

Fathers & Sons

By: Keith Keyser

History is suffused with problematic father-son relationships. Within the ranks of biography, works such as Edmund Gosse's highly biased diatribe against his father's faith (*Father & Son*), and Frank McCourt's lyrical, poignant tale of impoverished childhood (*Angela's Ashes*) represent the prevalence of disharmony between fathers and their progeny. Of course, it seems to be a right of passage for many celebrities to do the talk-show circuit, recounting their difficult relationships with their fathers (R & B singer Marvin Gaye was even murdered by his father in 1984 after a violent argument.)ⁱ Sadly, family problems are not limited to celebrities; many ordinary families struggle with divisions in their midst – particularly among fathers and sons.

The great families of the Old Testament were not exempt from struggles of this sort. Problems abounded in the relationships of Abraham and Ishmael, as well as among Isaac, Jacob, and Esau. The twelve sons of Israel, however, are decidedly the poster children for family dysfunction. Nonetheless, in His amazing grace, the Lord worked in their lives and used them to found His chosen nation, Israel. In keeping with His expansive character and marvelous redemptive work, their names will forever adorn the gates of the future New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:12.) When one compares them with the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Father's only begotten Son, the difference is striking. He alone demonstrates the divine intention for paternal and filial relationships.

The Sins Of The Fathers

The patriarch Israel, formerly known as Jacob, grew up in an environment of rampant favoritism. Whereas, his father Isaac preferred the machismo-exuding Esau, the younger son Jacob was his mother's darling (Gen 25:28.) From dear mama he inherited – and learned by example – an ability to gain advantages through opportunism and duplicity (25:29-34; Ch. 27.)ⁱⁱ Years later when Jacob had a family of his own, he also showed partiality among his wives and sons, preferring Rachel and her children over Leah and her offspring (including the children born by the concubinage of Bilhah and Zilpah.) This fostered a climate of suspicion and envy among the sons that did not proceed from Rachel. By giving Joseph a multicolored tunic, he indicated his singular love for the boy.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, the garment was a declaration of status: no ditch digger was he! He was destined for important position within the family and its holdings. The stage was set for a confrontation between the disgruntled older sons and their annoying little brother Joseph, who always seemed to be having dreams of his own greater grandeur at their expense.

Among the patriarchs, Joseph bears the most resemblance to the Lord Jesus Christ, but then for most of their lives, his brethren posed little competition for this distinction. A survey of the lives of his oldest four sons demonstrates their checkered careers. For example, Israel upbraided his eldest son in these scathing words: "Reuben, you are my firstborn, My might and the beginning

of my strength, The excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, Because you went up to your father's bed; Then you defiled it..." (Gen. 49:3-4.) All of his early promise and rank as the eldest son was negated by his habitual instability. He committed adultery with his father's concubine, Bilhah. When he should have opposed his brothers' evil plan to kill Joseph, he was reticent, intending to rescue the youth later by trickery. In the aftermath of Joseph being sold into slavery, he went along with the cover-up, heedless of the injury that it did to his father. His manic conduct is finally illustrated by his outrageous suggestion that if he did not return from Egypt with Benjamin, Israel could console himself by executing Reuben's sons! Clearly, his character calls to mind the proverb "Confidence in an unfaithful man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth and a foot out of joint" (Prov. 25:19.)

Their Violence Besmirched Their Father's Name

Simeon and Levi were also a disappointment to their father. They used deceit and wanton violence to avenge their raped sister Dinah by a bloody massacre against the men of Shechem (Gen. 34:25-31.) Israel summed them up this way: "Instruments of cruelty are in their dwelling place...Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; And their wrath, for it is cruel!" (49:5, 7.) Although he promised to "...scatter them in Israel," by the grace of God, this was not entirely a punishment (v. 7.) It would be ironic, but for grace: the progeny of the angry, vengeful one, became those who averted the wrath of God against the people. Later, Levi's descendants properly used the sword in the incident of the golden calf, and therefore were set apart as the priestly tribe. Thus, they served in the public worship and service of the Lord, as well as the instruction of the Israelites in the law (Ex. 32:26-29.)

From Rake To Role-Model

The wayward youth of Judah is perhaps the most surprising feature of the patriarchal history to modern readers of the Bible. After all, luminaries such as Caleb, King David and his royal line – including the Lord Jesus Christ Himself – descended from this impressive tribe. Nevertheless, their ancestor's early career had some infamous blemishes. Besides leading the way in selling Joseph into slavery, he married a Canaanite woman and produced two exceptionally wicked sons, named Er and Onan (Gen. 38:1-10.) Each of them displeased the Lord and were executed for their evil ways. When Judah wrongfully withheld his third son from the twice widowed Tamar, she took matters into her own hands. In the guise of prostitute, she was unrecognized by her father-in-law, who sated his lust by fornicating with her – a union which produced twin sons, called Perez and Zerah (vs. 12-30.) When the parentage of these boys was revealed, he acknowledged that it was his fault, saying: "She has been more righteous than I" (v. 26.) This sordid incident stands in stark contrast to the conduct of the enslaved Joseph, who resolutely resisted the repeated entreaties of Mrs. Potiphar to carnally indulge himself with her. Judah had no constraints to his freedom, yet he was a slave to his misguided fears and passions. While his betrayed brother maintained his purity and loyalty to the Lord in spite of having many things

against him in Egypt. Indeed, for His faithfulness, Joseph seemingly went from bad to worse, finding himself in the political prison of the mightiest superpower of the day.

The Gracious Discipline of God At Work

His gross sin notwithstanding, God graciously continued to work in Judah's life, molding and training him until he became the one to stand up for Benjamin in front of the governor of Egypt (Gen. 44:18-34.) He could not bear to put his father through the grief of losing another favored son, and so offered himself as a substitute. This act was a beautiful foreshadowing of what his descendent, "the man Christ Jesus" – who was also "God manifest in the flesh" – would do in becoming a substitute to those who were condemned to slavery and eternal death (1 Tim. 2:5; 3:16.) By His death and resurrection, He justifies the ungodly, sanctifies them, and glorifies them (Rom. 3-8.)

The Perfect Father-Son Relationship

Unlike the sons of Israel, there were no skeletons in the closet of the Lord Jesus Christ. Among His contemporaries, He alone could lay claim to the title "Only begotten Son"; furthermore, to Him only could the title Messiah be credibly applied. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit identified with Him at the commencement of His public ministry (Matt. 3:16.) The Father declared in unmistakable terms His unqualified approval, saying: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I have found my delight" (v. 17, JND.) Only the Lord Jesus could honestly say "...He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, **for I always do those things that please Him**" (Jn. 8:29, emphasis mine.) He alone could declare in solemn prayer to His Father: "I have glorified You on the earth. **I have finished the work which You have given Me to do**" (17:4, emphasis mine.)

Weighed in God's Balances

To prove the unique claim of Jesus as the Son and Christ one must compare Him with those who held the offices that were demarcated by anointing: prophet, priest, and king. True prophets were few and far between in early first century Israel. John the Baptist was a divinely commissioned one, but he readily confessed that he was not the Christ (e.g. Jn. 1:20.) There were pretenders aplenty, with no shortage of would-be political saviors vying to deliver the Jews from the onerous Gentile yoke of Rome. The venerable rabbi Gamaliel recounted the mistaken messianic pretensions of two ill-fated revolutionaries in these words: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed. And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you

cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God” (Acts 5:35-39.) So among the prophets, no one else had the credentials of the Lord Jesus.

As for the priests, it is apparent that Annas and Caiaphas posed no threat to Christ’s role as the true Great High Priest in heaven (Heb. 10:21.) Extra-biblical sources, such as the first century historian Flavius Josephus ben Mattathias, tell us that the former cleric controlled the priesthood like an economic and political dynasty. Five of his sons held the high priesthood at different times, but none had the office longer than his son-in-law, Caiaphas. Each of these men were appointed to their positions by the Romans, and conducted themselves with a realpolitik flair – “pragmatism before truth” could have been their family motto (e.g. Jn. 11:49-52.)^{iv} Discounting the evidence of Jesus’ Messiahship they conducted a show-trial, which set aside many of the ordinances of Jewish jurisprudence. As one writer describes it: “His [i.e. Caiaphas’] conduct at this preliminary trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:57-68), its time and its procedure, were almost entirely illegal from the standpoint of then existing Jewish law...”^v Clearly, the One who referred to Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life” stands out when put alongside the likes of Annas, Caiaphas, and their cronies (Jn. 14:6.)

Pax Romana, Lex Romana, et Peccamen Romana^{vi}

On the side of kings, neither the Roman emperor Tiberius or his representative, the governor of Judea Pontius Pilate, can challenge the character and qualifications of the “King of Kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 17:14.) The former was not as openly violent and depraved as later Caesar’s like Caligula and Nero; nevertheless, he was a sinful man, who was reputed to indulge in various perversions.^{vii} The failings of his civil servant Pilate are well documented in the Gospels. Though he knew Christ was innocent, he still delivered Him up to be crucified. He tried various means to free the problematic prisoner before him, but in the end, he chose Caesar over the Lord (Jn. 19:12-16.) It was a matter of one’s career over truth and personal eternal well-being. The governor cynically asked, “What is truth?” in conversation with God incarnate “who cannot lie” (Jn. 18:38; Titus 1:2.) By contrast, at the Great White Throne the Lord Jesus, the Judge of all the earth, will uphold the truth and will not compromise it in the slightest degree (Acts 17:31; Rev. 20:11-15.) Justice will prevail through God the Father’s faithful only begotten Son.

It is evident that in the annals of human history there has never been anyone like the Lord Jesus Christ. He uniquely pleases God the Father and is eminently qualified to be prophet, priest, and king. At their best the heroes of the Old and New Testaments faintly foreshadow His greatness. The Lord Jesus is the perfect Son, who forever lives in perfect harmony with His Father. If human families are to be what they ought, than they must bow to the Son of God’s love and permit Him to work in them. Thankfully, He is willing and able to overcome human dysfunction and sin, and to form a great family in heaven (Col. 1:13; Jn. 1:12; 1 Jn. 3:1-2; Eph. 3:14-21.)

ⁱ <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/marvingaye/biography>

ⁱⁱ One should not blame Rebekah too much, for Isaac was also capable of serious deception on occasion, e.g. his pretending to be her brother rather than her husband in Gerar; see Gen. 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ The idea of multicolored goes back to the ancient Greek (LXX) & Latin (Vulgate) translations. An Aramaic cognate word gives the idea of a long-sleeved coat. Either way the garment was distinctive, spoke of rank, and was not something one wore to do menial labor. For a discussion of the original words, see Gordon Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 2: Genesis 16-50*, Dallas: Word Publ. Inc., 2002, electronic edition (Logos), comment on Gen. 37:3.

^{iv} For the historical background to Annas, Caiaphas, & family, I recommend the following: J.A. M'Clymont, "Caiaphas," ed. James Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible Dealing With Its Language, Literature, & Contents, Vol. 1*, New York: Scribner's, 1901, p. 338 ; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hastings/dictv1.i.vii.html> ; C.M. Kerr, "Caiaphas," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/C/caiaphas.html> ; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, entry on "Joseph Caiaphas." New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03143b.htm> , All of this links were accessed on 2/8/10.

^v C.M. Kerr, "Caiaphas," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/C/caiaphas.html> [Brackets mine.]

^{vi} Latin for "Roman peace, Roman law, & Roman sin."

^{vii} The ancient Roman historian Suetonius wrote of his violent temper and wicked sexual practices, but many modern historians and Classicists think these are mere malicious rumors spread by Tiberius' enemies. E.g. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesar's: Tib. 43-44*: <http://artflx.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=PerseusLatinTexts&getid=1&query=Suet.%20Tib.43>.