

# EARLY TRADITIONS ON THE KIDNAPPING AND SALE OF JOSEPH: PART I

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At the kidnapping and subsequent sale of Joseph, one would have expected emotions to have run high among his brothers, coupled with a degree of outrage on the part of the offspring of the handmaids at the violence intended against him by the sons of Leah. After all, the Torah emphasizes that Joseph *was a lad with the sons of the handmaids, Bilhah and Zilpah* (Gen. 37:2), suggestive of a large measure of empathy on his part for those siblings of lesser family status who were also closer in age to him. One would have expected some strong opposition on their part, therefore, to that evil conspiracy. Nothing, however, is further from the truth. They were as culpable as the rest, if not more so.

## THE ROLE OF DAN AND GAD

Significantly, the Torah's account of the kidnapping and sale of Joseph highlights only the role of Reuben and Judah, sons of Leah, while the remainder of the siblings are portrayed as silently complicit. In the early post-biblical Pseudepigraphic literature (circa 200 BCE), however, a variant picture emerges, wherein two of the other brothers, Dan, son of Bilhah, and Gad, son of Zilpah, serve as primary instigators of the sale of Joseph and the subsequent deception of their father.<sup>1</sup> That source also reveals the existence of a compact of total silence among the brothers, to which they all bound themselves on pain of death. This tradition was also picked up in the much later midrashic literature.<sup>2</sup> We are not told on whose particular initiative that compact was drawn up, but, from the earlier of the two sources, the evidence points directly to Dan and Gad, since Dan is specifically credited with having first suggested that they dip the coat into blood, and Gad admits to a particularly vehement hatred of Joseph.<sup>3</sup> We may thus conclude that ac-

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ording to early post-biblical tradition there was an equal representation of the offspring of both Leah and the handmaids in that entire fearful affair.

Rabbinic tradition has consistently ignored the Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphic literature because of the fact that it was mainly written in Greek and by Jewish writers who were perceived as assimilated since they did not bear a pharisaic imprimatur. The exclusion of that literature from the Canon meant that it was left to the Church to be its custodian and the guarantor of its survival, a fact that misled many to regard it as a heretical work. The present writer believes that it is time we reclaim it, since it constitutes a valuable repository of many authentic traditions going back generations before the midrashic literature. The tradition we referred to above, regarding the solemn compact entered into by all the brothers, constitutes a clear example of a common reservoir for the contents of both Pseudepigrapha and Midrash.

It is often difficult to locate the origin or rationale of midrashic traditions, though our initial inquiry is always in the direction of some indication, however subtle or indirect, in the biblical text itself or some syntactical or grammatical variation. The blessing of Jacob<sup>4</sup> makes a direct reference to the brothers' violent encounter with Joseph: *'The archers have dealt bitterly with him, shot at him and hated him'* (Gen. 49:23), but it may also contain two further references to that event within the addresses to both Dan and Gad. Jacob alludes to an episode in Dan's life when he behaved like *'a serpent in the way, a horned snake in the path that bites the horse's heels so that the rider falls backward'* (49:17). The implication is that, at some time, Dan had been involved in some act of duplicity and violence – a reference that might well have inspired that early tradition regarding his dark role in the sale of Joseph.

Jacob's blessing of Gad consists of a mere six Hebrew words: *Gad gedud yegudennu, ve-hu yagud akev* [Gad, a troop will troop upon him; but he shall troop upon their heel] (v. 19). Whatever the unspecified, underlying historical reference, the notion of Gad as warlike by nature and regularly embroiled in violent retaliation is unmistakable. He was a natural choice, therefore, for any legendary attempt to identify the initiator of the plan to kill or sell Joseph.

Taking these two blessings together yields a subtle evocation of an earlier and similar attempt to frustrate a potentially glorious destiny as mapped out by God. Dan's and Gad's attempt to dethrone Joseph, frustrate his heaven-sent

dreams, and banish him to a far-off land, echoes the evil machinations of the serpent to have Adam and Eve, the Divinely-appointed custodians of the Garden of Eden, censured and banished. That analogy is conveyed subliminally through Jacob's reference to Dan as *a serpent*, as well as through the phrase *ikkevei sus* – that bites the horse's *heels*, echoing the reference to the enmity between man and serpent which will result in the former crushing the serpent under his heel [*akkev*]<sup>5</sup>!

#### DID THEY ALL PLOT TOGETHER?

As regards the initial decision to kill Joseph, which, on the biblical evidence, was taken as soon as *they saw him in the distance and before he had approached them* (37:18), it is stated, *va-yomeru ish el ahiv* [They said, one man to his brother] (37:19). The particular nuance of the plural usage [*vay-yomru*] is regularly<sup>6</sup> employed where the exchange of words is merely between two people, notwithstanding that the official translations generally prefer *And they said, one to another*, implying a consensus of all the brothers. In the context of Joseph's rapid approach toward them, however, there could hardly have been time for any full family discussion of such a momentous issue and for any consensus decision to have been taken. It would have had to have been the initiative and decision of just a couple of particularly determined and hostile siblings.

Support for the employment of a plural form of the verb where one individual initiates a dialogue or action is forthcoming from a midrash which, in this episode, identifies the particular individual responsible for throwing Joseph into the pit, notwithstanding that the text employs the plural form. Thus, on the phrase, *And they took him and threw him into the pit* (v. 24), the Midrash states, "Who was this? It was Simeon."<sup>7</sup> It is significant, therefore, that, a few verses earlier, in the description of Joseph's attempt to locate his brothers, and of his meeting with a nameless person who gives him directions, that same word "*ish*," appears three times as a description of the latter (vv.15, 17). Contextually, therefore, there is a strong indication that the recurrence of that same word *ish*, but two verses later, in the phrase *va-yomeru ish el ahiv* [and they spoke, one man to his fellow] refers also to just two individuals plotting together. The tradition that the plot against Joseph was spearheaded by just two of the brothers, Gad and Dan, can thus be textually reconciled.

## REUBEN'S INCONSISTENT BEHAVIOR

To review the biblical account: Reuben, overhearing the initial suggestion to murder Joseph and then cast him into a pit, displays firm and precipitous courage: *He delivered him from their hand, saying, 'We will not shed blood'* (37:21). He then comes up with a compromise solution, telling the brothers that, rather than kill him directly, they should cast him into a pit. The Torah testifies to Reuben's sympathetic intention *to deliver him out of their hand to restore him to their father* (v. 22). This is confirmed a few verses later by Reuben's reaction on his return – from a mission the objective of which is curiously not revealed in the text (but see below) – and his discovery of Joseph's absence: *And Reuben returned to the pit and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit; and he rent his clothes. And he returned unto his brethren, and said: 'The child is gone. Now where am I to go?'*(vv. 29-30).

A grammatical consideration enables us to infer the exact point at which Reuben left his brothers for that enigmatic mission. At the outset, he states, *'lo nakkenu nafesh [We will not shed blood]* employing the first person plural, to include himself. Yet, with regard to the instruction to cast Joseph into the pit, he does not say, as expected *'nashlikh oto [Let us cast him]*' but switches to the second person formulation *'hashlikhu oto el ha-bor. . . ve-yad al tishlekhuh voh [You cast him into the pit . . . but lay not your hand upon him]*' (v. 22). The implication is clearly that he, Reuben, did not have time to attend to that unpleasant task, but was leaving it to the other brothers. Thus, Reuben was clearly late for a very important date, and had, therefore, to rush away immediately!

The Torah's description of what followed Reuben's shocked discovery of the empty pit opens up the possibility that we have before us a considerably abridged account. We are told that, on Reuben's return, the brothers immediately *took Joseph's coat, killed a he-goat, and dipped it in the goat's blood* (v.31). Now, surely, had they, indeed, done this immediately after Reuben's return, and in his presence, he would most certainly have demanded to know how the coat came into their possession and precisely what had been done to Joseph. The last Reuben saw of him, Joseph was at the bottom of a deep pit. Reuben knew that someone must have raised him out, and that it could not have been done without the brothers' collusion. He would hardly have al-

lowed them, therefore, without challenge, to go through that charade of dipping the coat into the goat's blood! It is significant that the Torah nowhere states that the brothers lacerated the coat before dipping it.

So, although the grief-stricken Jacob, with his eyes blurred by tears, may later have been taken in by a cursory glance at his son's blood-stained coat, it is highly unlikely that Reuben would have believed his brothers' account of the fate of Joseph; namely that he had been torn in pieces by a wild beast. Although he must have been dismayed at his brothers' silence at his outburst, offering no explanation for what had befallen Joseph, Reuben would not have assumed that they themselves had killed him since, had that been their intention, the most obvious and simplest method of disposing of Joseph would have been for them to have dropped boulders onto him into the pit.

#### DID REUBEN IMAGINE THAT THE BROTHERS HAD KILLED JOSEPH?

We are not convinced by Nahum Sarna's assertion that Reuben knew nothing about the sale and believed Joseph to be dead right up until the moment when the brothers came to Egypt and were hauled before Joseph.<sup>8</sup> Sarna's conclusion is based on a literal reading of two verses. The first is: *And Reuben returned to the pit and he saw that Joseph was not in the pit, and he rent his clothes* (37:29). The second is in his speech of self-justification: *Reuben answered them, saying, 'Did I not speak to you, saying: Do not sin against the child, but you would not hear? Therefore also, behold, his blood is required [damo nidrash]'* (42:22).

The rending of his garment was, I contend, an instinctive act of fear and despair before he had become acquainted with the circumstances of Joseph's absence. This is clear from the continuation: *And he returned to his brothers and said, 'The child is gone!'* (v. 30). Significantly, he does not say "the child is dead." Indeed, at that point the brothers had not yet produced the coat (see verse 31), so Reuben had no reason to fear the worst. When Joseph's goblet was later discovered in Benjamin's sack, the instinctive reaction of the brothers was, similarly, to tear their garments,<sup>9</sup> indicative of the despair and dread that gripped them at that moment. Tearing one's garment was also a common demonstration of remorse.<sup>10</sup>

Sarna's second inference, from the phrase *damo nidrash* (42:22), that Reuben believed Joseph had been killed, is also hardly conclusive. The term

"*dam*" does not necessarily mean "blood spilt." *Dam* is synonymous with "*nefesh* [the soul, the person]",<sup>11</sup> and the expression *lidrosh dam* has the specific nuance of responsibility for that person.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Reuben may well have meant no more than that he and his brothers were now being punished for whatever had befallen Joseph. Hence our contention that, at that moment of Reuben's return from a very brief absence, he had no reason to believe that the brothers had killed Joseph, but every reason to suppose that they had hauled him up and sold him after having stripped him of the coat that had been the cause of so much envy. This seriously begs the question of why he did not demand of his brothers a full description of the men who had seized or bought Joseph, the nature of their wagons, and the direction in which they were travelling, and why he did not insist that they all ride swiftly to discover Joseph's whereabouts and secure his release.

Reuben certainly possessed the moral authority to bind his brothers to his will. This is apparent from his assertive retort '*lo nakkenu nefesh* [we will not shed blood]' (37:21) - to the brothers' peremptory decision to kill Joseph. Sarna appositely observes that this is a statement that "tolerates no opposition. The use of the first person plural makes clear that this is to be their collective decision. Indeed, the brothers do not say another word, either of assent or dissent."<sup>13</sup> Strangely, Sarna misses the implication of the inconsistency of Reuben's total silence when the clearly guilty brothers refuse to enlighten him as to Joseph's fate, and his curious complicity in their subsequent cover-up. The Reuben that Sarna depicts would have brooked no opposition had he demanded that his brothers immediately form themselves into a search party!

We are forced to the conclusion, therefore, that the Torah provides but a sketchy account of the events, leaving a number of questions unanswered, while presenting us with some major difficulties regarding the conduct of Reuben. Enigmatically, at the very outset it reveals his inner desire to save Joseph and return him to his father, yet subsequently it presents him as betraying a curious indifference to Joseph's fate and an apparent collusion in the charade of the bloody coat and the deception of his father. The tradition we have referred to, of an awesome compact of silence imposed by consensus, suggests inordinate pressure having been brought to bear on Reuben by the other brothers. This would explain his own shocked silence as he witnessed

his brothers dipping Joseph's coat into the blood, as well as why any demand he might have made for a search party to be launched clearly elicited no response.

#### THE TRANSFERENCE OF ALLEGIANCE FROM REUBEN TO JUDAH

The brothers' decision to transfer their allegiance from the firstborn, Reuben, to Judah (see below) may well have been connected with their recognition of the latter's growing influence within the indigenous Canaanite society. This was cemented with Judah's marriage to the daughter of Shua, a name meaning "nobleman,"<sup>14</sup> betokening chief of a clan. The Torah regarded it as significant in that context to emphasize that his wife was *bat ish kena'ani* [the daughter of a Canaanite] (38:2). We may take it for granted that the brothers would have been quick to appreciate the security and commercial benefits that would accrue to them all as a result of Judah's new alliances, especially if responsibility for their welfare was transferred to him as leader of their clan. This probably explains why the episode of Judah, and the description of his marriage and offspring (Chapter 38), is interposed into the story of Joseph's kidnapping and sale to Egypt. We suggest that Reuben's absence, however briefly, gave the brothers the opportunity to discuss the matter and take a consensus decision regarding the transference of allegiance to Judah. There may well have been a *quid pro quo*, with Dan and Gad, representing the children of the handmaids, demanding the sale of Joseph in return for switching their allegiance to Judah. The brothers' ensuing mood of guilt and defiance may well explain why, if Reuben had, indeed, demanded of them an explanation of Joseph's whereabouts, or issued a directive for them to pursue after him, it was ignored with impunity.

This rebellion against the authority of Reuben is also hinted at, we suggest, in the blessing of Jacob. While tradition views most of the references in the blessing as prophetic portents, it is far more likely that Jacob would have alluded, at least in equal measure, to events that had already occurred during their own lifetimes and which had impinged on relationships within the family. A reference to that transfer of allegiance by the brothers may well underlie Jacob's remarks regarding Judah: *'Judah, you shall your brothers acknowledge; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's*

*sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey [teref], my son, you went up'* (49: 8-9).

Significantly, it is not Jacob who transfers the blessing and authority from his firstborn to Judah, as he had done just a little earlier in the case of his grandchildren, Ephraim and Menasseh.<sup>15</sup> He emphasizes that it is Judah's brothers who had invested him with the mantle of leadership. Now, although all translations assume that the word "*beni* [my son]" is in the vocative case, referring to Judah, there is no reason to rule out *teref beni* as being in a construct relationship. "My son" might well be a term of endearment referring to Joseph, the son *whom Israel loved more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age* (37:3), and *teref beni* might well be an allusion to Judah's role, and responsibility, in the "tearing in pieces" of Joseph, as symbolised by the coat. Jacob might well have been recalling then, on his deathbed, the words that he had used when he had first caught sight of that coat: *'tarof taraf Yosef* [Joseph is utterly torn in pieces]' (37:33). Jacob's address to Judah may accordingly be read as embodying a sharp censure: *'miteref beni alita* [through the tearing of my son you achieved elevation]!'

#### SAVING REUBEN'S FACE

The Pseudepigraphic *Testament of Zebulun* relates that Dan approached the disconsolate Reuben on his return from his strenuous efforts to discover the whereabouts of Joseph. Reuben, on having discovered the empty pit, had taken money and pursued, fruitlessly, after the merchants who had bought him. It is Dan who offers Reuben a solution to enable him to escape parental censure for his breach of responsibility:

When Reuben heard that Joseph had been sold while he was away, he tore his clothing . . . saying, "How can I look my father in the face?" He ate no food that day. Then Dan approached him, saying, "Do not weep; do not mourn; for I have found what we should say to our father, Jacob. Let us kill a goat's kid and dip Joseph's coat in its blood . . ."<sup>16</sup>

That source also reveals a tradition that Joseph's coat had been kept by Simeon who refused to hand it over to Dan, threatening to cut it up with his sword since he was burning with anger that Dan had not killed him. "But we all rose in opposition to him and said: 'If you don't give it up we will say that



you alone did the evil deed.' So he gave it up and did as Dan had suggested."<sup>17</sup>

The picture thus emerges of the sole objective of that conspiracy of silence having been to enable Reuben to save face. Reuben's great relief on that score might well explain why he did not probe or challenge the brothers further as to the fate of Joseph during his absence.

Reuben thus metamorphoses from a deeply caring son and leader who, at the outset, frustrates a consensus determination to kill Joseph, into a heartless coward demoted by his brothers and prepared to deceive his father and allow him to suffer twenty-two years of anguish rather than own up to his own failure of responsibility.

#### NOTES

1. See *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, ed. H.C. Kee, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), I, p. 805.
2. *Midrash Tanhuma*, (*Va-yyeshev*, Sec.2) asserts that the brothers associated God in their compact of silence, to ensure that He did not reveal their guilty secret to their father. *Sifte Hakhamim* (See his comment on *Rashi* to Genesis 37:33) counters that they could not, in any event, have bound God to compliance. The reason why God did not enlighten Jacob, he suggests, was simply that such a disclosure would have frustrated God's revelation to Abraham that his offspring would be strangers in a foreign land (Gen. 15:13). For, had Jacob known that his beloved son had been sold as a slave on the trade route to Egypt, "he would have spent all the money in the world on securing his redemption."
3. See *Testament of Gad*, ed. Charlesworth, I, pp. 814-815.
4. Genesis 49:1-28.
5. See Genesis 3:15.
6. Cf. the phrase, *va-yish'alu ish le-re'ehu le-shalom* (Ex. 18:7) where the exchange is between just Moses and Jethro.
7. *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, *Va-yeshev* ch. 84 (15); *Yalkut Shim'oni*, *Va-yeshev* (sec.142).
8. Nahum M Sarna, ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary*, Genesis. Commentary on 37:29.
9. See Genesis 44:13.
10. See II Chronicles 34:27.
11. See Deuteronomy 12:23.
12. Cf. Genesis 9:5.
13. Sarna, p. 259.
14. See Isaiah 32:5, Job 34:19.
15. See Genesis 48:14, 17-20.
16. *Testament of Zebulun* in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1983), I, p.806.
17. *Ibid.* p. 806.