Josef Sykora

The Unfavored: Judah and Saul in the Narratives of Genesis and 1 Samuel

Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures 25


Tony W. Cartledge
Campbell University Divinity School

In The Unfavored: Judah and Saul in the Narratives of Genesis and 1 Samuel, Josef Sykora explores the changeable nature of election or “chosenness” in the Hebrew Bible. He takes as case studies the stories of Judah, who was not his father’s favorite but emerged as the leader of his brothers, and Saul, chosen as Israel’s first king but rejected in favor of Judah’s descendant David as the one who would establish a lasting dynasty.

The book is a slightly revised version of Sykora’s dissertation at the University of Durham. It thus follows the stodgy but straightforward style expected of such works: each chapter begins with a statement of purpose, a tightly outlined examination of the stated question, a brief summary, and a look toward the next chapter. In a formatting oddity, chapters are numbered in the text (beginning with the introduction), but not in the table of contents.

Sykora approaches the project by conducting a “thought experiment,” reading and interpreting narratives concerning Judah and Saul both with and without sections commonly judged to be intrusive. This allows him to show how later insertions changed the tenor of the narrative and prepared the way for Judah to outshine his favored brother Joseph and for the shadow of David to plague Saul well before he appeared on the scene.
The first half of the book is devoted to a reading of Gen 37–50, first without Gen 38 and 49, arguably intrusive (chs. 3–7), then in the canonical form, showing how the insertions reshape the story in Judah’s favor (chs. 8–11).

As the first son of Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel, Joseph is clearly his father’s favorite, and once Joseph is thought to be lost, Benjamin becomes his stand-in. After the family relocates to Egypt, Jacob adopts Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh as his own, effectively doubling Joseph’s favored position in the family. With elder brothers Reuben, Simeon, and Levi having brought disgrace on themselves through moral or violent offenses just before the Joseph cycle begins (Gen 34; 35:22), fourth-born Judah emerges to distinguish himself as a practical man who speaks for his other brothers, respects his father’s favoritism for Rachel’s sons, and is willing to risk his life for Jacob’s beloved Benjamin. Despite becoming the most prominent sibling not born to Rachel, however, he is only first among the unfavored, like a second-place runner who considers himself the “first loser.”

Reading the story with the inclusion of Gen 38 and 49 draws a different picture. While Judah’s traffic with Canaanites and the unknowing impregnation of his daughter-in-law Tamar in Gen 38 might cast him in a questionable light, a full chapter devoted to him near the beginning of the Joseph cycle lodges him firmly in the reader’s mind. Judah shows himself capable of living independently and looking after his own household without reference to his father. Though two of his sons offend Yahweh sufficiently to cause their deaths and Judah comes close to executing the put-upon but tenacious Tamar, he acknowledges his failure. By the end of the episode, he emerges as the father of Perez, whose house would give rise to David.

The addition of Jacob’s mixed “blessings” in Gen 49 further enhances Judah’s status. Joseph receives an impressive blessing; he is to defeat his enemies and become both prosperous and fruitful (49:22–26). Nothing suggests a loss of his favored status, but the reader already knows it is Judah who will become a lion that will defeat his enemies and a leader whose brothers will bow down to him (49:8–12). Nothing else in Gen 37–50 anticipates such an illustrious future for Judah, Sykora argues, another indication that Gen 49 was added to position Judah as the dominant tribe. Readers, however, would know that, while Judah’s line would endure in the south, Joseph’s descendants would dominate the shorter-lived Northern Kingdom: the categories of election or chosenness are dynamic and flexible.

Sykora’s examination of Saul’s story concerns itself with 1 Sam 13–15 alone, but his close examination fills out the second half of the book. In making the transition from Genesis
to 1 Samuel (ch. 13), Sykora points to literary and theological connections between the stories of Judah and David, with Saul serving as a cipher for kingship in the north.

In chapters 14–15, Sykora reads the narrative in 1 Sam 13–15 without the account of Saul’s first rejection in 13:7b–15a, widely regarded as intrusive. Read this way, Saul is largely successful, though portrayed in less glowing terms than his brave son Jonathan. Samuel sharply announces that Saul’s kingship will be taken away and given to a עִם, usually translated as “neighbor,” who is better than him. Sykora argues that the meaning could extend to a “fellow Israelite,” including his worthy son Jonathan, so Saul’s dynasty could remain in play.

The addition of 13:7b–15a (chs. 18–19), however, inserts an earlier rejection of Saul in which a cranky Samuel castigates the bewildered king for offering prebattle sacrifices without waiting for the prophet, even though Saul had obediently waited the full seven days Samuel had demanded (apparently an awkward connection to 10:8) and was in desperate straits, with his army deserting. Samuel’s fiery rebuke declares that Saul had failed the test of establishing a dynasty—an exam Saul did not realize he was taking—and that God would replace him with a man “after God’s heart.” Readers of the canonical version, then, have advance notice that Jonathan could not succeed Saul. Readers know that David was chosen because God “looks on the heart” rather than outward appearances (1 Sam 16:7) and that David was known for having a heart that was true to Yahweh (1 Kgs 11:4).

Sykora notes that the canonical story of 1 Sam 13–15 takes a different trajectory from Gen 37–50, but not without similarities. While Judah’s star rose, Saul faded into the sunset. Even so, Saul remained the chosen king—even acknowledged so by David—long after Samuel announced his fall. Not until Saul’s third rejection by Samuel’s angry ghost is his doom sealed (1 Sam 28), and he remains king until his death on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31).

Sykora concludes that there is value in reading the canonical text both forward and backward: a linear reading is enhanced when one already knows how the story will play out, so the reader is more attuned to earlier clues pointing to the coming denouement. In the process, one learns that “the notion of election is not something static and unchangeable”: one does not have to lose all favor with God to be eclipsed by another.

Sykora’s treatment of these texts is thorough and admirable, and his observations concerning the dynamic nature of chosenness is helpful. One might wish he had devoted more effort to exploring what particular chain of events might have led a Judean author to edit the narrative for the purpose of highlighting Judah’s rise and Joseph’s fade. As
always, however, one purpose of innovative work is to raise good questions for further research.