

Trinity College Cambridge

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Telling Tales: Stories from the book of Genesis

Joseph

Genesis 45: 1–8 and Luke 6: 27–38

Simon Goldhill

My favourite fellow of Trinity – in the 19th century – is Frederic Farrar. He is best known today as the author of *Eric or Little by Little*, one of *the* foundational boarding-school children's books, which is full of good looking lads, quoting poetry, crying and being whipped: the hero ends up a moral and physical wreck, responsible for the death of his darling brother, all because of a single lie – little by little.... It will give you some sense of how tough the novel is to read today if I tell you that Rudyard Kipling, no stranger to sentiment and kids' stories, used the verb "ericing", taken from the lead character's name, to mean "to be a totally pathetic drip". Farrar went on to be a pioneering schoolmaster and eventually Dean of Canterbury Cathedral. He also wrote a best-selling *Life of Christ*, designed to counter the new historical criticism of the gospels. He was a radical liberal at one level, and a solidly conservative broad churchman at another. Farrar got into hot water, however, for some sermons he preached at Westminster Cathedral in 1877, and published the year after. In these sermons he suggested reasonably enough that the Greek word *aeinaon*, usually translated "everlasting" did not mean "without end". So why were there protests in the street and counter-sermons preached across the land – though, as a classical scholar, I am always happy to go back to times when Greek translation could cause a riot? Farrar suggested that "everlasting punishment" might eventually be tempered by the forgiveness of God. This caused an evangelical and high church explosion. For sinners, they retorted, punishment means punishment for ever and ever *and ever*. Farrar's nasty idea of God's eventual forgiveness, they screamed, would let sinners off the hook and out of the flames. Just think of the social consequences...

The readings from the service today underline that the question of forgiveness has not lost its purchase, especially in the current political climate where, as the death of Osama Bin Ladin showed, even to question the self-evident desirability of violent revenge was to open yourself to charges of treasonable self-reflection. Today we read of Judah's extraordinary speech to Joseph, as Joseph, in disguise and in a position of immense power, tests and manipulates the brothers who had sold him into slavery. Now, Judah is one of the most fascinating figures in the Bible, who has the misfortune to have his story intertwined throughout with Joseph, whose dreams and coat of many colours continue to dominate the imagination, not to mention all those Lloyd Webber-scripted school children performances of "red *and* green *and* blue *and* yellow *and*"...replaying again and again the jealousy that initially prompted the brothers' hostility to Joseph. I want to start *Judah's* story with his first intervention.

When the brothers, the children of Jacob, have thrown Joseph into the pit, they sit down to eat a meal. This detail is typically precise and telling. The callousness of this distanced act is poignant: how much distance, how much engagement do you need for violence, for violence within a family or against your community? The commentators note that this meal anticipates the role of food in the narrative to come, where famine will motivate all the future journeys and politics. But as they eat, Reuven walks away, and Judah for the first time speaks up. “What do we gain”, he asks, “by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, but let us not do away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh”. Judah’s interest here is not in Joseph’s pleas, but in his and his brothers’ profit. He is horrified by the thought of dipping his hands into what he calls strikingly “our own flesh”. He does not want to spill blood, but the reasoning is wholly based on its implications for himself. Judah here saves Joseph, but does so out of wholly selfish reasoning. The commentators are blunt: he is not to be praised for committing a lesser crime.

The story of Joseph’s time in Egypt is interrupted by another story of Judah. Judah’s two elder children both die – a punishment, say the commentators, for his treatment of Joseph. Tamar was married to his oldest boy, and by the law should be married now to the surviving male child, but Judah refuses to recognize her and her needs. So she dresses as a prostitute by the side of the road, you will recall, and Judah sleeps with her, leaving his staff and cord with her as a pledge of future payment. When it becomes clear that Tamar is pregnant, Judah wishes to have her put to death for her sexual transgression. She declares that the father is the man whose staff and cord she now reveals. She does so with one of those moments of linguistic echo that make the bible so exciting to read. *Haker nah*, she declares publicly: “Recognize please” and *Veyaker Yehudah*, “and Judah recognized”. When Judah and the brothers brought back the bloodied coat of many colours to Jacob, they had said to him “*Haker nah*” “Recognize please”. The words Judah used to conceal his crime against Joseph come back to haunt him as he is publicly humiliated by his failure to have recognized Tamar’s rights. At both moments, the question is not just one of identification – whose coat? whose staff? – but one of “can you recognize what is at stake here? Can you recognize the ethical implications of the previous failures to recognize, to respect, to deal properly with family relations?” Judah’s recognition of Tamar is a first step in seeing what he has not seen before.

It is in this light that we should understand the verb that describes Judah’s decision to address Joseph, *vayigash*, “he went up”. Joseph has engineered things so that Benjamin, Jacob’s youngest and dearest son, has been framed for stealing a cup, and will be imprisoned. Judah goes up to try and avert the calamity. But it is also an act of rising up into self-awareness, say the ancient commentators. The Pentateuch is divided into sections, *parshot*, one of which is read each week in full in synagogue. The division between *parshot* is made here so that the first word of the new week’s reading is this *vayigash*: not only is there the drama of a week’s pause between the crisis and Judah’s response, but also it puts huge emphasis on this first word, and his speech. So why did the commentators see his rising up to speak as a journey up into self-recognition?

Because for the first time, Judah's speaks to put himself in the firing line out of concern for others. He offers himself to save his brother and his father's grief – when before he had sold his brother and caused his father's grief. His speech is deeply moving not least because it marks the end of a moral journey for Judah, to a position when he can recognize, analyze and regret his own past actions in a way which lets him behave as a morally mature adult for the first time. This is Judah's story.

But it is Joseph's too. For Joseph, here only, breaks down in tears, and – precisely – reveals himself. It is only after this speech of Judah and his own emotional collapse into tears that Joseph can show who he is. The verb is an odd one, *hit'apek* – and implies a loss of self-control. From a position of power over the brothers as over Egypt, from the ring-master directing the show, Joseph loses control, and gives up his plan of punishment, and recognizes his brothers and allows himself to be recognized.

This is an extraordinary scene that tells us a great deal about forgiveness. Joseph can forgive because of a moral journey that both he and his brother have made. Because they have learnt to recognize the needs of others. Because they have recognized their intertwining with other people and other people's emotional requirements. Because the regret has been both sincere and led to an ability to act otherwise. But also because the sincerity of regret has prompted Joseph to give up his sense of righteous punishment and control. And we should not forget that the brothers are struck dumb and it takes a further long speech by Joseph to reach the point where he can actually embrace Benjamin in tears. It takes two for forgiveness to make sense. And as he sends them home, he still adds “Do not be quarrelsome on the road home” – because realism is also part of forgiveness.

It is worth contrasting this intricate and dynamic narrative with the injunction from the Gospel, our other reading today, to turn the other cheek – the blanket requirement, as it were, to forgive an enemy. This idealism of emotional generosity has been tempered many times in Christian thinking, from Augustine's notion of a just war to the less salutary Victorian demands for the punishment of sinners with which I began, but it remains a stirring ideal. What I wonder, however, is the degree to which the idealism of a requirement of forgiveness, without the intricate narrative of moral and psychological development that the Joseph story enshrines, actually prevents or hinders the work of emotional change that forgiveness requires. Perhaps the idealism is necessary to remind us constantly that forgiveness remains an ideal towards which we should travel, but in my work in the Middle East especially, I find that Joseph is a necessary recognition: a recognition that for community violence to end, acts of recognition, sincere regret, giving up on feelings of righteous outrage as well as giving up on exercising power in revenge or jealousy, all need to be in play – along with the realism that says “Do not be quarrelsome on the road home”.

The journey of Judah is deeply inscribed in both Judaism and Christianity in one final, paradoxical way. Judah's thoughtless sexual encounter with his daughter-in-law Tamar not only led to his beginning of self-recognition. It also led, through the child of the encounter, to a genealogy – a genealogy that produces King David and the Davidic line. So perhaps the hope of Judah's story for all of us is that selfishness, ethical obtuseness and the violence with which our lives are led can move on to another level, and that Judah's story, painful but finally transcendent as it is, may be a hopeful model for our story.