

Judah

I am Judah, fourth son of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel and became our national name, Israelites. My mother was Leah. Therefore, I was not the oldest and not the son of the favorite wife. I was not even a particularly good example to my brothers or source of joy to my parents although I did show some good streaks. I will give you examples of my spotty record.

My brothers and I had taken all the aggravation we could from our irritating little brother Joseph. Then father sent him to check up on us as we pastured the sheep in Dothan. I don't remember who said it but there was a strong consensus to kill him. Reuben argued for not taking his life and just putting him into a cistern. Reuben actually had a plan to later rescue him. When a party of Ishmaelites came along I said, "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; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood."

There are several ways to look at that speech. I was not calling for his death but still arguing for getting rid of him. Of course, I later found out that it was the will of the LORD. So, I was unwittingly receiving a message from the LORD – which perhaps makes me an ignorant prophet? Not a particularly noble prophet for sure. When our food ran out in the famine we went to Egypt and bowed before Joseph – we didn't know yet it was him. We were playing out the exact scenario his dreams had predicted, Joseph toyed with us and called us spies. As we brothers tried to make sense of the situation, Reuben was the first to express guilt for what we had done. We were told that we must leave Simeon as a hostage and bring our other brother back next time or we all would die.

When we came home with the food, I tried to deal with our father to make him realize that if we went back a second time without Benjamin, all our lives would be in danger. I personally guaranteed his safety to Jacob. Later when we had brought Benjamin to Egypt, he was accused of stealing a valuable cup. It looked like this powerful Egyptian would make him a slave, so I offered to take his place. That's the extent of the positive side of my ledger.

I was with my brothers when we destroyed the Shechemites for the rape of our sister Dinah. I don't know how you want to classify that situation. Shechem, son of Hamor, had done a terrible thing. As he offered to marry Dinah, we deceived him and his entire tribe to believe that if they were all circumcised, we could freely intermarry. Three days after all the men had been circumcised and were so sore they could not fight, Simeon and Levi killed them all and we looted their city and captured the women and children. Jacob was not pleased and said we had made ourselves a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites.

The major sin in my life, however, happened after we sent Joseph into slavery. I met a Canaanite woman named Shua and married her. She had two sons, named Er and Onan. When they were grown, I got a wife for Er named Tamar. Something happened between Er and the LORD and he was killed. According to the tradition of our people, his brother should produce an heir for him. Onan deceitfully made sure that Tamar would not become pregnant. This was wicked in the sight of the LORD and he also died. I promised my next son Shelah to Tamar when he grew up. Tamar returned to her parents to wait but Shelah grew up and was not offered to her.

About that time my wife died. I journeyed to the place where my sheep were being shorn and Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute. I did not recognize her and asked to sleep with her. She asked what I would give and I promised a goat, leaving my seal, cord and staff as pledge. I tried to deliver the promised goat and inquired of the locals about the shrine prostitute. They said there was no prostitute there. She conceived. Later word came to me that my daughter in law had been guilty of

prostitution and I self-righteously said, “Bring her out and have her burned to death.” She sent me a message, “I am pregnant by the man who owns these.” Then she held out the seal, cord and staff. I was humiliated and said, “She is more righteous than I.” I did not take her as wife. She gave birth to twins, Perez and Zerah. Jacob accepted them as my sons. What a way to build a family!

Now listen to the blessing my father pronounced over me as he lay dying. You will think he is describing a powerful, virtuous heroic figure. “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. You are a lion’s cub, O Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness — who dares to rouse him? 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. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.”

I felt like the black sheep of the family – and although there was a lot of competition for that “honor,” I really was pretty depraved. But what have I learned since entering the eternal kingdom? My son Perez was to be in the line of the greatest king of Israel, David. Which means that he was also in the line to produce the long-awaited Messiah, the hope of Israel, the one who would crush the head of the serpent while being bruised in the heel.

Who is like the LORD, great in power, great in wisdom but most of all great in mercy and love? He took my act of selfishness and lust and turned it into the answer to the promise made to my great grandfather Abraham, "All nations will be blessed through you." I praise the LORD with all my being!

Genesis 37 - 50