

In the halls of power

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Genesis 37
Romans 10:5-15

Ours is a complicated family story. It is not just the human element though that is complex enough. It's God, the God of Great Grandfather Abraham that makes it tricky to tell. You can't really *tell* our family story without telling God's story too.

Maybe you have experienced that in your own family? Looking back at crucial points you start to understand that something was going on, something beyond what makes sense, beyond logic. But what is it? Is it God?

Our family lore is that great grandfather Abraham had very direct contact, a relationship really, with God. Not just any god but the one God who made heaven and earth. God told him when to move, where to live and even made promises that seemed outlandish, but have since proven true. This happened not only to Abraham but also to his slave. Even Hagar had visits from God's messenger and heard God's voice.

My grandfather, Isaac, was the son that God promised to Abraham and Sarah. And God is in the love story of how Grandpa found a wife, my grandmother Rebekah.

My own father, Jacob, was rather wily and crafty and didn't always play by the rules. He sort of stole the inheritance from his brother. But when Papa tells the story it seems like it was just youthful indiscretion. Even though he was looking out for himself and not following the traditions, he says God still blessed him. Papa tells several stories about God coming to him in the night. When things looked pretty bleak, God met him and blessed him in unexpected ways.

I don't claim to understand all of this God stuff; it certainly hasn't been my experience to have dreams, meet strangers and wrestle with angels. Frankly, as the oldest in the family, it worries me. Tradition has it that the oldest, that would

be me, Reuben, should receive the father's blessing and receive the bulk of the inheritance. Problem is, it just hasn't worked that way in our family and it seems like God gets the credit for that.

Isaac was younger than Ishmael, but Isaac got the blessing because God wanted it that way. Then Papa tricked Grandpa Isaac into giving the blessing to Papa instead of Uncle Esau who, as the eldest, should have received it. Admittedly, Esau was only minutes older since they were twins but still there are rules and traditions to follow. Apparently God doesn't have to follow the traditions.

In my own generation things are not *any less* complicated. My brothers and I live with quite a village. Leah – **my** mother – and her younger sister Rachel, as well as Leah's maid, Zilpah, and Rachel's maid, Bilhah, are the mothers. Add it all up: four wives, 12 sons and one daughter. Given how our family seems to operate, I guess it is not surprising that I haven't received my rightful due as the oldest.

I lay some of the blame on Papa. He has never hidden the fact that he loves Rachel most even though she couldn't give him any children for many years. This created no little tension between Mama and Rachel, since Mama was the older one and was once again receiving the lesser part. We boys, from all the mothers, sort of picked up on that I suppose and have had an ongoing rivalry.

Life is good; don't get me wrong. Papa made out well when he left Uncle Laban's household. We have lots of sheep and goats, donkeys, camels and plenty of servants to help with all the tending and feeding. We work hard. Sometimes Papa reminds us that God is blessing us, that the promises God made are being fulfilled.

But there are hard times too. I remember when Rachel, the favorite wife, and Grandpa Isaac died in the same season. Papa had just received another vision from God that all the land that was *great* grandpa's and grandpa's was now to be his. And then, just like God changed great grandpa Abraham's name, God changed Papa's name, from Jacob to Israel. (To be honest, a lot of people still call him Jacob most of the time.) After the promise of land and the name

change, Papa had us boys set up a pillar at Bethel to mark the spot and remember the significant experience.

Out of this blessing, tragedy struck. Rachel was pregnant and she started to go into labor as we were on the road to Ephrath. We stopped to let her give birth, but it was hard. The midwife said she barely hung on to see the baby. She lived long enough to name the boy “son of my sorrow” or Ben-Oni. But Papa didn’t want to saddle the little one with such a tough name. After Rachel died he changed the name to “son of my right hand” or Benjamin.

Papa’s heart was broken. Women often die in childbirth, it just hadn’t happened in our family. Rachel was his beloved. The grief was palpable and some of us got impatient with the wailing and weeping.

Maybe it was all the crying that made me do what I did next. Was I acting out of anger, trying to be a real man or just pretending to comfort the women at this loss? I went to Bilhah’s tent, (mother of my brothers Dan and Naphtali) and there I became a man. Bilhah was not enthusiastic about my coming to her but what could she do? She is a woman, only a concubine. I am a man, stronger and more powerful, at least physically. I admit it wasn’t a smart move and certainly not thought through carefully.

Papa was not pleased when he heard about it. He said to me, “Did you learn nothing from the experience with your sister Dinah? Men cannot just go to women without permission. Is it not enough that your brothers killed all the men of Shechem to revenge Dinah’s rape? Now you should violate my concubine as well?” Yes, my conniving father had all these women, but when would he ever find wives for his boys. When was he ever going to find me a wife?

After this Papa wanted to be with his father so we returned to Hebron. We weren’t there long before Grandpa died as well.

To be honest, we have had a lot of difficult times as a family. Rachel’s oldest son, Joseph, has caused no end of trouble. Being the son of Rachel of course he is Papa’s favorite. He never had to get his hands dirty. He got out of doing regular chores. Papa even gave him a special coat, with long sleeves,

since he never had to worry about dragging the sleeves in the mud or sheep dung.

Joseph's main job as he got older, though he was called a herder, was following after Bilhah and Zilpah's sons to make sure they were caring for the flocks adequately. Of course, as his older brothers, they were touchy about the responsibility he was given over them. You might expect him to have some respect or at least camaraderie with his brothers. But, not Joseph. He never had a nice word to say to our father about how Dan, Naphtali, Gad or Asher did their work. They hated him for it. Believe me, there was no peace between us and certainly no love.

Part of the problem was that Joseph is like Papa; he had dreams. Not dreams from God like Papa had, but dreams that seemed to elevate himself above the rest of the family. Just one more reason for all of us to hate him.

One time, all of us brothers had gone to Shechem, the land of the infamous rape of our sister, to take the herds to fresh pasture. Papa asked Joseph to go and check on us. It was no small trip, a good two days journey for him, but whatever Papa asked, Joseph did. When he got to Shechem we weren't there. He wandered around looking for us. Someone saw him walking the fields and told him we had gone on further to Dothan. I have often wondered if that was one of God's messengers, like people in our family seem to meet. If it was, God sure has strange ways. It would have been better for Joseph to stay clear of Dothan and those of us who hated him.

We could see him coming toward us across the fields. You can spot that crazy, colorful, long sleeved coat clear across the kingdom. I was reminded of the story that Papa tells about returning home after so many years of working for Mama's father, Laban. Papa was scared that he would not be welcome, that Esau would be angry or even attack him. But Uncle Esau ran to meet him, receiving him with open arms.

My brothers were not as forgiving or full of love as Uncle Esau. We were away from home, far from any observers. One of the boys got the idea that we should kill Joseph and throw his body into a cistern to rot. But no matter what a

pain he is, I couldn't let them kill Joseph like that. My father may not give me the respect due the eldest, but I still feel some responsibility for the family. I convinced them to put him in the cistern alive, thinking that I could come rescue him later and take him back to Papa.

As Joseph came closer we could tell he had no idea what was about to befall him. The boys started their regular taunting of him. It didn't take long for them to act on the rest of their plan. They stripped off his coat and then dumped him in the pit.

We all moved a distance away, so we couldn't hear him yelling and calling out. We fixed some dinner, even using some of the supplies Joseph had been carrying with him. I couldn't eat though. I was trying to figure out how I was going to get Joseph out of that pit and home to our father.

I went for a walk to think and plan. While I was gone, the boys saw some merchant traders in the distance. Ishmaelites they were, distant relatives probably. Their camels were loaded with spices and myrrh to trade and sell in Egypt. Judah had the great idea that Joseph could be sold; they could make a little money and not be responsible for his death. The others thought this a brilliant idea so they pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him for 20 pieces of silver to the next traders that came by. Joseph was on his way to Egypt as a slave. So much for dreams about the whole family worshipping him, bowing down to him!

Of course I knew none of this. I got back to the group with my rescue plan formulated, but Joseph was gone. The pit was empty. I was distraught, ripping my clothes and now putting on my own show of wailing. What kind of eldest brother am I that allows his younger brother to be sold into slavery?

With Joseph on his way to Egypt, it was decided he was as good as dead. We killed a goat and drenched Joseph's distinctive coat in blood. We would present it to Papa and let him draw his own conclusions.

When we got home we showed the coat to our father. He recognized it at once, realizing that Joseph must have been killed by a wild beast. Predictably he fell to pieces. Again his favorite — gone. We tried to comfort him, the wives, the

sons, even the servants, but he was inconsolable. He insisted he would never be happy again, as long as he lived.

It was many years before we learned what happened to Joseph when he got to Egypt. It seems he was once more the favored one, this time among the Pharaoh's guard. And knowing him, he probably reveled in that power too. In fact when we brothers first met him again years later, we did not recognize him and he did not tell us who he was. He toyed with us, letting us grovel at his feet, fulfilling that dream he had dreamed as a boy.

The whole episode in Egypt is too long, and too emotional, to tell. After it was all over, people realized what an important story it really is even though our family was not all that special. We had our weaknesses, certainly our conflicts. And yet our story survives. It is our family story that continues to resonate with weak and conflicted families all over the world, throughout the generations.

But I still wonder how does this God of our family work through our failings, through our differences? Joseph went from the pasture pit to the palace halls of power. He was safer in a foreign palace, even in the palace prison, than with our family. And through it all, we tell the story as if God was with him, blessing him, watching over him.

What about me? Does this God of my great grandfather have any compassion for me? I know I didn't always follow the traditions but then neither did our father. Does this God have favorites too, just like Papa? How does this One God work?

It makes no sense, but the way we tell the story it seems this God works through weakness, through conflict, through sorry humans that dream and wander and wrestle. I just hope that someday I will see how God was working through my own weakness.