Reuben, who was dealing with reputation management issues—remember the incident reported at 35.22—proposed a less violent approach: “Let’s not take his life. Don’t shed any blood” (37.21–22).

Reuben’s words tamp down the flash-mob mentality, the momentum to kill. Judah then proposes an alternative. “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him” (vv. 26–27). Judah, what a brother! What a saint. Instead of joining in with the brothers (minus Reuben) in killing Joseph, Judah proposes selling Joseph into slavery.

Hatred, intimidation, slave trafficking (of a brother, no less)—Judah is doing well. One more detail to add. Once Joseph is sold to the caravaneers, the brothers have to offer some explanation to Jacob of their brother’s whereabouts. Suffice it to say, they realize that “Father, we sold your favorite son into slavery” will not do, so instead they offer to Jacob a calculated lie. They take Joseph’s famous coat, dipped in goat’s blood, and submit it as proof that some ferocious animal had torn Joseph to pieces, at the same time exonerating themselves from any wrongdoing. The lie works. When Jacob examines the evidence, he concludes: “Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces” (v. 33). All Jacob can do is grieve bitterly for his dead son. Judah and his brothers feign grief for their “dead” brother and their grieving father. Hatred, intimidation, slave trafficking, deception of a father, incest with a daughter-in-law—yes, Judah desperately needs redemption . . . to which the story turns.

First, back to Joseph. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, where he would eventually come to power—second only to Pharaoh, who said to him: “You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you” (41.40).

So Joseph took responsibility for preparing Egypt and the Egyptians for the coming famine, successfully stockpiling grain for the future crisis (v. 56; see also v. 36). And thus, when the famine spread to Canaan,

where the family of Jacob lived, Jacob sent ten sons to Egypt to secure grain for the family. Benjamin was not sent because his father feared that harm might come to him (42.4). Of course harm might befall them all, but Benjamin was the only surviving child born of Jacob's beloved Rachel.

The brothers travelled to Egypt, where they encountered Joseph, though—of course—they did not realize this. Joseph recognized his brothers, charging them with espionage: “You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected” (v. 9; see also vv. 12 and 14). Joseph clearly knew better—he was testing them to see if they had changed over the years.¹ The test would naturally revolve around Benjamin. Simeon was taken and bound, but would be released on one condition: Benjamin would have to come to Egypt (v. 34). Would the sons of Jacob sacrifice another brother (Simeon) to Egypt? Would they foist another lie upon their father to hide the truth about Joseph and now Simeon? Would they return to Egypt with Benjamin, taking the risk of bringing greater grief upon Jacob if something did happen to his beloved Benjamin? Would the animosity they felt earlier toward Joseph be rekindled now against Benjamin?²

When the grain secured from the first trip ran out, the brothers went to Egypt a second time, this time with Benjamin, much to their father's great concern. Judah reassured his father saying, “I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life” (43.9; compare to 42.37).

In Egypt, when Benjamin was threatened with imprisonment, of all the brothers, it is Judah, Judah alone, who pleads with Joseph for the freedom of Benjamin.³ Judah's words are spoken on behalf of Jacob. “So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy's life, sees that the boy isn't there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow” (44.30–31). Judah's concern for his father is so real that he even offers himself in place of Benjamin. “Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord's slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come upon my father” (vv. 33–34).⁴

1. In his book *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), Nahum M. Sarna writes, “Joseph carefully contrives a desperate situation in which the brothers are compelled to show, once and for all, whether they have reformed since the day they so brutally sold him into slavery” (223).

2. Allen P. Ross elaborates on this in *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988). Ross believes that the test was twofold: a test for jealousy and a test of loyalty. Was the brothers' jealousy of Joseph, Jacob's favored son, still alive in the brothers with respect to Benjamin, Jacob's favorite remaining son? The test of loyalty would be passed by showing love for Benjamin and Jacob (656–668). With respect to the test for jealousy, John Walton points out in *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) that “he [Joseph] needs to have Benjamin there for the test he has in mind to discover whether his full brother is being treated in the same way he was” (678).

3. In *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), John H. Sailhamer observes, “Though it is through Judah's speech that the reader is again reminded of the brothers' guilt, we should not lose sight of the fact that once again it was Judah who intervened on behalf of Benjamin and ultimately, within the narrative, it was his words which saved the day” (222).

4. Joyce Baldwin has written, “Judah begged to be allowed to become a substitute for Benjamin. He could not have proved more effectively the genuineness of his love for his father and of his repentance for the blame he had incurred in selling Joseph (37:26). It is a vivid example of the change that God can bring about in a person, even someone as ‘earthy’ as Judah. The Lord had been at work to make his people what he wanted them to become” (*The Message of Genesis 12–50* [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1986], 187). Writing of Judah, Claus Westermann adds, “He prefers to take the punishment upon himself rather than cause his father distress yet again. It is indeed vicarious suffering. . . . The healing of a breach is possible only when there is one who is ready to take the suffering upon oneself” (*Genesis 12–50* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986], 138).

Gary E. Schnittjer, *The Torah Story* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 167. In *Midrash Rabbah Genesis*, vol. 2 (New York: The Soncino Press, 1983), H. Freedman captures Judah thinking, when he gave himself for Benjamin, “Perhaps the Holy One, blessed be He, will forgive me for my sin in deceiving my father, assuring him, ‘I will bring him back to thee’” (863). Walton adds this description of Judah: “He would rather bear slavery than blame. He is selflessly willing to accept his own misery rather than put others in misery. This transformation of the brothers represented in Judah is every bit as miraculous as the transformation in the status of Joseph” (*Genesis*, 682).

The redemption of Judah is now complete. He willingly offers himself to spare his father misery and free from slavery his youngest brother. What a remarkable contrast with chapter 37, when he cared little for his father's well-being and sold a younger brother into slavery. When Joseph sees the transformation in Judah, he calls out, "I am Joseph!" (45.3), one of the most dramatic moments recorded in all of Scripture. Schnittjer writes, "The high point of the sons of Jacob stories comes when Judah offered himself in place of his brother. This event resolves the two-decade-plus family fracture that resulted from the crime against Joseph and the lie to Israel. . . . Because of Judah the family had been divided. Because of changed Judah's self-sacrifice, the family was reunited. Jacob would again see the son of his beloved Rachel."⁵

Not surprisingly then, when Jacob gathers his sons together to offer his patriarchal blessing, it is Judah who receives the preeminent role. "Judah, your brothers will praise you; your hand will be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. . . . The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (49.8, 10). This prominence is reflected geographically by the fact that the name of Judah is used later to refer to the southern kingdom (for example, 1 Kgs 14.21; see also Heb 8.8).

In light of this blessing/promise, it is not at all surprising to find the New Testament linking Judah to Jesus, the one to whom the scepter, staff, and obedience of the nations belong. This is done by Matthew in Jesus's genealogy (Matt 1.2–3), by the author of Hebrews in linking Jesus to kingship (7.14), and triumphantly by John in Revelation 5.5: "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed." Judah has been redeemed and within his descendants we find our Redeemer, Jesus.

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