

Article

Myths of Brotherly Animosity and the Civil Wars of Biblical Israel

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Abstract: A recurrent theme in the Hebrew Bible is brotherly animosity. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and Solomon and Adonijah are but a few examples. This variety seems to reflect a fundamental conflict in ancient society. In this article, I argue that all these stories function as ethos myths. After describing the various stories with an attempt to single out the motivations behind them, they will be put into the social context that probably fueled them. Although the stories are extremely varied, they all share at least one common element, namely: it is always the younger brother who turns out to be God's favorite. A second element is the jealousy of the older brother in the special status of the younger. Against the historical background of long-lasting civil war between the smaller kingdom of Judah and the larger, militarily stronger, and more financially stable kingdom of Israel, I argue that these stories were adapted to fit into the Judean narrative for the sake of strengthening its self-image as a small kingdom struggling against a stronger opponent who is motivated by jealousy. The mythical conflict reflects the complexity of the struggle between the two kingdoms, in which Judah identifies itself as being the 'younger child' or the 'little brother', who is blessed by God. Such myths give justification to the military struggle and feed the self-conviction narratives of the superiority of Judah as being divinely chosen.

Keywords: myth; Hebrew Bible; brotherly animosity; civil wars; Judah; Israel



Citation: Zohar, Diklah. 2022. Myths of Brotherly Animosity and the Civil Wars of Biblical Israel. *Religions* 13: 753. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13080753>

Academic Editor: Debra Scoggins Ballentine

Received: 21 June 2022

Accepted: 13 August 2022

Published: 18 August 2022

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1. Introduction

Many of the studies on mythical elements in the Hebrew Bible have concentrated on finding the parallels (and differences) with the mythical literary corpora of the ancient Near East, illustrating influences, debates, and controversies that the biblical writers faced as they confronted polytheistic concepts and their struggle with the 'pagan' worship that they tried to delegitimize (Cassuto 1972). Often, these very attempts reveal how deeply these concepts were also rooted within the 'monotheistic' mind. It is, however, not yet common to approach the Hebrew Bible as a mythical cycle in its own right.

This article approaches the Hebrew Bible precisely as such and will attempt to show how myth theory and the approach toward the social function of myth fit a very specific category of biblical stories, namely stories that express brotherly animosity or where brotherly animosity fulfils a fundamental component in the plot.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the intention behind the cycle of brotherly animosity stories, to identify the similarities among them, and to illustrate their deeper social function and political motivation. It should be stressed that each of these stories may have more than one layer of meaning and may therefore reveal more than one mythical aspect. It is not in the scope of the current study to explore all these mythical functions, although some of them will be mentioned within the discussion. Various elements in these stories relate to the law of the Torah and, as such, enlighten the ethical practices of ancient society. Ritual, religion, and other aspects can be traced in them. It is the common traits among all these stories that is the subject of the current study, as these traits illustrate their function as ethos myths. An ethos myth indicates the very expression and means of propagation of the collective consciousness and identity.

These myths justify and perpetuate the pattern of thought and belief which makes up the particular mentality of a given social group and serve as a foundation and warrant for its customs and institutions (Csapo 2005).

2. Biblical Stories of Brotherly Animosity

The very first story of brotherly animosity in the Hebrew Bible is that of Cain and Abel. Cain is an agricultural farmer, while Abel is a shepherd (an occupation that also designates the younger brother in other brotherly animosity stories). Both brothers bring a sacrifice and God shows preference to the sacrifice of the younger brother, Abel. The story does not state why Abel was preferred and it is possible that this component of the story illustrates its function as a ritual myth (the preference for animal sacrifice over vegetable) or a myth that explains the customs of sacrifice at the time in which the story was composed. Another reading suggests a negative attitude toward a sedentary culture in favor of a nomadic one (Antwi 2017). A second important element in the story is the ordeal, as Cain confronts his own uncontrollable jealousy that culminates in the murder of his brother. The element of murder (or the plan to murder the younger brother) also appears in other brotherly animosity stories. This action, however, does not give Cain the desirable status of the beloved brother.

In the story of Ishmael and Isaac, the animosity between the mothers, Sarah and Hagar, reflects the relationship between the brothers. God's choice of Isaac (Abraham's younger son, but the firstborn of Sarah) is made clear all along and culminates in the introductory verses of the Binding of Isaac story, where God refers to Isaac as Abraham's only son, ignoring the existence of his elder brother, Ishmael. This myth may reflect a social structure in which the son of the lawful wife surpasses the status of the son of the maidservant, despite his younger age.

One of the most well-known, as well as the most complex, brotherly animosity stories in the Hebrew Bible is that of Jacob and Esau. In this case, the very notion of the firstborn's right is being challenged, even at the price of deception and fraud, which rabbinic interpretations throughout Jewish literary tradition somehow deem legitimate. The fact that the two brothers are twins intensifies this tension, as Jacob holds the heel of his brother at birth (a later story, that of Zerah and Perez, also illustrates the ambiguity of determining 'the firstborn' between twins). In the story of Jacob and Esau, the attempt to grant divine grace to the younger, deceitful brother, who was backed by his cunning mother, is all the more conspicuous as the younger brother does not seem to have earned the preferred status in any way: not morally and not by any other achievement. It is the ambition of the mother, who would do anything to promote her favorite son above her husband's favorite son, that plays a decisive role in the deceit. Jealousy and revenge once again play a role in the wish of Esau to kill his younger brother after he learns about his deception, and Jacob is sent away for safekeeping with the mother's family far away from the reach of his furious brother. In turn, Jacob confronts his own share of deception at the hands of Laban, who strictly keeps the firstborn right of his daughters: Leah, the elder sister, is to be married first, despite the passionate love of Jacob for the younger daughter, Rachel. That Jacob tries to bypass this broadly accepted cultural rule portrays the deceit of Laban as poetic justice. In fact, the attitude of the story to Jacob is rather dual. On the one hand, he is clearly the main protagonist in the story, who enjoys divine favor at more than one moment along the plot. On the other hand, he is portrayed all along as a cunning, unworthy figure, while Esau, with all his shortcomings, gains the reader's favor as being the deceived party. Conspicuously, divine blessing has not ultimately skipped Esau; in his meeting with Jacob, many years after Jacob's cowardly escape, Esau is portrayed as a confident, forgiving brother and as a powerful and accomplished leader, who possesses military might and wealth. However, it is Jacob who became the forefather of the Israelite people, while Esau became the forefather of their traditional enemy: Edom. In this sense, the story is set to explain a long-term conflict with a neighboring ethnic group with which the Israelites were

engaged in war. The identification of the older brother with the enemy is seen here for the first time and is very explicit.

A similar connotation can be found in the story of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. This story shows a somewhat different pattern of animosity but is interesting to mention in the context of the current discussion of long-term ethnic rivalry. It illustrates how a myth reflects existing social structures: After Noah gets drunk and lies naked in the tent, Ham sees his nakedness. The two other brothers take a blanket and walk backward in order to cover their father's nakedness without seeing it. After Noah wakes up, he curses Ham (the ancestor of Canaan): 'So Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his younger son had done to him. Then he said: "Cursed be Canaan; A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren." And he said: "Blessed be the LORD, The God of Shem, and may Canaan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant."' (Genesis 9: 24–27. All Bible quotations follow the New King James Version). Here, the myth explains how a certain social structure is related to ethnic identity and expresses the social hierarchy in mythical terms. Here, the Hebrew applies the words 'small' or 'little' (*katan*) in the meaning of 'young', and in fact, the Hebrew Bible uses both terms as synonyms. Thus, Noah refers to Ham as his 'little son', meaning 'younger': 'בְּנֵי הַקָּטָן'. This will be of some importance in a later stage in the discussion.

The story of Joseph and his brothers uses some of the elements appearing in stories of brotherly animosity but sets them in a totally different context and setting. Here, the little brother is the son of the beloved wife Rachel (herself the younger of the two daughters of Laban mentioned earlier). Joseph is the firstborn of his mother but not of his father. Like his father Jacob, Joseph is introduced in the story as a negative figure of a spoiled, selfish, and arrogant brother, whose dreams (which function as an oracle) make him the target of hatred and jealousy by his 10 elder brothers. Again, this jealousy almost brings about his death, only to be replaced by slavery. However, he is virtually presented as dead: His clothes are stained with the blood of a goat to convince Jacob that Joseph did not survive the journey to meet his brothers, who were grazing their flocks in Dothan valley. Joseph's death is staged to play a decisive role in the later drama as the story develops. However, as the plot unfolds, the reader is introduced to a grand transformation in Joseph's character. Joseph turns into the classical divinely blessed protagonist who brings the divine bliss with him wherever he goes, succeeds in all that he undertakes, and becomes a player within a broader divine plan. In a way, he embodies the divine blessing given to Abraham: 'I will bless those who bless you' (Genesis 12: 3). Unlike earlier stories of brotherly animosity, Joseph gains his status as the rightfully blessed younger brother from the personal qualities that he possesses (or develops in the course of the plot). It would not be true to say that other brothers do not possess any positive characteristics; Ruben is truly shaken by the fact that he could not find Joseph in the well, and Judah displays his eloquence in a crucial moment of the story, creating a triangular relationship of himself, Joseph, and Benjamin. This triangle is probably not an accidental choice; Judah was the one who persuaded the brothers to sell Joseph as a slave to the passing Ishmaelites in the first place. It is thus up to him to make things right, although he is not aware of it as he presents his apologetic speech to Joseph. The writer associates, perhaps very consciously, the relationship between Judah and Joseph, as possessing powerful natural leadership, as well as the relationship between Judah and Benjamin, perhaps as a reflection of the later incorporation of the tribe of Benjamin within Judah, through which Judah gains the blessing of both younger brothers. This story is extremely complex and invites more than one layer of interpretation. In his wonderful analysis of the story, Rainer Albertz demonstrates how the story is about the destruction—and restoration—of family solidarity (Albertz 2021).

In the next generation, namely Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, we encounter again the element of the preference of the younger brother when Jacob crosses his arms in order to lay his right hand over the head of the younger son Ephraim. By doing so, Jacob is granted prophetic powers. In both stories, we see again the linguistic application of the word 'little' (Hebrew: '*katan*') with the meaning of 'young'.

Moses and Aaron are brothers who work in cooperation and thus present a different model of brotherly relations to the reader. Having very different upbringings, Moses grows up as a prince, while Aaron owes his own freedom to his younger brother. It is Moses who, during his life as a shepherd, receives the mission of saving the people from slavery. Although the story focuses on Moses, the younger brother, as the chosen one to whom God also manifests, both brothers reach a position of power. However, despite Aaron being the high priest, it is Moses who speaks face to face with God.

The prophet Samuel is a peculiar case, as the story revolves around him being the first born of Hannah but not the firstborn of Elkanah. In that sense, Samuel resembles Joseph in his family position. However, being dedicated to God, he does not receive the chance to meet or confront his own natural half-brothers. The story replaces his real half-brothers with the biological sons of Eli the high priest and illustrates his moral superiority over them as the reason for him being divinely favored.

Moving on to the king cycle, the preference for the younger son remains a recurring theme. David is anointed by Samuel after being misled by the appearance of his elder brothers. David is a shepherd, while his brothers are military-trained soldiers and, as such, impress Samuel with their physical properties. The element of the preferred brother as a shepherd has already been mentioned earlier. The shepherd as a leader and protector of his flock plays a role in characterizing the shepherd. Although the beauty of David is stressed, he does not possess the impressive appearance of his elder brothers but, thanks to God's lead, Samuel recognizes David as God's chosen. In this story, it is clearly stated that the unseen potential virtues and character that are possessed by the younger brother are the qualities that turn him into the favored one: 'For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.' (1 Samuel 16: 7).

The succession by Solomon is a rather complex story that involves (similarly to Jacob and Esau) a scheme by Solomon's mother Bathsheba and the priest Nathan, who cooperate to secure the throne for the younger brother. After the murder of Amnon (who was the firstborn son of David) by Absalom, the rebel son Absalom is defeated by David's army and dies in the course of battle. The following in line was Adonijah, who rightly claims the crown and celebrates his succession, unaware of the scheme behind his back. Solomon does all in his power to eliminate any sign of authority granted to his older brother. Consider Solomon's vehement response to Adonijah's request to marry Abishag of Shumen, which might give Adonijah influence in the northern region of the country (1 Kings 2: 13–24). Solomon works systematically to eliminate and execute any opponent who can endanger his position. Furthermore, however, the story stresses the qualities of Solomon, such as wisdom and modesty. As such, his time as a ruler is glorified as the golden age of the united monarchy. It is after this story that the element of brotherly animosity does not take a prominent role in the biblical narrative any longer. It could be that this indicates a turning point in the orientation of the biblical narrative from a mythical to a more historiographic approach, although the discussion around the historiographic intentions in the Bible is a complex issue. The later historical discussion in this study refers to how the Hebrew Bible presents the historical conditions of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and not the true historical conditions of the time.

3. Myth Theory

Brotherly animosity is, of course, not a subject exclusive to biblical myth and it also appears in other cultures. It is not in the scope of the current article to conduct a comparative study of these myths or discuss the relationship between the biblical myths and those of other cultures, but one parallel from the Near Eastern cultural sphere should be mentioned, namely the Egyptian animosity between Osiris and Seth. In this story, the union between Geb and Nut produced four children: Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. Osiris, who was the eldest, became the king of Egypt. He was a just king who respected both those on Earth and those in the Netherworld. His brother Seth, who was always jealous of Osiris, murdered him, cut his body into pieces, and scattered them across Egypt. The myth goes further

to describe how his sister-wife Isis reassembled the pieces of his body (and thus creating the process of mummification) and is united with him. From the union, she bears Horus. Horus challenges Seth and, in their contest, Seth overcomes him by playing falsely. In the last round, a boat race, it is Horus who plays a trick and eventually secures the kingship of Egypt by gaining the favor of the other gods. This myth includes many different elements that were undoubtedly of fundamental importance within ancient Egyptian culture, from the concept of mummification and the underworld to just ruling, the disagreements in a court of justice, and perhaps even the duty of a child to seek justice for his father's murder and ideas around the succession of kingship. Family formation in ancient agricultural society may also be reflected in this myth (Merkus 2018). The myth reflects the right course of succession: Kingship is granted to the eldest son, who also earns his position by his just treatment of all his subjects. Here, jealousy is directed by the younger toward the elder brother and, as such, this jealousy is easy to condemn. The myth thus deals with the socially unjustified jealousy by the party who does not deserve the kingship, obtains it in unjust manner and is eventually banished. This element alone already forms a fundamental difference from all the biblical variants of the brotherly animosity stories, where the younger brother is the one who is presented as just (although, the story of Jacob and Esau includes the element of treachery). In any case, it is the younger who always gains divine favor and, as such, inherits the primary position. This is precisely the main issue that the biblical narrative addresses and is the one common trait shared by all the biblical myths mentioned above: the stories define the younger brother (from the lineage perspective of the father) as the one favored by God and/or having a primary role in a divine plan.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss argued that the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming cultural contradictions (Csapo 2005). The contradiction in our stories is thus the preference of the younger brother, ignoring the legal rights of the firstborn son. It should be stressed that the law of the Torah explicitly states the legal birthright of the firstborn: '... for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.' (Deuteronomy 21: 17). The notion of the redemption of the firstborn implied special rights attached to this status, but then again, the story of Jacob and Esau implies that the birthright is also a legal right that can be transferred (or even sold) to another. The biblical myth thus challenges its own law.

The basic contradiction of preference for the younger brother is common to all biblical brotherly animosity stories. However, the biblical narrative is not satisfied with a single mythic model. The variations seem to show that the biblical cycle tries to confront different 'case studies' that each contradict, in their own way, the convention of succession or the firstborn's right as an accepted social construct.

It has already been mentioned that the favored brother in some of the stories is the younger from the perspective of the father's lineage but is often the firstborn in the mother's lineage. This is the case of Isaac (born to Sarah and Abraham after Ishmael was born from Hagar) and Joseph (the firstborn of Rachel after Jacob already had sons from Leah as well as the concubines). Another is Samuel, who was the firstborn of Hannah after Elkanah already had other sons from Peninnah. The case of Solomon deviates from this pattern, as Salomon was not the first- but the secondborn of Bathsheba and David, after the firstborn died during infancy. Had that firstborn child survived, he would need to have been cast off as a bastard, as he was conceived while Bathsheba was still married to Uriah. This would make him unfit for the throne, and the myth conveniently eliminates him, because even if he would have been of a fine character, his bastard status would have risked the legitimacy of the whole dynasty. From the point of view of the law of the Torah, the problem that is being tackled here is the fact that in all these stories, the favored brother is born of the favorite wife rather than the first wife. The contradiction between the divine choice of the younger brother and the social convention of the right of the firstborn creates the mythical tension. It seems that all these stories are designed to undermine the social convention that admits the firstborn's right. This tension appears in all brotherly animosity stories, but in some, the tension is within the accepted social structures: the tension in some of

the abovementioned stories is from the literal law of the Torah not to prefer the son of the beloved wife. That God favors precisely the son that the law forbids creates an enormous level of tension. The literal law says:

‘If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and they have borne him children, both the loved and the unloved, and if the firstborn son is of her who is unloved, then it shall be, on the day he bequeaths his possessions to his sons, that he must not bestow firstborn status on the son of the loved wife in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn. But he shall acknowledge the son of the unloved wife *as* the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his’. (Deuteronomy 21: 15–17)

It might be argued that the literal law refers only to inheritance, and the stories are intended to separate the legal rights from other preferences. Thus, the stories aim to establish a new social convention referring to the question of leadership: Should a leader be selected by virtue of his character, wisdom, and qualities (as is the case of Solomon); by virtue of his natural leadership and charisma (Absalom); or by an external factor such as birthright (Amnon or Adonijah)?

It is worth mentioning that the law of succession to the throne does not literally appear as a law in the Torah. That the firstborn received the legal right of succession was a broadly accepted practice in the ancient Near East (and is accepted in monarchies to this very day). However, nowhere is this explicitly defined, and one may infer that this may have been the default choice in the case when the ruler passed away without naming his successor. It seems that the biblical myth, in this case, also supports a choice based on character, wisdom, and talents. This is especially useful as propaganda for claiming the throne by a non-rightful heir or even a usurper (as in the case of Jehu or Jeroboam). The case of Solomon is revealing, and the cycle as a whole would have been a powerful propagandistic tool for a young (and, in the first instance, seemingly weak) ruler to strengthen his claim to the throne. However, I suggest that the cycle has a much broader implication and is not a matter of a politically motivated agenda by a single ruler, but a much broader identity-forming mechanism that served to unite Judah behind an aggressive policy toward its neighbors and especially toward the kingdom of Israel.

To achieve this aim, the stories can be read in the light of the archetypal theory, as all these stories introduce the archetype of the blessed little brother, accompanied by a second shared element between the stories, namely the jealousy toward the younger brother as a result of his elevated status as blessed and divinely favored.

This element forms the basis of the animosity between the brothers and the built-in assumption that the jealous brother will always attempt to kill the younger, favored one. This narrative supports and nourishes in the younger brother an attitude that is at times defensive and at times aggressive, whether attacked or not. I suggest that this is indeed the case and that the cycle of brotherly animosity is meant to establish the superiority of the kingdom of Judah as ‘the divinely favored younger brother’ and also create the narrative of the younger as the attacked party. Such political intention goes far beyond the ambitions of a specific monarch and seems to have met the need for a strong identity bond for the Judeans themselves as an identity myth that distinguished them from their Israelite brothers. In a time of long-lasting political and military rivalry between the kingdom of Judah and the kingdom of Israel, this cycle of myths would have played a pivotal role in creating the self-image of the Judean monarchy as divinely favored and the animosity toward Judah as outbursts of jealousy regarding this unique status. This interpretation fits into the theory of myth, which states that: ‘the function of myth is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial event’ (Malinowski 1954). According to this interpretation, myth justifies the social order, its institutions, practices, customs, and moral codes. These are confirmed by fitting the political order into the sacred realm and formulating this order as a cycle of narratives that empowers the existing order. The following discussion

will explain the historical background of the animosity between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

4. The Historical Background According to the Biblical Narrative

As stated earlier, the present study refers to the ancient historical circumstances as perceived through the eyes of the biblical writers. According to the biblical narrative, the united monarchy had a rather short life and, after the death of King Solomon, the animosity, which was probably hidden under the surface for quite some time, brought about the collapse of the monarchy into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It is important to stress that the difference between the two kingdoms was not ethnic: the peoples of both kingdoms spoke Hebrew (or dialects of Hebrew) and shared the same ancestry, history, and probably also the same law. In terms of political loyalty, however, the division took the shape of an actual civil war that was fed by a strong religious ideology and the biblical narrative shows an animosity that was always present and deeply rooted. From a religious point of view, Judah, and especially the prophets of Judah, are presented as the true prophets of God and Jerusalem as the exclusive legitimate center of true 'monotheism', while the religion of the kingdom of Israel is presented as corrupted by 'heathen' practices. It is probably due to this deep animosity that the writers obscure the brotherhood between the two kingdoms, as any attempt to seek political alliance between the two opposed their political agenda (Asa-El 2019).

As the monarchy collapsed in two kingdoms, war was almost immediately forged between the two. The first attempt of Judah and Benjamin under Rehoboam to engage in battle to bring the tribes of Israel back under the Davidic dynasty was ultimately not put into action. It could be that the perspectives of winning the battle were so grim that Judah gave up before coming to blows, expressing the separation of kingdoms as 'divine will'. It is interesting that the formulation of the relationship between Judah and Israel in this context uses the word 'brothers':

"Thus saith the LORD: "You shall not go up, nor fight against your brethren the children of Israel: return every man to his house; for this thing is from me.""
(1 Kings 12: 24)

At a later stage, however, war is unmistakable. The book of Chronicles mentions that '... there were wars between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all their days' (2 Chronicles 12: 15) while the books of Kings repeat again and again the formula 'There was war between [name of the king of Judah] and [name of the king of Israel] all the days of his life' (1 Kings 15: 6; 15: 16; 15: 31). At times, the king of Judah bribes an external power, such as Aram, to attack Israel while the king of Israel sets blockades to roads from Judah. For a very short time, it seems as though the two kingdoms cooperate against a common enemy, and by bringing the lineages together through marriage, the two kingdoms attempt to protect the realm from external threats. However, this episode also passed and war between Israel and Judah was renewed (2 Kings 13: 12; 14: 15; 16: 7).

The book of 2 Chronicles is more specific about the civil war in the time of King Abijah of Judah and Jeroboam:

'Abijah set the battle in order with an army of valiant warriors, four hundred thousand choice men. Jeroboam also drew up in battle formation against him with eight hundred thousand choice men, mighty men of valor. Then Abijah stood on Mount Zemaraim, which is in the mountains of Ephraim, and said, "Hear me, Jeroboam and all Israel: Should you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the dominion over Israel to David forever, to him and his sons, by a covenant of salt?"' (2 Chronicles 13: 3–5)

A lengthy speech follows, in which Abijah demonstrates the loyalty of Judah to God, the daily sacrifices kept in all their details in the temple of Jerusalem, the falseness of Jeroboam, and his rebellious actions toward both his former king Solomon and toward God by replacing him with golden calves. This lengthy speech explains the reasoning behind

the unexpected victory of Judah but also promotes the idea of Judah as having a special bond with God. As they are the people who are loyal to his laws, they are rewarded for this loyalty: they are blessed, enjoy prosperity, and deserve special divine protection (Gürkan 2009). The army of Israel had two strong advantages: it was double in size and had a better tactical plan—it ambushed the Judean force from its rear so that the army of Judah had to fight on two fronts. Despite these disadvantages, the victory of Judah is complete and is portrayed as the largest massacre ever in any biblical war narrative:

‘And the children of Israel fled before Judah, and God delivered them into their hand. Then Abijah and his people struck them with a great slaughter; so five hundred thousand choice men of Israel fell slain. Thus the children of Israel were subdued at that time; and the children of Judah prevailed, because they relied on the LORD God of their fathers.’ (2 Chronicles 13: 16–19)

The text does not end with the description of the battle: it continues with a comparison of the life of the two kings afterward:

‘So Jeroboam did not recover strength again in the days of Abijah; and the LORD struck him, and he died. But Abijah grew mighty, married fourteen wives, and begot twenty-two sons and sixteen daughters.’ (2 Chronicles 13: 20–21)

A few elements in the narrative deserve our attention. First of all, the victory is portrayed as a direct result of the divine protection that Judah earned through loyalty and as a result of an unbreakable bond (‘a covenant of salt’). An important element here is the fulfillment of religious rituals, which is an element that does not directly appear in the stories but is stressed in the speech of Abijah. Objective strength, the number of soldiers, and the size of the army is not a guarantee of victory, but the special and continuous bond with the divine and being ‘the favored one’ is the core and source of strength, despite having the disadvantage in terms of numbers. As shown earlier, the language of the myth uses the Hebrew word ‘small’ or ‘little’ where the word ‘young’ would be more appropriate. By doing so, the authors blur the distinction between the two terms. As such, Judah, the smaller kingdom, may easily be identified with ‘the younger brother’, while the kingdom of Israel is easily identified with ‘the elder brother’. Judah, the smaller of the two, is thus fighting against the larger kingdom of Israel and wins not because of its objective strength but because of it being favored and righteous, the same elements that appear in all the mythical stories of brotherly animosity granted to the younger brother. The application of the word ‘little’ with the meaning of ‘young’ here receives special importance, as the biblical narrative applies both terms as synonyms. Thus, Judah, being smaller, identifies itself with the younger protagonists in the myths.

A second element in the narrative is the comparison between the fate of the elder king, Jeroboam of Israel, and the younger king, Abijah of Judah (Jeroboam has already been on the throne for 18 years when Abijah, the son of Rehoboam, inherited the throne). Though they were not brothers, the myth of brotherly animosity resonates here as well: it is the flourishing of the younger king leading the smaller kingdom of Judah that is contrasted with the decay of the elder king and the larger kingdom of Israel.

In the case of the war between Jeroboam and Abijah, it is not clear who was the initiator of the aggression. However, the aggression during the reign of Asa, king of Judah, and Baasha, king of Israel, is clearly on the part of Israel and thus the ‘elder brother’ who acts—as the myth explains—out of jealousy in order to destroy his younger (smaller) brother.

This pattern of reasoning can be recognized in every hostility between the two kingdoms (and even beyond, as is clear from the identification of Esau with Edom) and continues all the way until the Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Israel and its exile. This event is portrayed as the divine punishment par excellence, while the loyalty of Judah to the divine power is seen as a guarantee of its protection and salvation. That Judah itself did not escape the same fate in the Babylonian times is not explained in terms of the geo-political

circumstances and the military miscalculations of Judah but is explained as the fault of the kings as individuals, their betrayal of the bond, and their choice to worship other gods.

5. Conclusions

Although the variety of stories in the Bible that include the element of brotherly animosity is astonishing, there is only one truly consistent component that can be traced in all of them, namely the element of the divinely favored younger brother. A second component that appears in many of the stories is the element of jealousy and revenge that motivates the elder brother to plan an assault (that usually fails or is eventually unmasked) on the younger brother. These two elements are recognizable in the way the books of Kings and Chronicles reflect the troubled relationship between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The separation between Judah and Israel is presented as divine will and, at the same time, Judah is elevated to the status of the favored entity. The house of David as the rightful dynastic line and the worship of God in Jerusalem are the guarantee of the continuation, flourishing, and success of the small kingdom of Judah. In that sense, the ethos myth has a social function, idealizing and strengthening local identity, validating existing political structures, and affirming the religious institutions that were established in Judah.

If the stories of brotherly animosity indeed reflect the troubled relationship between the two kingdoms, then this cycle of stories can be seen as a cycle of myths that function as identity markers and as a binding factor to unite Judah and its identity around a collective consciousness, formed by the narrative of the 'favored younger brother'. The myth is applied as a means of strengthening the animosity between the two neighboring kingdoms rather than indicating their brotherhood or common ancestry. Therefore, the biblical narrative refrains, as a rule, from the association between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel being that of 'brothers' (and the reference in 1 Kings 12: 24 is thus rather an exception than the rule). In order to emphasize Judah as the righteous party in a long conflict, the biblical narrative promotes the portrayal of the two kingdoms as sworn enemies. We can only assume that the common cultural ground between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel was, at the time, so obvious that a contemporary Judean did not need its affirmation. It is the narrative of animosity that the myth wished to stress.

That two brotherly animosity stories hint directly at the animosity with other neighboring social or ethnic groups that are in conflict with the protagonists strengthens this conclusion. In the story of Jacob and Esau, Jacob represents the ancestor of the Israelites, while Esau is the ancestor of Edom, and the brotherly animosity in the story functions as an explanation myth for the hostilities between these two groups at the time prior to or in which the story emerged. Moreover, the curse of Canaan seems to have a similar function, and the 'explanation' of the myth is integrated in the story itself. Other stories, however, do not include this direct reference and the question rises as to which groups or rivals the story refers to. At times, the reference may seem to strengthen the political position of a king who did not stand in the direct line to the throne, as in the case of Solomon. This would explain the emergence of a specific variant but not the interest—almost obsession—of the biblical writer in brotherly animosity stories and the inclusion of such a large number and so many variants of them in the biblical cycle.

It seems that the explanation for this needs to be sought in the fundamental experience of the Judean society as a society in danger: A relatively small kingdom that was engaged, almost from its very initial foundation, in a civil war against a larger, richer, and militarily stronger 'brother', in whose shadow it constantly operated. The survival of such a society depends, in the first instance, on an inner conviction of its own right to exist; hence, the emergence of an ethos that brings together a primary political claim (the line of David), a religious system (the rituals of one God in His sanctuary), and the mythical element of being chosen is stressed again and again by a long and continuous narrative tradition of brotherly animosity myths.

These stories legitimize the superiority of the younger, more righteous but weaker brother who ends up overcoming as victorious, having divine favor, and being the keeper

of the everlasting and unbreakable bond with the one true divine force. This cycle of stories again and again empowers the younger ('little') brother to dare take his primary position, which is ultimately what Judah gained after the fall of Israel and the Assyrian exile, which the biblical writer interprets as a divine punishment to the elder brother, Israel. Against this background, we may place the call of king Hezekiah of Judah, who was trying to restore the status of Jerusalem once again as the one supreme center of a renewed monarchy and who calls to those who were left in Israel after the exile:

'Children of Israel, return to the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel; then He will return to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. And do not be like your fathers and your brethren, who trespassed against the LORD God of their fathers, so that He gave them up to desolation, as you see. Now do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD; and enter His sanctuary, which He has sanctified forever, and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you. For if you return to the LORD, your brethren and your children will be treated with compassion by those who lead them captive, so that they may come back to this land; for the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn His face from you if you return to Him.' (2 Chronicles, 30: 6–9)

In the light of the myths, returning to the worship of God is thus not only a religious call. It is a call to adopt the Judean narrative and identity by the remnants of the population of those who lived in the kingdom of Israel and who now became part of the divinely blessed people, by which virtue those who are in captivity will also return some day and see salvation, in the near or far future.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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