

A group of unconscious associations or impulses having to do with the image of a father. These impulses may be positive or negative. Father complex. I'm sure you've heard of it, a term in modern psychology. There were twelve sons in my family. Eleven of us had negative father complexes. One had a positive father complex. And he needed to die for it.

Let me start with an odd story that happened at the ford of the Jabbok River. My father, Jacob, was headed to meet his estranged brother, Esau, and his 400 men. Things were more than a little tense because Esau had promised to kill Jacob the last time they had seen each other.¹ Jacob sent gifts to Esau in an attempt to pacify him, and then sent his family away.

The Bible says that when Jacob was alone, a man wrestled with him until dawn. The Bible does not identify the man. When the man could not overcome Jacob, he touched Jacob's hip and dislocated it. The man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man gave him this odd blessing, "I am changing your name from Jacob to Israel, because you have overcome God and humans." Jacob let him go, and named the place Peniel, because he said that he had seen God face to face, and his life had been spared. My father wrestled with God, and wrestling with God is no joke.

My father, Jacob, now Israel... son of Isaac, son of Abraham. God instructs him to take his entire enormous family and massive wealth and go to Bethel. At Bethel, he is to build an altar to God. Before doing so, Israel does a very important thing.

He instructs his entire household to get rid of their foreign gods and purify themselves. They give him their foreign gods and their earrings, and Israel buries them. With this act of dedication to God, the terror of God falls on all of the towns around them and nobody bothers them.

At Bethel, God reaffirms my father's name change, says that he will increase in number until a great nation and kings come from him, and that he will receive the land given to Abraham and Isaac. God doesn't say when this will happen, just that it will happen. My father set up a stone pillar as a memorial of God's promise.

At that time, my father had two wives. Leah was his first wife, and her sister Rachel was his

¹ Genesis 27:41

second and favorite wife. My father also had two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah. He had sons by all of them. Twelve sons in total.

I was his firstborn son by his first wife, Leah. My father never truly loved my mother, and I'm not sure he ever really loved me, either. He certainly didn't love his two concubines. Maybe that is part of the explanation for what happened next. I slept with his concubine, Bilhah, the mother of two of my half-brothers. This was a hugely disrespectful act. My father found out about it, but didn't do anything. I guess he just didn't care that much about me or Bilhah.

That doesn't mean my father didn't love any of his children. He had a special love for his two children by Rachel, the love of his life. Joseph and Benjamin. He loved Joseph far more than any of the rest of us. In fact, he made Joseph a special ornate robe to show how much more he loved him. We hated Joseph. Every time we brothers saw the many colors and designs on that robe, we hated him even more.

Joseph told us about a dream he'd had... He told us that we were binding grain into sheaves, when our sheaves bowed down to his. We exploded. He insinuated that he would rule over us?! That was beyond disrespectful to us, his older brothers.

And it got worse. Joseph told us he had a dream where the sun, moon and eleven stars bowed down to him. This dream even bothered our father. It was a clear reference to Jacob and eleven brothers bowing down to him. We were completely done with it all.

Joseph was a little older than seventeen, and our father sent him to check on the rest of us. We were many miles away. One time, Joseph had tattled on us, so our father wanted to find out if we were misbehaving again.

In the distance, we could see Joseph walking toward us. The brilliant colors of his robe, couldn't miss them. The closer he came, the more enraged my brothers became. By the time he reached them, they had agreed to kill him. Then tell our father that a wild animal had devoured him. His dreams could never come true, they laughed.

I reached the scheming group before Joseph and heard their plot. Somehow, I convinced them not to kill him, but just throw him in the cistern... I was the oldest, so maybe that was it. I planned to rescue him later.

When Joseph arrived, we grabbed him, took off his repulsive robe, and threw him in a dry well. I left while my brothers sat down to a meal and to celebrate their shallow victory. Then they heard something, a distant noise of bells. Camel bells. They looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelite traders loaded with spices to take to Egypt. These Ishmaelites were distant cousins of ours.

When I returned to the cistern to rescue Joseph, it was empty! I confronted my brothers and they explained what they had done.

My brother, Judah, had a brilliant idea. Rather than killing Joseph for no gain, they should sell him to the traders as a slave. They would not be guilty of murdering their own brother and they would have money to boot. Done. They sold him for twenty shekels of silver, and Joseph became a slave.

I had no choice but to join their conspiracy.

We slaughtered a goat to get its blood. We splashed the blood on Joseph's robe, even tore it in a few places. We took it back to our father and showed it to him.

My father looked at the robe, he said that it was Joseph's robe, and some wild animal must have devoured him. We didn't even have to lie to him. Our father tore his clothes and mourned for many, many days. We tried to comfort him, he would have none of it.

Our father said that he would mourn for Joseph the rest of his life. We secretly felt justified in our action because our father loved Joseph so much, and us so little.

With Joseph gone, I hoped to be more respected by my father. I hoped to gain his trust and love. But things did not go so well for our family after Joseph was gone. I won't bore you with all the details and stories, but I will tell you one story that exemplifies how badly things fell apart for us.

My brother, Judah, moved away from the family. While gone, he married a Canaanite woman. He knew our father would never approve of that, which is maybe why he did it. She quickly became pregnant, and bore a son. She got pregnant again and had another son.

His firstborn son married a woman named Tamar. But he was so wicked that the Lord put him to death. Now, that is wicked! My brother, Judah, went to his second son and demanded he impregnate his brother's wife and raise her children so she could carry on the name of the family. His second son refused to do so. The Lord got so angry at the second son that he put him to death, too.

Judah then asked Tamar to live with him as a widow until his much younger third son grew to be an adult. Tamar did so, and all went well until the third son had grown old enough. But Judah did not give his third son to Tamar, so she did not have any children.

Eventually, Judah's own wife died. After recovering from his grief, Judah went away to be with an old friend. Tamar heard where Judah was going, put on a disguise and rushed ahead of him. She sat by the road and acted as a prostitute in her disguise. Not recognizing her, Judah hired her for the price of a goat. She also required he give her a pledge of his seal, cord and staff that he would bring the goat to her. He did, then he slept with her. When he sent the goat to her to get his pledges back, she was gone.

Three months later, Judah was told that Tamar was pregnant, so was guilty of prostitution. Enraged, he sentenced her to be burned to death. Tamar showed him his pledges. Caught. Judah realized he was the father. Judah never slept with her again, but she did have twin sons by him.

Now, why did I spend so much time telling you the incestuous story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar? In the New Testament, the family lineage of Jesus is: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and Perez.² Tamar's twin boys were named Zerah and Perez.

My family! Twelve brothers by four women. Plenty of interpersonal conflict. Overwhelming amounts of sin and stupid choices. My family was a mess. We were a sad, sad excuse for a family with a covenant with God. And it was about to get worse. A lot worse. A world-wide famine was on its way.

God's promise to my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father to make them into a great nation seemed like a distant dream. Or a very bad joke. But God was in control, not me. Not my father, even. That alone can move a father complex into a positive direction.

² Matthew 1:2-3, Luke 3:33-34