

Leaven

Volume 24

Issue 4 *The Joseph Story*

Article 9

1-1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Ashlock, Rodney (2016) "A Good Leader Is Hard To Find," *Leaven*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 , Article 9.

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A Good Leader Is Hard To Find

Rodney Ashlock

According to Mark Searby, in his book *The Resilient Pastor*, we are facing a leadership crisis today as many churches struggle to find effective ministers and lay leaders in the midst of tumultuous times.¹ But searching for and finding good and faithful leaders for God's people is hardly a new problem. The Bible is replete with examples of judges, kings, priests, and prophets who are corrupted by power and whom scripture evaluates in very negative ways.² Arthur Boers depicts the problem this way, "Positive leader terminology is scant in the scriptures. Few office holders are regarded favorably. Official rulers usually looked out for interests contrary to God's purposes; their characters are deficient. Good rulers are exceptions."³ Given this negative appraisal of what the Bible has to say about leaders it may seem rather foolish to try and draw from scripture any principles or characteristics of effective leadership. Yet, I believe that by comparing and contrasting the characters of Joseph and Judah with that of David, Israel's greatest king, we may glean some insight into what it takes to be a faithful leader of God's people.⁴ In order to accomplish this task, we will first turn our attention to the Joseph narrative (Gen 37–50), where we initially learn of the importance and significance of the two principal sons of Jacob—Joseph and Judah.⁵

Juxtaposing Judah and Joseph

The Joseph narrative quickly reveals Joseph's exalted status by highlighting the special robe he receives from his father (37.3)⁶ and the dreams he has with his family members bowing down before him (vv. 5–11). While Joseph's rise to power and acclaim is familiar to most readers of the Bible, Judah's rise to prominence is more obscure.⁷ Primarily, Judah serves as the spokesperson for the ten older brothers of Joseph throughout the Joseph narrative. It is Judah who suggests selling Joseph as a slave to the band of merchants heading to Egypt

1. Mark A. Searby, *The Resilient Pastor: Ten Principles for Developing Pastoral Resilience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015), 2.

2. For examples, see 2 Kings 17; Isaiah 28.7–8; Micah 3.9–12 and Matthew 23.

3. Arthur Boers, *Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 77.

4. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, *Reading the Historical Books: A Student's Guide To Engaging the Biblical Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2014), 85–91, uses the term *modeling* to describe the process whereby the biblical narrative writers establish "a particular character from one part of a story as a model with which other characters can be compared." This narrative technique only works if the character is famous or well known to the audience. Figures such as Joseph, Judah and David would have been well known to ancient Jewish and early Christian audiences. For examples, see Psalm 105, Acts 7 and Hebrews 11.

5. David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 271.

6. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986), 37, notes that the garment "is not only a fine present from the father to the beloved son; it also sets Joseph apart from his brothers."

7. While Joseph is the obvious protagonist of Genesis 37–50, Judah's role in the story should not be underestimated (37.26–27; 38.1–30; 43.3–10; 44.14–34; 46.28; and 49.8–12).

(vv. 26–27). Next, Judah guarantees the safety of Joseph’s younger brother Benjamin when the older brothers are sent to Egypt to buy grain a second time (43.3–10). Finally, in Genesis 44.18–34, Judah pleads to Joseph to spare Benjamin and offers to serve the prison sentence in place of their youngest brother, who has been accused of stealing Joseph’s silver cup of divination.

A second way in which the Joseph story emphasizes the leadership roles of the brothers is through the blessings each one receives from Jacob in Genesis 49. Jacob appears to reserve the primary blessing for Joseph (vv. 22–26) as he underscores the fruitful bounty of the land Joseph’s descendants will inherit. He also gives a slight hint of the royal status that will accompany the tribes of Joseph:

Your father’s blessings are greater
 than the blessings of the ancient mountains,
 than the bounty of the age-old hills.
 Let all these rest on the head of Joseph,
 on the brow of the prince⁸ among his brothers. (v. 26)

To underscore Joseph’s role as a leader not only among his brothers but also in Egypt, the Pharaoh had placed Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt after he had successfully interpreted his dreams concerning future famine in the land (41.41–44). As further reward, he also gave Joseph an Egyptian wife, Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest. She bore him two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (vv. 50–52), who later become the principal tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel or Samaria.

Prior to the blessing that Jacob speaks to Joseph, the great ancestor of Israel states the following to Judah:

The scepter will not depart from Judah,
 nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,
 until he to whom it belongs shall come
 and the obedience of the nations shall be his. (49.10)

The phrase, “the scepter will not depart from Judah,” receives its fulfillment in the days of David, who descends from Judah (2 Sam 7). The link between these two great ancestors of Israel is forged by the stories of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 and the genealogy in Ruth 4.12, 18–22. Taken together, these two sons of Jacob constitute the two kingdoms that will coexist from 1 Kings 12—2 Kings 17. Rulers and kings will descend from their tribal lines. Given the special and exalted status of these two brothers, it should come as no surprise that their stories invite comparisons with many events in the life of David.⁹

Juxtaposing Joseph and David

As younger brothers, both Joseph (Gen 37.12–28) and David (1 Sam 17.17–26) are sent on missions by their fathers to check on the well being (*shalom*) of their older brothers. When each arrives at their destination they encounter the animosity of the older brothers (Gen 37.18–20 and 1 Sam 17.28). When Joseph catches up with his brothers who are shepherding their father’s flock at Dothan, they scheme his demise, “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams” (Gen 37.19–20). Likewise, David’s older brothers are not exactly thrilled to see their youngest brother when he arrives at the army camp, “When Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, ‘Why have you come down here? And with

8. The word *nazir* means “one consecrated or devoted,” thus possibly signifying a prince. See also Deuteronomy 33.16 and Lamentations 4.7. Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 634.

9. Dutcher-Walls, 72, states that, “The figure of David, the king who ruled over a united Israel and Judah, seems to be the single most present concept throughout the historical writing.” As such a figure, it is no surprise that, from a narrative and theological perspective, his shadow casts long not only upon those who followed him, but also upon those who preceded him.

whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle” (1 Sam 17.28). One may assume that David’s brothers were just as jealous of him after watching his anointing in 1 Samuel 16.1–12 as Joseph’s brothers were after listening to him go on with his dreams about them bowing down to him, not once, but twice (Gen 37.5–11).

The two share other features as well. Each is given a physical description: Joseph is “beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance” (Gen 39. 6) while David is “beautiful of eyes and good to look at” (1 Sam 16.12).¹⁰ Each is taken from his father’s house and placed in the house of another more powerful man. Joseph’s brothers sell him to a caravan of traders on their way to Egypt, where Potiphar, a high-ranking official of the Pharaoh, buys him and places him over his household (Gen 37.25–28; 39.1–4). After David’s defeat of Goliath, Saul takes David from his father’s house and brings him back to the king’s own home (1 Samuel 17–18). While residing with these powerful men, both Joseph and David experience success because God is with them (Gen 39.1–4 and 1 Sam 18.12–30).

Finally, each of them has a life-changing encounter with another man’s wife. In Joseph’s case, he is a servant being seduced by Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39.7–13). He has very little power, yet resists her requests or demands. David, on the other hand, has all kinds of power as king of Israel and takes Uriah the Hittite’s wife, Bathsheba (2 Sam 11). However, the reason that Joseph gives for not acquiescing to his master’s wife’s requests to sleep with her is that he does not want to “sin against God” (Gen 39.9) and, when confronted with his sin by Nathan, David confesses, “I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Sam 12.13). Both Joseph and David use very similar language to acknowledge the seriousness of their situations, which suggests that as readers we are invited to make comparisons between these important figures.¹¹

Juxtaposing Judah and David

Just as the stories surrounding Joseph and David share many common features, so do narratives involving Judah and David. But for the purpose of this article, we will focus on only one—their relationships with individuals who share the name Tamar.¹² Judah’s Tamar is his daughter-in-law, who we meet in Genesis 38. She is the young woman who Judah takes to be the wife of his eldest son, Er. We are told that there was something evil about Er and the Lord killed him. As a result, Tamar was given to Judah’s second son, Onan, who, according to the levirate marriage principle (Deut 25.5–6), had the responsibility to produce an heir to continue the line of his older brother who died before he had a son. Onan refuses to fulfill his duty as levir and is also killed by the Lord. Judah then promises his third son, Shelah, to Tamar, but fails to give her to him fearing his fate will be the same as his two older brothers. Recognizing that Judah has no intention of giving her to Shelah, she seizes an opportunity to deceive her father-in-law and becomes pregnant by him and bears twins, thus securing her future and continuing the line of Judah that will eventually produce David.¹³

The Tamar in David’s story is his daughter and the full sister of his third son Absalom. Just as Judah impregnates his daughter-in-law in an illicit relationship, so David’s oldest son, Amnon, rapes his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam 13). In both stories further violence or the threat of violence ensues. Judah threatens to have

10. Dutcher-Walls, 52–53, stresses that the physical description of characters in the Old Testament is rare, so when it does occur we should pay careful attention to it.

11. *Ibid.*, 79–81, points out that one of the primary features of Hebrew narratives is the use of analogies across texts. This feature occurs when “repetition of words and phrases not only works within a small section of text but also can work across texts that are separated by many chapters” (79). Though Joseph and David use a different divine name, the situations they face and their responses to temptation/confrontation are strikingly similar.

12. Parallels between Joseph and Tamar also abound: (1) both Tamar and Joseph wear a special, ornamented robe or garment—the only two people who wear this type of garment in the Old Testament, described in Genesis 37.3 and 2 Samuel 13.18–19; (2) just as Joseph attempts to reason with Potiphar’s wife in Genesis 39.9, so Tamar tries to persuade Amnon to marry her rather than raping her in 2 Samuel 13.12–13; and (3) neither is successful as Joseph is falsely accused of attempted rape and winds up in prison, recorded in Genesis 39.20–23, while Tamar is raped and spends the rest of her life in her brother’s house as a prisoner of sorts, noted in 2 Samuel 13.20.

13. Numbers 26.19–22 and Ruth 4. 18–22.

Tamar burned for playing the harlot, while Absalom, David's third son and full brother of Tamar, kills his half-brother Amnon in revenge.¹⁴

What We Can Learn

Having looked at the characters of Joseph, Judah, and David and seeing how they serve as models for our learning, I want to focus our attention on how these ancient stories might aid us as God's people today as we look for leaders in our churches.¹⁵ By juxtaposing Joseph and David, we saw that they both enjoyed success in the house of other, more powerful men. Why were they successful? The texts make no bones about it: the Lord is with them. In Genesis 39, while in both Potiphar's house and the jailhouse, we are told four times that "the Lord is with Joseph" (vv. 2, 3, 21, 23). As a result, Joseph finds favor in eyes of both Potiphar and the chief jailer, and enjoys success in both places. In David's case, the servants of Saul have heard that the Lord is with David and give that as a reason to bring him into the house of Saul to play the lyre and calm him down when he is having one his fits (1 Sam 16.18). Later, David experiences success in the house of Saul and we are informed that the reason for that success is that "the Lord is with him" (18.12, 14, 28).

I think two observations are in order with regard to this principle. First, when seeking leaders for our churches we should be looking for people who exhibit habits and behaviors that God's spirit is *already* at work in their lives. Far too often, we may find ourselves in a place where we ask or appoint someone to a position of leadership, *hoping* this person will begin cultivating his or her spiritual life. Using Joseph and David as models, we remind ourselves of the importance of finding people to serve in leadership positions who already exhibit the characteristics that indicate that the Lord is with them.

The second observation is related to the first one. Both the Joseph and David narratives highlight that it was *obvious* the spirit was at work in their lives: *When his master saw* that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant (Gen 39.3–4, emphasis added). Potiphar recognizes that the success that Joseph enjoys and his own house benefits from is due to the presence of the Lord in Joseph's life. Another example of someone recognizing that the Lord was with Joseph comes a little later in the story. Prior to Joseph's appointment as the second-in-command of all of Egypt, Pharaoh recognizes the divine spirit at work in the life of Joseph in his ability to interpret dreams: "So Pharaoh asked them, 'Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?'" (41.38).

Moreover, though David was becoming a source of concern and anxiety for Saul, the king of Israel still recognized that the Lord was with the son of Jesse: "In everything he did he had great success, because the LORD was with him. *When Saul saw* how successful he was, he was afraid of him" (1 Sam 18.14–15, emphasis added). And again, a little later in the same chapter, "*when Saul realized* that the LORD was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy the rest of his days (vv. 28–29, emphasis added).

As churches go through the process of looking for ministers and shepherds, perhaps we can glean an important principle from the above stories. We should not have to guess whether or not the Lord is with a person. It should be obvious to people that the spirit of God is already at work in the lives of the individuals we seek to place in positions of leadership in our congregations, even before they assume these roles of leadership.

A second trait or characteristic we should be looking for in our leaders can be found by comparing David with Judah. In this story we learn that good leaders can be very flawed, but they have *the capacity to admit their mistakes and repent*. In Judah's case, when he learns that he is the one who impregnated Tamar, he

14. Two other smaller features appear both in the story of Judah and that of David. First, Judah takes for himself a wife who is the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua. Hence, she could be referred to as Bath-Shua. David's most famous wife is, of course, Bathsheba. Second, both Judah and David form friendships or make alliances with non-Israelites and each spends time in Adullam (Gen 38.1 and 1 Sam 22.1).

15. Dutcher-Walls, 84–91, discusses how repetition across texts creates patterns and sets up models for readers to either emulate or disassociate themselves from certain characters. I want to suggest that even though Joseph, Judah, and David lived long ago and in a very different world, we can still learn important lessons with regard to what we should be seeking in leaders today. In other words, these stories invite pastoral reflection.

confesses, “She is more righteous than I” (Gen 38.26a). We are also told that he did not go in to her again (26b). In other words, he changed his behavior. David likewise acknowledges his sexual misconduct with regard to Bathsheba and, when confronted by Nathan the prophet, acknowledges, “I have sinned against the Lord,” and prays and fasts before God (2 Sam 12.13–23).

It is a far too rare occurrence when a person in a position of power is willing to admit they are in the wrong and, though it may be hard for us to appreciate, we need to recognize the power that both Judah and David wield in their respective situations. Judah certainly controls the fortune and fate of his daughter-in-law. David, as king of Israel, certainly has power over Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan.¹⁶ Yet neither abuses his power in a critical moment. Judah could have gone through with the burning of Tamar and probably would have gotten away with it. David most certainly could have ordered the execution of the prophet. But neither did abuse their power and, even if it is a small consolation given the gravity of each situation, their willingness to restrain their emotions and admit their sin does commend them.¹⁷ When conducting searches for church leaders, we often search in vain for that perfect person. What we might want to be looking for instead are people who are willing to acknowledge their sins and mistakes and consequently change their behaviors.

I would also like to suggest that what lies behind both Judah’s and David’s admission of guilt is the third trait we need to pay close attention to when looking for and selecting leaders: the ability to *listen*. In their book, *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication*, Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M. Badzinski define listening as “attending to reality rather than getting caught up in our narrow, often self-serving view of things.”¹⁸ Reality was not pretty for either Judah or David. Both of these leaders had impregnated a woman out of wedlock. Judah was threatening to kill the woman, Tamar, whom he gotten pregnant, while David had killed the husband of Bathsheba. Given the intensity of the situation and the rapid-fire pace of the narrative at this juncture, the words of Tamar could have easily been drowned out or Judah could have just ignored her. Instead, he actually pauses long enough to hear what she has to say and she is not killed (Gen 38.25).

As previously noted, David listens to the prophet Nathan as he first tells the parable of the ewe lamb (2 Sam 12.1–4) and then condemns him as the rich man who took the wife of the poor man, Uriah (vv. 7–12). As the king, he could have ordered the execution of the prophet who would dare speak such words against him. Instead, David hears what the messenger of God has to say and responds in humble obedience.

If it is easy for us regular people to let our emotions get the best of us when we are confronted with our sins, consider how much more difficult it might be for those in positions of leadership. Anger, pride, embarrassment, and shame often keep us from listening to what God has to say to us. One of the hallmarks of good leaders is their ability to listen and discern what the right thing to do is, even in the most pressing of situations.

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16. One has simply to read 1 Kings 18.4 where we learn that Ahab and Jezebel were killing the Lord’s prophets, or Jeremiah 26 where the prophet’s life is under threat because he speaks a word against the establishment in Jerusalem, the city of David.

17. In contrast, David’s inaction with regard to Tamar (2 Samuel 13) demonstrates weakness rather than virtue. Amnon easily dupes his father David when he feigns illness and requests that Tamar come into his room and feed him cakes while he lies in bed. David foolishly grants the request, which then provides Amnon the opportunity to rape his half-sister. This story gives us a glimpse of an ineffectual king who is easily deceived and powerless to counteract the schemes of his sons. Nevertheless, God still finds a way to use him in spite of his weaknesses.

18. Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M. Badzinski, *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication: Building Great Relationships with Faith, Skill, and Virtue in the Age of Social Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2015), 17.