

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

JEFFREY M. COHEN

We have referred in Part I to one of the most mystifying aspects of the whole episode: Reuben's apparent abandonment of Joseph just when he needed him most, notwithstanding the Torah's specific testimony to his original determination to protect him. We need to explore what was so pressing as to demand that Reuben give it priority over the protection of his brother.

The Midrash already struggled with this issue, suggesting that he absented himself "in order to don sackcloth and observe a fast for having lain with his father's concubine."<sup>1</sup> This is problematic however, since, however guilt-laden he might have been, one might still consider that his brother's safety should have taken priority over his own emotional torment. This is the view of R. Jacob Culi who perceptively asks what place there was for pietism at a moment like that when Joseph's life lay in the balance! His own, unconvincing, answer is that Reuben did not remove himself far from the scene, and, having seen the brothers throw Joseph into the pit, and then sit down to a meal, he assumed that their hostility had abated and that he could safely repair to a nearby place of seclusion in order to observe some tokens of remorse.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from our objection that, textually, Reuben absented himself before Joseph was cast into the pit, before the brothers sat down to eat, and probably even before Joseph had arrived at his brothers' encampment,<sup>3</sup> it is difficult to conceive of any plausible basis for such "tokens of remorse." Reuben had nothing for which to reproach himself at this time. He was convinced of his ability to save Joseph, and his suggestion to cast him into a pit was indubitably a ploy to save time until the initial hostility had abated. His conscience should have been totally clear.

The *Midrash Tanhuma*, on the other hand, views Reuben's absence as tactical: "What did Reuben do? He betook himself to a nearby mountain with the intention of returning in the night to haul up Joseph."<sup>4</sup> We understand this to

*Jeffrey M. Cohen is rabbi emeritus of the Stanmore Synagogue in London. He is the author of twenty books on liturgy, the festivals and biblical themes (see [www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk](http://www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk)), the most recent of which is Torah for Teens: Growing up Spiritually with the Weekly Sidrah. He has lectured at Jews' College, London, and The University of Glasgow.*

mean that fearing if he stayed at the brothers' encampment he might be detected attempting to leave in the dead of night to free Joseph, Reuben chose to position himself so that he might stealthily approach the pit from another direction, offering himself the best chance of completing his mission undetected.

Our Pseudepigraphic tradition once again offers us an interesting explanation, if we read between its lines. In *The Testament of Gad* we find that son admitting to his offspring his particularly vehement hatred of Joseph. He justifies this on the grounds of Joseph's misrepresentation to his father of a harmless act that he witnessed being done by Gad's confrères, the children of the handmaids:

Now Joseph was tending the flock with me for about thirty days, and since he was delicate, he became faint from the heat and went back to Hebron to his father. He made Joseph lie down close to him because he loved him. Joseph said to his father, "The sons of Zilpah and Bilhah are killing the best animals and eating them, *in defiance of the warning of Judah and Reuben.*" He had seen me extricate a lamb from the mouth of a bear. I then proceeded to kill the lamb since I was sad to see that it was too weak to survive. We (sons of the handmaids) then ate it. This he told to our father, and on this matter I bore a grudge against Joseph until the day he was sold into Egypt. The spirit of hatred was in me, and I wanted to see or hear nothing further of Joseph.

I now confess to you my sin, children, that I wanted to kill him . . . Because of his dreams my hatred toward him increased and I wanted to gobble him up from the living as an ox gobbles up grass from the ground.<sup>5</sup>

We believe that this outpouring of guilt may offer us, *inter alia*, an explanation of Reuben's absence. He had hitherto enjoyed the status of firstborn while Judah clearly revelled in his growing influence within the clan, facilitated by his contacts within Canaanite society. This was exemplified later, when the brothers were detained in Egypt to explain Benjamin's alleged theft of the cup. The Torah itself acknowledges his new authority, stating, *And Judah and his brethren came to the house of Joseph* (44:14). For that same reason, it was Judah who confidently challenged Joseph when he disclosed

his intention of incarcerating Benjamin in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Reuben as firstborn and Judah as spokesman and effective leader of the family, conjointly ensured the internal cohesion and discipline of the tribal entity.

Now, aside from Gad's excuse for the killing and eating of the weak lamb, the disclosure that that act, and those of *the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah*, had met with the disapproval of Judah and Reuben reflects a situation of tension between the sons of Leah and those of the handmaids over the disposal of family property. It could hardly have been an isolated incident for it to have become such an issue that Joseph saw fit to worry his father with it and for it to have elicited such censure from both Judah and Reuben. The herds that they were all tending belonged to their father, and the unauthorised seizure of any animal by the sons of the handmaids would have been regarded by the sons of Leah as misappropriation of family property, if not as an audacious bid for equality in the matter of inheritance. It is not to be forgotten that their great-grandfather Abraham had sent away the offspring of his secondary wives with gifts, rather than herds of cattle;<sup>7</sup> and there is no saying that the sons of Leah did not expect to be the primary, if not exclusive, heirs of the family estate. This explains the otherwise unusual instruction given to Joseph by his father to go and ascertain *the welfare of your brothers and the welfare of the sheep* (37:14). It might well be that Jacob was responding here to Joseph's report, and was anxious to know whether that specific matter of dispute regarding the sheep had been effectively resolved.

We may suppose that Joseph had witnessed the latter sharply reproofing the offspring of the handmaids for their action. It does not stretch the imagination, therefore, to assume that Judah and Reuben would have put in place safeguards to protect their future inheritance, especially given the advanced age of their father. This would have necessitated that they themselves monitor the other brothers' grazing grounds to ensure that the requisite number of animals was accounted for. Reuben's absence from the scene can thus be explained in the context of such an inspection rota. Judah, knowing of Reuben's intention to restore Joseph to his father, would then have seized the opportunity afforded by Reuben's absence, to harness the antipathy toward Joseph on the part of Gad and Dan in particular, and to hastily execute the sale of Joseph.

Judah's objective was to frustrate an up-and-coming threat to own bid for leadership. The investiture of Joseph with the coat of many colors had signalled a potential transference of authority from the senior to the most junior member of the clan, an act that, in the eyes of both Reuben and Judah, would have been repugnant as well as a dangerous re-run of the conflicts that had dogged fraternal relations within their family over the two previous generations. That their aged father, through his latest mission to Joseph, was on the verge of confirming his status as inspector and overseer of his other children had to be avoided at all cost. Hence their collusion with the offspring of the handmaids in his sale and in a solemn agreement never to disclose what they had done to their brother, even if meant plunging their father into protracted grief. We may assume that, notwithstanding their own lesser position within the family, the offspring of the handmaids did not take kindly to the immature Joseph being catapulted into the position of leader, quite apart from their antipathy toward him on account of his dreams and his tale-bearing, as well as their probable jealousy of his beauty and charisma.

#### DID JACOB EVER DISCOVER WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO JOSEPH?

A question that inevitably springs to mind when considering the aftermath of the sale and kidnapping of Joseph is: To what extent, if at all, did Jacob suspect or become aware of what his other sons had perpetrated? It is inconceivable that, subsequent to the reunion and the settlement in Goshen, Jacob would not have probed and cross-examined both Joseph and the other brothers regarding what had happened after Joseph had completed his mission. Jacob had sent Joseph to determine how his brothers were faring, and had told him specifically to bring him back a report (37:14). The natural thing, at their reunion, would have been for him to have demanded an explanation of Joseph as to why he had not complied with his father's instruction, and how he came to end up in Egypt.

Our conclusion, therefore, is that Jacob did indeed discover the facts of the situation, notwithstanding the authenticity or otherwise of the solemn compact tradition. How else was he able to describe Joseph as having been hated, assailed and attacked by hostile forces; namely, "the archers" of 49:23? We have previously suggested how some obscure phrases in Jacob's blessing of Judah, Joseph, Dan, and Gad allude specifically to the kidnapping and sale.

Given the authenticity of the Pseudepigraphic source, it is likely that Jacob had been apprised by an informant that it was Dan and Gad who were the chief culprits in the Joseph affair. Evidence for this may also be forthcoming from a comparison of the order of the birth of Jacob's children with the order in which Jacob blesses them on his deathbed.

For convenience we present here the respective orders:

<u>ORDER OF BIRTH</u>	<u>MOTHER</u>	<u>ORDER OF BLESSING</u>	
<u>MOTHER</u>			
Reuben	Leah	Reuben	Leah
Shimon	Leah	Shimon	Leah
Levi	Leah	Levi	Leah
Judah	Leah	Judah	Leah
Dan	Bilhah	Zebulun	Leah
Naphtali	Bilhah	Issachar	Leah
Gad	Zilpah	Dan	Bilhah
Asher	Zilpah	Gad	Zilpah
Issachar	Leah	Asher	Zilpah
Zebulun	Leah	Naphtali	Bilhah
Joseph	Rachel	Joseph	Rachel
Benjamin	Rachel	Benjamin	Rachel

It will be readily apparent that, when blessing his children, Jacob departs from the chronological order of their birth. Instead, he commences by addressing all six children of Leah in order of their birth (apart from placing Zebulun before Issachar).<sup>8</sup> Logic should have demanded, therefore, that he follow that pattern in the case of the offspring of the handmaids. He should accordingly have addressed blessings to Dan and Naphtali (offspring of Bilhah), followed by Gad and Asher (offspring of Zilpah). There seems to have been no compelling reason for him to have done otherwise, unless, consciously or subconsciously, he was lumping Dan and Gad together in his mind, and alluding to the identical situation wherein they acted as arch conspirators.<sup>9</sup> Having followed that order, it was logical that Asher should have been addressed after his older brother Gad, leaving Naphtali as the last of the sons of the handmaids to be addressed.

Finally, our textual tradition provides a most curious pointer to Gad's role in the violence against Joseph. On seeing him for the first time, the text states that Leah exclaimed *bagad*, for which reason he was called Gad (30:11). Now, the Masorah identifies a *Qere-ketib* device here, and instructs us to read that exclamation as two words, namely *ba gad* [fortune has come]. However, there is no escaping the implication of the single-word masoretic textual version *bagad*, whose meaning is "treachery" – the very antithesis of fortune! In a flash of prophetic clarity, Leah foresees the treachery which this child of her handmaid would one day perpetrate. Thus, if we accept the tradition of our early Pseudepigraphic source, we learn that the children of the handmaids, and especially Dan and Gad, with whom Joseph had had a special relationship in his early years, evolved into his implacable enemies, spear-heading his kidnapping and sale.

#### NOTES

1. Midrash *Ber. Rabbah* 84 (18); see *Rashi* on Genesis 37:29.
2. *Yalkut Me-Am Lo'ez, Bereshit* (Jerusalem, 1968), p.677.
3. Midrash *Ber. Rabbah* (84 (14)), on the phrase *Va-yishma Reuven*, 'And Reuben heard' (37:21), quotes the views of Rabbis Jose and Nehemiah that Reuben was also absent on the day Joseph arrived. Only on his return did Reuben "hear" of the plan to kill Joseph, and immediately made his demand of his brothers to abandon it. R. Jose states that Judah's absence was on account of there having been a daily rota to return to look after their father, and that day it was Reuben's turn. See also *Etz Yosef ad loc.* R. Nehemiah, on the other hand, explains Reuben's absence on the basis of his troubled conscience that, as the firstborn, his father would hold him responsible. R. Nehemiah's interpretation is difficult to reconcile with his other view that Reuben had already absented himself before Joseph arrived. That having been the case, he could not possibly have had any knowledge of Joseph's impending visit or the danger he might have been in. He could hardly have left his brothers out of any pang of conscience!
4. Midrash *Tanhuma, Va-yeshev*, sec 2.
5. *Testament of Gad*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1985, II), pp. 814-815.
6. See Genesis 44:18.
7. See Genesis 25:6.
8. Genesis 49:13-14. See Ibn Ezra, Radak and Seforno on 49:13 for the traditional explanations for this change in order.
9. That juxtaposition of Dan and Gad, though in reverse order, is also followed by Moses in his blessing of the tribes. See Deuteronomy 33:20, 22.