

# Sibling rivalry and birth order



## **SIBLING RIVALRY AND BIRTH ORDER**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sibling rivalry and the power of birth order are as alive today as it was in the Old Testament, even though there have been many centuries between the time of the Old Testament and today. While birth order doesn't cause sibling rivalry by itself, the fact of the matter is that it can definitely affect sibling rivalry (Parenting Magazine). What follows is a comparison between siblings in the age of the Old Testament with siblings of the world today. This study will demonstrate that the centuries have done little to produce substantial change or progress. Today's siblings continue to struggle in their efforts to get past jealousy, resolve conflict and fulfill their desire for power. Sibling Rivalry and the power of birth order are as alive today as it was in the Old Testament. Although there have been years between the Old Testament and today's families episodes of rivalry, there are similar reasons for its prevalence today. While birth order doesn't cause sibling rivalry by itself, the fact of the matter is that it can definitely affect sibling rivalry (Parenting Magazine). I want to compare Old Testament siblings with siblings of the world today. I will unfortunately compare there has not been much change or progress through the decades. We still encounter not only sibling rivalry, but also adult, friend, and co-worker rivalry. There seems to have been no improvement in our abilities to get past jealousy, conflict or the need for power in our society.

“ The biggest cause of sibling rivalry in children and in adults is jealousy. It may be that one sibling is more successful in an area, such as their career, than another sibling. Or, it could be that one sibling has more positive

experiences in relationships than the other. While competition is not always a bad thing, if one sibling constantly feels as though they are behind their sibling in one way or another it will lead to sibling rivalry.” (Parenting magazine)

## **I. BIRTH ORDER**

### **A. Firstborn**

- society also places favoritism towards oldest siblings, natural born leaders, rule-conscious, exacting, conservative, organized, responsible, jealous, fearful, high achieving, competitive, high in self-esteem and anxious
- often pressured to succeed
- on the other hand, youngest siblings often idolize the first born, putting the first born in a position of leader of the children of the family

### **B. Middle born**

- tends to be forgotten
- never truly in the spotlight so can be natural mediators
- they avoid conflict, often have many friends and highly loyal to peer groups
- they may become a fighter of injustice or they may have trouble finding their place

### **C. Youngest**

- baby of the family, outgoing, entertainer
- out of all the siblings the youngest has the least aversion to risk
- often an endearing and delightful friend

The study confirmed older siblings had distinct advantages, and that birth order was more important than gender in shaping sibling relations. (Horin)

Although the advantages of the older siblings seem to have a proportional advantage to other siblings in today's society, we find that God had favor over the younger siblings. God's choice of the second born is a recurring theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. The eldest is passed over for the father's blessing and inheritance, leaving his or her descendants filled with resentment and hatred. We have to wonder though if the birth order of the Old Testament brothers was a factor in their relationships as well. Not much has changed in regards to people's personalities of greed, vanity, sin and power. Then I would tend to believe that birth order did play a factor in relationships in the Old Testament.

## **II. Cain and Abel**

In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain was the first son of Adam and Eve. He was a farmer while his brother, Abel, was a shepherd. The two brothers had each brought a sacrifice to God (Genesis 4: 3-4). God rejects Cain's field offering but has regard for Abel's offering of an animal sacrifice (Genesis 4: 5).

Although both offerings were considered appropriate sacrifices, God was more pleased with Abel's. Perhaps he believed Abel had a better heart in his giving than Cain (Genesis 4: 7). Cain became angry with God's favoritism and he killed Abel (Genesis 4: 8). God confronted Cain about his brother, judged him, and pronounced a curse upon him, driving him out to the land of Nod, which was east of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 4: 9-16). It doesn't state how the two brother's relationships were to each other before this event or the family dynamics with their parents. Genesis does not mention if they

were always at odds from earlier days or if it came later after they became adults. But it does show that even from the onset of time we have had the desire to succeed and be better than the others. It shows how we often displace our anger towards the wrong people too. Because of Cain's anger toward God he killed Abel.

### **III. Ishmael and Isaac**

In the story of Ishmael and Isaac, Ishmael was Abraham's first son. His mother was Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian handmaid. Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sarah his wife. Abraham and Sarah did not have a son to make a great nation of the childless Abraham (Genesis 17: 4). Even though God had promised them an heir, Sarah felt that God had restrained her from bearing a child (Genesis 16: 1-2) and took matters into her own hands. In unbelief, Sarah offered to Abraham her maid Hagar (Geisler). Hagar was promised a son named Ishmael, meaning " God hears", because of her affliction (Genesis 16: 9-11). Abraham and Sarah received him as the son of God's promise. They both laughed in disbelief when the birth of Isaac was announced (Genesis 17: 17). God promised to make Ishmael the father of twelve princes, from which would become a great nation. But the covenant would be established with Isaac (Genesis 17: 20-21). Believing Ishmael was mocking Isaac she wanted Hagar and Ishmael to be cast out. At the insistence of his wife, Abraham expels his Ishmael and his mother Hagar, from his camp after Ishmael behaves inappropriately with his half-brother, Isaac (Genesis 21: 9-21). Ishmael married an Egyptian and fathered 12 sons and a daughter. He was the half brother of Isaac and was Esau's father-in-law. He is also considered the prophet of the Muslims, inheritors of Ishmael's

legacy. Once again God favors the second born, Isaac, not Ishmael, inheriting the blessings of the covenant. I do speculate on how things would have possibly been different if Sarah had just trusted God instead of taking matters into her own hands. Even now we try to do the same thing; we forget or fail to keep our trust and faith in God.

In regards to Ishmael and Isaac they were born to two different mothers. This undoubtedly made a hedge between them from the onset. Having two different mothers, from two different backgrounds surely made the difference. Even though Abraham loved both of his sons, the mother's of the boys were of two different statuses and backgrounds. The conflict between the mothers had to appear to the sons somewhere during their upbringings. From the very beginning, it would have been hard for harmony to be achieved due to Sarah's jealousy and Hagar's different background and the rivalry between the two. I think it is important here to see that the sibling rivalry between the two focused more on the mother's rivalry between each other, than the actual relationship between the sons. It appears that not just personalities between siblings can cause rivalry. But, perhaps rivalry within the family causes rivalry to be imminent between children. We must realize the impact of our actions to our children and those around us.

#### **IV. Esau and Jacob**

Just as the blessings and promises of God pass from Abraham to Isaac, they must also pass from Isaac to his son. But Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob (Geisler 46). When Abraham's son Isaac was grown he married Rebekah. He pleaded with God that his wife might bear children (Genesis 25: 21). The children struggled together within her, when she inquired of God he said that

there were two nations in her womb. They shall be separated from your bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger (Genesis 25: 22, 23). As a result, she bore twin sons, Esau “ the hairy one” and Jacob “ supplanter”. Jacob was described as grabbing Esau’s’ heels upon birth, as if trying to come out first and become firstborn. Esau became a hunter, and Isaac favored him.

Jacob was more of a settler and farmer and was favored by his mother (Genesis 25: 24-28). Jacob was also crafty and took advantage of Esau’s extreme hunger one day. He bargained with his older brother to exchange his birthright for some lentil stew. Possession of the birthright secured for Jacob a double portion of the inheritance (Genesis 25: 28-33). Although Esau was Isaac’s favorite son, he displeased his father by marrying two Hittite women who were not descendants of Abraham. This made life extremely difficult for his parents (Genesis 26: 34-35). Near the end of his life, when it came time for Isaac to give his blessing on Esau, he is deceived into blessing Jacob instead (Geisler). Rebekah overheard his instructions to Esau. She encouraged Jacob to deceive the blind old man by disguising himself as Esau and taking his brother’s blessing. The deception succeeded, and Isaac gave Jacob the blessing of the firstborn. When Esau appeared to receive his blessing he was too late. He was very bitter against Jacob because of what had happened. After this, Esau was so angry that Jacob left for Haran. Twenty years later Esau generously forgave his brother and the brothers were reunited (33: 4-16). Two decades later a rich and prosperous Jacob returned with his family. Esau and Jacob finally made peace before Isaac died.

Even before they were born Jacob and Esau were in a battle for supremacy. But unlike Ishmael and Isaac they were twins from the same mother. Twins we tend to believe are closer because of similar genes. They are known to act alike and know what each other are feeling or thinking at times it is said. In Jacob and Esau's case this was not true. They seemed to try to battle it out even before birth. During their upbringing we see that their relationships with their parents may have played a role also. Jacob was more favored by this mother and Esau was favored more by his father. I find it interesting to see how the family dynamics of children may be influenced by the favoritism of their parents. Along with their personalities and how children are molded by which parent they are favored by in regards to male or female.

#### **V. Joseph and his Brothers**

Joseph was one of twelve sons of Jacob. He was the first born son of Rachel (Genesis 30: 22-24). Jacob also had four sons by Rachael's sister, Leah (Genesis 29: 31-35) Leah then bore sons five and six, Issachar and Zebulun, followed by a daughter, Dinah (Genesis 30: 14-21). She gave her maid Bilhah to Jacob and Bilhah bore him Dan and Naphtali (Genesis 30: 1-8). At this point Leah gave her maid Zilpah to Jacob as a wife. Zilpah brought forth Gad and Asher (Genesis 30: 9-13). Joseph was the favorite of his father, since he was the son of Jacob's old age (Genesis 37: 3) and the firstborn son of his favorite wife. Because he showed his favoritism so openly that the other sons became jealous of Joseph. Joseph's brothers hated him. Plus, Joseph was a bit of a show off and a tattletale, acting as his father's spy in their eyes.

Their jealousy and envy towards Joseph only got worse when Jacob gave Joseph a ground-length, long-sleeved, multicolored robe (Genesis 37: 3-4).



The animosity of his brothers increased even more when Joseph revealed to them he was having dreams where his brothers would one day bow down before him (Genesis 37: 5-11). Because of this, when Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers and the flocks near Shechem, his brothers tricked him and sold him to a caravan of traders going down to Egypt (Genesis 37: 25-28). Joseph's brothers then took his robe, dipped it in goat's blood, and brought it back to Jacob, who was overwhelmed with grief (Genesis 37: 31-35). Joseph went on to live out his visions from God and attained a high position in Egypt. He eventually faced his brothers again during the famine, and reveals his identity to them (Genesis 42-44). Joseph forgives his brothers after realizing that they will no longer sacrifice a brother for their own means or gains (Genesis 44: 18-34). This showed Joseph that his brothers were changed men from their past dealings with Joseph.

Joseph's relationship with his brothers was one of resentment by his brothers a story of tragedy and deception. It shows a group of brothers having sibling rivalry over one brother. The dynamics of the family shows the partiality of Jacob over Joseph in comparison to the other brothers. This favoritism was not hidden by their father and shows the dangers of favoritism and the extent of how dangerous rivalry can become.

## **VI. Amnon and Absalom**

Amnon was the son of King David and Ahinoam (2 Samuel 3: 2). Absalom was the son of King David and his wife Maacah (2 Samuel 3: 3). Thus Amnon and Absalom were half-brothers, like Abraham's son's Ishmael and Isaac.

Absalom was a handsome young prince known for his long, thick hair (2 Samuel 14: 25-26). He had a beautiful sister Tamar; Amnon brought shame

upon Tamar by forcing himself on her and then refusing to marry her (13: 1-20).

Absalom allowed his dejected sister to live with him in his house, believing that his father King David would punish Amnon for what he had done. After two years of waiting, Absalom plotted his own revenge after his father did nothing to Amnon for his behavior towards Tamar. Absalom gave a feast for King David and his princes at his estate in the country. King David did not attend, but Amnon did; Absalom got him drunk and then had his servants kill Amnon (2 Samuel 13: 26-28). Afraid of King David's anger, Absalom fled across the Jordan River to King Talmai of Geshur, the father of Absalom's mother (2 Samuel 13: 29-39).

After three years hiding far away from home, Absalom was called back to Jerusalem by David's general, Joab. After two years he was back in full favor with the king (2 Samuel 14) and began plotting ways to gain the throne for himself. He worked to make the people think well of him, while also lowering people's opinion of his father, the king (2 Samuel 15: 1-6). Eventually, Absalom planned a rebellion against King David, gathering the people who wanted him to be king together in Hebron. After Ahithophel, one of King David's wisest counselors, joined Absalom, the prince announced that he was now king. By the time news of Absalom's conspiracy reached him, King David was unable to do anything but flee from Jerusalem (2 Samuel 15). When it finally came down to the battle between King David's men and Absalom's men, Joab slew Absalom. He found Absalom hanging from an oak tree by his hair and slain him, even though King David had asked that Absalom not be harmed (2 Samuel 18).

The story of Amnon and Absalom shows that rivalries often drive people to destroy one another. Amnon and Absalom were like Ishmael and Isaac being of two different mothers also. From early on they were against each other due to Amnon's crime against Tamar. In addition, King David showed a pattern of defending his sons even though he knew they had done wrong. He seemed to "turn his head" at all the wrong times. This may be due to King David's sins of his past. King David had unwittingly pronounced a fourfold judgment on himself in his responses to Prophet Nathan's parable (Geisler 119). I wonder if he had been more of a role model in the sense of not sinning with Bathsheba that it would have changed any outcomes of his sons. The consequences of King David's sins brought greater sorrow on him than had he died himself (Geisler 119). No matter what his sons had done, as all parents do, he continued to love them in spite of their troubles. How many times have we as parents never realized at the time the influences we have over our children. It is the perfect lesson of the "do as I say and not as I do". King David did not act out in hypocrisy, but he did live in a sinful lifestyle at times. Allowing our sinful nature to be so prominent sends a message to our children that it's okay. We must be a role model and teacher for all.

### **Summary**

In summary I believe birth order played a part in each of the son's personalities. Although, God's plans are more significant than the birth order process, sibling rivalry, family dynamics, or personalities and his plans follow through. . Throughout the Old Testament we see the same characteristics of rivalry, power; desire and resentment come to a head in each of these

families. We see anger being taken out on the wrong people, as in Cain and Abel, where the anger was directed toward Abel, instead of God. We read of many forms of deception in several of the Old Testament families. Whether you could say that the oldest had more power than the other siblings, in terms of the personalities and birth order, it did not seem to matter in the end. God had a plan that would be implemented no matter what the circumstances were.

Some people trace the hostility between Israeli and Arab to the rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael. Today's bloody disputes over territory spring from God's promise of a land for his people (Knowles). The tragedy of strained relations between Islamic and Judeo-Christian countries is a part of everyday life. One need only pick up a newspaper or check the news story of the day via television, radio, or internet to learn of the latest violent attack. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, three of the world's great religions, have their roots in the Middle East. All three religions revere Abraham as a common ancestor. Yet all three have had bloody interchanges throughout history. How and why did Abraham's children become such a dysfunctional family? Where is God in these "family feuds?" Even if there was a way to get past human characteristics of jealousy, power, conflict and self-centeredness, we would not be able to get past the differences in religious beliefs. When there is no ability for us as a society to come together as a whole then there is no way to rise above the problems.