Verbum et Ecclesia
ISSN: (Online) 2074-7705, (Print) 1609-9982

The fulfilment of God's promises: A literary-homiletic reading of 1 Chronicles 7:20–27

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Dates:
Received: 08 Oct. 2019
Accepted: 09 Mar. 2020
Published: 03 June 2020

How to cite this article:
Bae, H.-S., 2020, 'The fulfilment of God's promises: A literary-homiletic reading of 1 Chronicles 7:20–27', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41(1), a2054. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.2054

In ancient history, individual lives paralleled nations in their rise and fall, thereby reflecting their destiny; however, individuals were overshadowed by the glorified history of a collective entity. Therefore, familial or tribal traditions reflected in genealogies sometimes contradicted official history; a good example in this regard is 1 Chronicles 7:20–27. An initial reading of the genealogy contained therein focused on its literary and rhetorical implications; subsequently, its homiletical implications were extended. From a literary perspective, the ending of Ephraim's genealogy with Joshua was the Chronicler's special device that placed the first unsuccessful exploitation by Ephraim's sons as an overture to the long history of conquest that followed. The scriptural text contextualised Joshua's positive judgement regarding the Promised Land and his election as Moses' successor. From a homiletical perspective, Ephraim's genealogy generated insights about failure and tragedy and hope for the fulfilment of God's promise, also likening the life of faith to a journey of perseverance. Research findings revealed similarities in the literary and homiletic meaning of Ephraim's genealogy with that of Terah in Genesis 11:27–32.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Homileticians used to complain that biblical studies were more oriented towards historic-critical interest than towards preaching. Results of this research, which relate to the discipline of Old Testament Studies, show how a genealogical text can be relevant for homiletic and pastoral use in church ministry.

Keywords: 1 Chronicles 7:20–27; Ephraim genealogy; Beriah; Joshua; tradition of conquest.

Introduction

The first chapter of Chronicles describes the beginning of the world with Adam (1:1) and the creation of the nation of Israel with Abraham (1:27). Thereafter, the entire history of Israel unfolds in two parts: the genealogy described in 1 Chronicles 2–9 and the following narrative from 1 Chronicles 10 to 2 Chronicles 36. Starting with the election of David in 1 Chronicles 10, the narrative section of the book illustrates the history of the kingdom of Judah with a focus on the Davidic kings, Jerusalem and the Temple. The genealogical section, on the other hand, provides the history of the people of Israel, from the birth of the twelve tribes (1 Chr 2:1–2) to their resettlement following the exile, reflecting the Chronicler's timeframe (1 Chr 9). As there are many personal, geographical and ethnological names included in the genealogy, it is difficult for the reader to become engrossed in this book. This difficulty was figuratively depicted by Leslie Allen (1999:299) as a lion that stood as the gatekeeper for the treasure house (i.e. the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles). The genealogy is not simply an enumeration of names, but a condensed history of individuals, families and tribes. The collective experiences of Israel have built the traditions that have become the nation's religious, theological and spiritual foundations. In contrast to the description of a nation's history, a large or small group of individuals – like a family unit – may have experiences that are opposite those of this collective entity, such as hardship during peacetime. Although familial or tribal traditions in the genealogy of the Old Testament sometimes conflict with official history, they also provide a glimpse into a context that is missing from the Old Testament narrative. To illustrate this point, I consider the text, 1 Chronicles 7:20–27, which concerns the genealogy of Ephraim, Joseph's second son and extends its homiletic significance.

The unsuccessful attempt of Ephraim's sons (1 Chr 7:20–21)

The genealogy commences with the 'sons of Ephraim', followed by 'Shuthelah, and Bered his son, Tahath his son, Eleadah his son, Tahath his son, Zabad his son, Shuthelah his son, and Ezer and Elead' (vv. 20–21a).[1] The names appear to be a filiation of successive generations from Ephraim.

1.Hereafter, a Bible citation from New Revised Standard Version.

This interpretation creates the problem of identifying Ezer and his brother Elead of the eighth generation from Ephraim (v. 21a) because, in verse 22, they appear as the sons of Ephraim. In Numbers 26:35–36, Ephraim is described as having three sons: Shuthelah, Becher and Tahan, the last two of whom are obviously variants of Bered and Tahath in 1 Chronicles 7:20. The comparison denotes those mentioned in 1 Chronicles 7:20–21a as Ephraim's direct sons, rather than his descendants.[2] The numerous sons of Ephraim signify the fulfilment of Joseph's being honoured in Jacob's blessing (cf. Gn 49:22–26). However, Ephraim lost his many sons with a single blow. By using a genealogical device, the Chronicler maximises his family's crisis in a small episode (1 Chr 7:21b–24) that interrupts the genealogy and is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament. According to verse 21b, Ezer and Elead are killed in their encounter with 'the people of Gath, who were born in the land', 'because they came down to raid their cattle'. This passage raises several questions about the time and motive for 'going down'.

The usage of the verb to 'go down' (ירד) presupposes that the settlement is in the central highlands of Palestine, as journeying from Egypt to Canaan is typically expressed as to 'go up' (עלה; Gn 13:1, 50:7, 26) (cf. Rudolph 1955:73). In this case, because of the long distance, some scholars (Alt 1939:103; Mazar 1954:227–235) emend the Palestine city 'Gath' in favour of 'Gittaim' – an unconquered city in Canaan until the monarchy (2 Sm 4:3; Neh 11:33). Meyers (1974:55) argues that this episode reflects the conflicts between Israel and Canaan during the exploits of Jacob's sons in the patriarchal period (Gn 34), whereas Kallai (1986:73) suggests that it preserves a remnant of the Danites' failure to control their allotment in the Promised Land and points to the subjugation by the Amorites in Judges 1:34. These two ideas do not reflect a consideration for the location of Ephraim in Egypt, so the anachronistic problem still remains. However, it can be solved by simply looking at the time the episode was written – that is, when the Israelites settled in Palestine after conquering it.[3] On the other hand, Mulder (1975:145) emphasises several verses like Judges 1:9, 11:37 and 15:3, in which the verb ירד is not determined by the translation, 'go down'; thus, it should not necessarily be assumed that they settled on the Mount of Ephraim. In sum, the episode relates that in the course of Israel's settlement in Egypt – even before the Israelites collectively set foot in the Promised Land – the sons of Ephraim advanced from Egypt to the Philistine city of Gath to raid cattle.

The motive for the campaign is enigmatic. Boda (2010:85) describes it as 'sinful' and 'illicit behaviour (trying to steal livestock)'. One especially illuminating text in this regard is Genesis 34: two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, slaughter the men of Shechem because of the rape of their sister, Dinah. Commentators generally postulate that Genesis 34 consists of two parallel stories from non-priestly sources (Jahwist and Elohist) (e.g. Westermann 1982:653). It preserves the memory of the violent seizure of Shechem during the settlement in Canaan (Albright 1929:6; Davidson 1979:194; Westermann 1982:653), which is connoted by the words employed in this instance (Davidson 1979:197). Here, the military conquest is expressed as 'taking' (לקח) livestock, as in 1 Chronicles 7: 'They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field' (Gn 34:28). From this, the exploitation of Ephraim's sons can be defined as an attempt to conquer and extend the territorial hold (Albright 1929:6). However, their actions ended catastrophically.

Generally, this failure is easily interpreted as a punishment, either emerging from a lack of faith towards the Lord or reckless behaviour based on hubris. What does the Chronicler propose here? Mulder (1975:141–166) offers an interesting discussion of the Midrash in 1 Chronicles 7 (see also Heinemann 1975:1–15). In association with the other biblical texts, the targumim and rabbinic literature give a polemic tone to the action of the Ephraimites in 1 Chronicles 7:21. The tribe of Ephraim moved out of Egypt thirty years before the Exodus – that is, before the divinely appointed time. Subsequently, the Ephraimites were defeated and slain in battle because of their failure to heed the Torah (Ps 78:9–10) (Heinemann 1975:10–11; Mulder 1975:151).[4] The sheer number of dead bodies in the battlefield was the cause of Israel's ban from using 'the way of the land of the Philistines' (Ex 13:17)[5] (cf. Heinemann 1975:11; Mulder 1975:149). Overall, 1 Chronicles 7:21b concerns the premature and unsuccessful Exodus of the tribe of Ephraim, which was based on the manifestation of pride and an unwillingness to wait for the divine act of redemption. The Chronicler seems to provide a hidden polemic against the Ephraimites by characterising the action of the sons of Ephraim as rebellion against the Lord or the result of a lack of faith. To do justice to the significance of this episode, there needs to be a careful consideration of the text. Firstly, we review the polemic against Ephraim in Psalm 78.

In the discussion about Psalm 78, Frisch (2009:196–197) suggests that Ephraim's disobedience against the word of God relates to his refusal to be loyal to the Davidic monarchy (vv. 1–8, 68–72). In Frisch's analysis, Psalm 78 provides a plausible background for justifying the transfer of primacy from Ephraim to Judah (vv. 67–68). It is possible, therefore, that our text proceeds along the same line when one considers that the emphasis on Judah's special position is observed in a number of ways in 1 and 2 Chronicles: the first position of the tribe of Judah (1 Chr 2:3–4:23) in the genealogical lists that involve all tribes, the exclusive description of the history of the kingdom of Judah in the Chronicler's historiography (from 1 Chr 10 to 2 Chr 36) and the representative role of the

2.On the other hand, Knoppers (2004:464) and Boda (2010:84) regard Shuthelah, Ezer and Elead as the three sons of Ephraim and the seven generations from Bered to Shuthelah II as in Shuthelah's line.

3.Others view this verb as idiomatic for the Ephraimites (cf. Mulder 1975:141–166; Williamson 1982: 80–81).

4.The situation is also explained as a faulty computation of the period of enslavement resulting from the contradiction between timelines of 400 years (Gn 15:13) and 430 years (Ex 12:40) (Heinemann 1975:11).

5.According to the classic literary hypothesis, this description belongs to the E fragment, and the P stratum supplies the detailed information: God commands them to take the routes along the Mediterranean Sea. Albertz (2012:236) views Exodus 13:17 as the Hexateuch Redaction.

tribe of Judah for 'all Israel' by David's election (1 Chr 10; 2 Chr 13). Genesis, by contrast, portrays Ephraim's primacy[6] and Judah's leading role as juxtaposed.[7] However, their stories lack a proper eliminative process (cf. Smyth 1945:209), unlike those of Reuben and Levi (Gn 34; 35:22–23). In view of the dual leadership or kingship of Judah and Joseph or Ephraim, it is suspected that the Chronicler intended to provide a rationale for Ephraim's discreditation through the proper eliminative process of the primogeniture. However, in the books of Chronicles, the polemic against the tribe of Ephraim does not relate to the Exodus, but to separation from the Davidic kingdom. With the election of the Davidic line, from the outset, reproach is directed against Jeroboam (2 Chr 13:6), as Frisch (2009:196–197) (cf. Bae 2005:76ff.) points out in his discussion about Psalm 78. With regard to the right of the firstborn, 1 Chronicles 5:1–2 states:

> The sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel. (He was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph son of Israel, so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright; though Judah became prominent among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph.)

Thus, according to the Chronicler, Reuben forfeited his firstborn right; subsequently, it was transferred to Joseph, just as Genesis 48:3–5 implicitly acknowledges. Despite Judah's prominence, Joseph's primacy was not rejected or transferred to Judah. Instead, Judah's prominent position involves the leading role, not the birthright. Hieke (2003:165) explains this relationship succinctly by describing Reuben as the biological firstborn, then Joseph as gaining the official rights and Judah serving as the functional leader. Therefore, our text is not a polemic against the loss of Ephraim's position as a firstborn son. Strikingly, the genealogy ends with Joshua. It, at least, calls for a different perspective of the tragedy, rather than viewing it merely as a misfortune, a punishment with an unknown basis or a lack of preparation.

Ephraim's naming of the newborn son, Beriah (1 Chr 7:22–23)

Ephraim lost all of his sons with one blow. What happened to him was a bolt out of the blue. Throughout history and into the present, the loss of children is perhaps the greatest pain that human beings endure (cf. Gn 37:35; Jr 31:15).[8] The Chronicler describes the father's suffering: 'their father Ephraim mourned many days' (1 Chr 7:22a). This gives the impression that Ephraim could not easily escape the pain and suffering of grieving for his children. Fortunately, after being consoled by his brothers, Ephraim went into his wife, and they had a son (vv. 22b–23a): 'He named him Beriah, because disaster had befallen his house' (v. 23b). It is significant to note that the Hebrew expression *bᵉraʿah* (ברעה), which means 'there was misfortune', bears a phonetic resemblance to the name *Bᵉriah* (בריעה). Ephraim's name for his newborn son, Beriah, indicates that the death of his sons was highly traumatic and a continuing source of pain. Beriah, as a personal name, is also in Asher and Benjamin genealogies (1 Chr 8:13, 16; cf. Gn 46:17; 14:2; Nm 26:44,45). Presumably, this name has a positive connotation (Japhet 1993:182). Noth (1980:224; cf. Rudolph 1955:73) defines the name Beriah as stemming from the root *br'* (ברע), which is equivalent to the Arabic *barā ʾatun*, meaning 'excellence'. Ephraim's name choice signifies that whilst he looked back on the disaster (ברעה) that befell his sons, he was also looking forward and hoping for a different future for his new son, Beriah (בריעה). We see a similar situation in the naming of Jabez by his mother during her difficult labour (1 Chr 4:9–10): 'I bore him in pain' (בעצב). The conjectured root of the name Jabez (יעבץ) is a metathesis of the word 'pain' (עצב). The common feature in the naming of the two sons is that the names Jabez and Beriah were determined by the parents' bad experiences at the time of their births. The names ostensibly bear a negative connotation, but actually have a positive meaning that reveals a shift in focus from the present catastrophe to the future.

A new beginning after failure (1 Chr 7:24–27)

The second part of the genealogy of Ephraim begins with Beriah (v. 24) and ends with Joshua (v. 27). Japhet (2009:295) considers the genealogy that ends with Joshua as 'a literary fabrication' because 'Elishama the son of Ammihud, head of the tribe of Ephraim (Nm 7:48; 10:22) and a contemporary of Joshua according to the Pentateuch, is named as Joshua's grandfather in 1 Chronicles 7:26-27'. The ending of the genealogy of Ephraim with Joshua is the Chronicler's special device that positions the first unsuccessful exploitation by Ephraim's sons as an overture in the long history of conquest that follows. The march of Ephraim's sons to Gath was the first and foremost attempt to conquer Canaan (i.e. before quests of Moses and Joshua). In this respect, Ephraim's sons were the forerunners of Joshua, the hero of the conquest and settlement. Undoubtedly, Ephraim's special interest in the Promised Land is based on God's promise in the book of Genesis when a dying Jacob in Egypt repeatedly asks Joseph to promise that he will bury him in the Promised Land (Gn 47:29–30; cf. 49:29). Joseph's last words are: 'God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob' (Gn 50:24b). It can be understood that the actions of Ephraim's sons were steps towards the fulfilment of God's promise according to the words of their ancestors. In conclusion, their actions were neither the acts of rebellion against the Lord or hubris, nor the result of a lack of faith in the Lord!

In the same vein, 1 Chronicles 7:24 states that Sheerah, Ephraim's daughter, built the cities of upper and lower Beth-horon and Uzzen-sheerah after the failure of her brothers.

6.Joseph's kingship or primogeniture and Ephraim's status as a firstborn son and recipient of a blessing are approved in several ways: in Joseph's double dreams (Gn 37:8; 37:9–11) (cf. Schmid 2016:374–388), in Joseph's double portion (48:3–5, 22a; cf. Dt 21:15–17) and in Ephraim's designation as Joseph's firstborn in the blessing of Jacob (48:13–14; cf. Dt 33:17, 26).

7.Judah's leading role is also emphasised in Genesis 43:8–9, 44:16, 44:18–34 and 46:28. Finally, the promise of kingship is given to Judah and his descendants in Jacob's blessing (49:8–12), justifying the claim to rule over Israel entirely (cf. Alexander 1993:255–270, specifically 260, 262 and 269).

8.In the Confucian culture, dying before one's parents die is considered most undutiful. The particular Korean word for it is *chamcheog*.

In general, the devastating defeat was enough of a blow to cause continuance of the campaign to be implausible. Despite the tragic end, the family of Ephraim continued with the struggle of the occupation and settlement of the Promised Land. The Ephraimites are revealed as relentless dreamers who believe God's promise. As Japhet has pointed out, the Chronicler provides an 'alternative concept of the beginnings of Israel in their land' (Japhet 1993:184; 2009:295; also, Knoppers 2004:464–465). Furthermore, the Chronicler provides the context that is missing in the narratives within the Old Testament. We see that Joshua was one of the two who judged the Promised Land positively after their scouting expedition (Nm 14:6–9) and succeeded Moses in the task of conquering and settling (Jos 1:7; Nm 27:15–23); God's assurance to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob of the Promised Land (Gn 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7, 18, etc.) was achieved under the leadership of Joshua (Jos 11:23; 21:43–45; 23:4), the descendant of Beriah. In this light, the first failure of the Ephraim's sons was not punishment for an unknown reason or a lack of preparation; instead, it was suffering incidental to a manifestation of their faith, and a gateway to a successful future. Ephraim's sons showed that the way to conquer and possess the Promised Land was not as fair and easy as the history of Israel, as a collective entity, depicts.

The view on tragedy and failure is also seen in the genealogy of Terah, the father of Abram or Abraham. Terah loses his son Haran in Ur of the Chaldeans but proceeds 'to the Land of Canaan'. He dies in Haran (Gn 11:27–32), but Abram is called to go 'to the Land', which God shows him. He leaves Haran and heads for the land of Canaan (Gn 12:5b). There, he receives the promise of God: 'To your offspring I will give this land' (Gn 12:7). Initially, the promise and fulfilment take the form of death and tragedy, but triumph emerges out of the warp and weft of failure and tragedy.

Conclusion

The Ephraim genealogy demonstrates that the promises of God are never achieved without trials and pain. There is the potential for loss, death, blame and regret in the course of the fulfilment of God's plan. However, one's failures may be accomplished by future generations, as long as one does not abandon the faith. Today's sense of failure and loss may be conceived of as tomorrow's fruit. Therefore, 'let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us' (Heb 12:1).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors' contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This work was supported by the Research Fund of the Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, 2020.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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