



'I have chosen . . .!' (God)

A discussion about two brothers whose destinies collided
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The Abraham line of succession reaches a watershed moment when Jacob ends up with too many sons (and wives). Prior to this, the line was fairly predictable: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham's brothers were never in contention. Ishmael was sent off into exile so he would not be a threat to Isaac. Jacob ensured that Esau could not stand in his way by defrauding him of two important succession criteria, birthright (Gen 25) and birth blessing (Gen 27).

The next generation becomes an unmitigated disaster. Jacob had 10 sons from Leah (6) and the two concubines (4) but only 2 sons from Rachel, his chosen and loved bride. The story behind this state of affairs is in itself a tale of great love and tragedy, but it is not for this study. Therefore, we need to move on to the struggle for succession.

However, we should back track somewhat to understand the story about to unfold. It is crucial to consider the primary literary technique employed in

Genesis with regards to succession lines. In every single instance, the person who is introduced or mentioned last in a narrative sequence is the holder of the succession line, the one through whom the redemptive line would run. Additionally, in every case, the sons who would not inherit the line are factored out of the narrative. The following examples evidence this simple technique:

- Gen 4: Adam's immediate heir was neither Cain nor Abel. Cain was the firstborn and natural heir but he is written out of the story by murdering his brother. Abel was the second son but is also factored out by being killed. The successor was the third son, Seth.
- Gen 10: Noah had three sons and their family lines are traced in this chapter. First, the descendants of Japheth are recorded and they moved away from the biblical lands. Next, we read the same thing happening to Ham's descendants. Shem's descendants are mentioned last and they occupied the bulk of the biblical world. One of Shem's descendants is Eber from whose name is derived the term Hebrew (the first designation for Abraham's people before being replaced with Ben-Yisra'el or the Israelites).
- Gen 11: Terah, a descendant of Shem, had 3 sons, Haran, Nahor and Abraham. Haran died in Ur before the clan migration began. Nahor mysteriously disappears from the account. When the clan began its migration to Haran (Padan Aram), only Abraham is mentioned. In Haran, Abraham is called by God (Gen 12) to start the true redemptive line.

In the case of Jacob, 12 sons created a genuine dilemma and the choice of heir became more difficult. As was customary for the time and culture, the firstborn son should have been the natural heir. If we follow the chronology of birth then we have Rueben, Simeon, Levi and Judah (all sons of Leah) as possible candidates for succession and Joseph the first son of Rachel. As the story unfolds, Jacob was determined to make Joseph his heir because he saw Rachel as his true wife and Joseph as his true first born. That is when the story gets interesting.

In Gen 34, Simeon and Levi led a murderous rampage against the city of Shechem and committed a form of genocide, totally obliterating the city and

its inhabitants. By doing this, they took themselves out of the equation of succession. While Levi's descendants would be rehabilitated in the book of Exodus and be granted special status as the clergy tribe, Simeon's descendants simply became a footnote in history.

In Gen 35, Rueben, the eldest son and natural heir, committed an unthinkable act; he had sexual relations with one of Jacob's concubines. While Jacob did not immediately react, he would use this episode as a way of taking Rueben out of the equation of succession (see Gen 49).

In Gen 37, the ultimate narrative movement occurs. Jacob pushed through his plan of making Joseph his heir by giving him a royal robe. Joseph himself had dreams which seemed to confirm this. The text never says that God gave these dreams but Joseph seemed convinced even though his father appeared a bit reticent. All of this was too much for the brothers and as fate would have it, they found a way to remove Joseph from the scene. He ended up being a slave in Egypt and then ruler. He marries the daughter of Egypt's high priest and is given an Egyptian name. He is disconnected from his clan by over a decade. All the while he is moved further and further from the succession line.

In Gen 38, we encounter the final introduction of a son of Jacob. His name was Judah and his quick thinking hit two birds with one stone: Joseph is out of the way and Judah becomes the dominant character in the rest of the book. Nevertheless, Judah left the clan immediately after the Joseph episode and attempted to start his own clan (Gen 38). Since he was 5th in the succession line, it was probably a smart move as he had no real chance of becoming heir, a little like Prince Harry in our own time who left the British Royals knowing his chance of succession is slim.

While Jacob intended to make Joseph his heir, God had other plans. By Gen 44.14 we discover that Judah had become the leader. On his death bed, Jacob was fully on board with God's plans as his final words reveal this shift. His blessing to Joseph included the phrase, 'a prince among brothers' (literal reading of Gen 49.26), whereas Judah is proclaimed king.

Judah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the necks of your enemies; your father's sons will bow down to you. Judah is a young

lion—my son, you return from the kill. He crouches; he lies down like a lion or a lioness—who dares to rouse him? The sceptre will not depart from Judah or the staff from between his feet until He whose right it is comes and the obedience of the peoples belongs to Him. (Gen 49.8-10)

The final part of these words has been understood to be a messianic prophecy in both Judaism and Christianity.

The psalmist Asaph, centuries later, confirmed God's choice in the following lines.

He (Yahweh) rejected the tent of Joseph and did not choose the tribe of Ephraim. He chose instead the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which He loved. (Ps 78.67-68)

Our love affair with the Joseph stories often ignores this simple truth: he was not God's chosen. Yes, God aided Joseph in his difficult journey and Joseph developed great faith in God. However, Judah was chosen by God to carry on the succession line leading all the way to the messiah. In the very last book of the Bible we read that Jesus is the 'Lion from the tribe of Judah' (Rev 5.5).

A little aside at this point. Why was Judah chosen by God? When we examine the stories, we get a clearer insight.

- In Gen 37, Judah actually saved Joseph from certain death by suggesting they sell him as slave rather than shed blood. The method may be dubious but it had a good outcome.
- In Gen 38, he saved his daughter-in-law Tamar from death by rectifying a bad situation he had created for her.
- In Gen 43, he saved the clan from extinction by persuading Jacob to permit Benjamin to travel with them to Egypt as Joseph had demanded. Reuben tried but Jacob refused to listen to him. Judah then became the clan's deliverer.
- In Gen 44, Judah turned family intercessor by attempting to convince Joseph not to take the life of Benjamin. It was his moving defence which ultimately turned the heart of Joseph and led to the reconciliation.

God chose Judah because of his salvific nature. Jacob wanted to choose Joseph as his heir, but God overruled him and picked Judah instead. Judah was the man who did not have a realistic chance of being the heir but became the ancestor of great destiny. Judah exemplifies the faith of most people who do seem to have what it takes for great destiny but end up being called 'children of God'.

Shalom!