LEARNING FROM EXAMPLE: LESSONS ON LEADERSHIP FROM EARLY BIBLICAL LEADERS

A Review of *The Genesis of Leadership: What the Bible Teaches Us About Vision, Values, and Leading Change* by Nathan Laufer

STEPHANIE A. SLINGERLAND

Beginning as children and continuing into adulthood, humans learn from the example of others. Learning from example may impact nearly every life experience; the same can be said for the experience of leadership. For instance, a student teacher learns to lead in the classroom under the guidance of experienced educators, while an aspiring team leader learns to lead under the mentorship of practiced executives. Thousands of people flock each year to leadership workshops hoping to learn what it takes to be successful from successful leaders themselves. Learning from example is the central premise of Nathan Laufer's book, *The Genesis of Leadership: What the Bible Teaches Us About Vision, Values, and Leading Change.*[1] In his text, Laufer argues that successful leadership is a learned art and a developed discipline. One can learn how to become an exceptional leader by examining both the missteps and achievements of past leaders. Through a discussion of various stories demonstrating the actions of early biblical leaders, Laufer attempts to express the vision, values, and characteristics of leadership that may be learned from one of the most widely read books in the world: the Bible.

I: Synopsis

In his foreward to the book, Senator Lieberman sets the stage for Laufer's examination of leadership. Lieberman states, as Laufer will later argue, that the foundation of leadership rests on the character and values of the individual. The senator commends Laufer, a Jewish rabbi, for writing a text that intertwines the principles of

---

[1] Nathan Laufer, *The Genesis of Leadership: What the Bible Teaches Us About Vision, Values, and Leading Change* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006).

leadership with the values and ideals set forth in the Bible. Lieberman argues that the biblical standards of responsibility challenge today's leaders to achieve a higher level of accountability. Three levels of accountability exist for leaders, according to both Lieberman and Laufer: leaders must be accountable for themselves and their actions, they must be responsible for the welfare of those with whom they have a personal relationship, and they are responsible for those touched by their leadership. Ultimately, leaders need to be accountable not only for their own success but the continued success of their followers and future leaders of the group. The values inherent in leadership, as well as the responsibility that comes with leadership, are central to the premise of *The Genesis of Leadership*.

Laufer divides his text into four subbooks, each discussing a different component of leadership. Book I examines the responsibilities and values associated with leadership, Book II outlines major guiding principles of leadership, Book III considers the challenges of leadership, and Book IV discusses the legacy of leadership. Throughout each section, Laufer walks the reader through stories of leadership found in the first five books of the Bible to complement his main points and assertions. As these books of the Bible purport the genesis of humankind, and the first book of the Bible is aptly named "Genesis," Laufer states *The Genesis of Leadership* may also be found in these holy books. Laufer utilizes these stories and lessons from the early books of the Bible to provide examples of exemplary leadership and the challenges of leadership, particularly when one fails to lead or leads followers in the wrong direction. According to Laufer, the Bible provides many relevant examples of people who not only demonstrated the caring, courage, and commitment to lead, but also overcame various obstacles and hardships often built into the experience of leadership.

For instance, despite his oversights, Moses provides an example of exemplary leadership. The story of Moses is significant. As Laufer points out, even the most successful leaders can make mistakes. On the other hand, Laufer also illustrates the consequences of leading in the wrong direction, such as when Adam and Eve consumed the forbidden fruit and condemned humanity to a life full of sin. As people learn from the examples and anecdotes of others, Laufer draws upon these biblical stories to provide lessons on leadership that leaders of nations, communities, and organizations can apply even today. Laufer posits the Bible can serve as a valuable resource to leaders, underscoring the values and responsibilities of leadership, the guiding principles of leadership, the challenges of leadership, and the legacy of leadership.

II: Discussion

Strengths

Several strengths make Laufer's text on the values, vision, and characteristics of a leader a valuable addition to the existing body of literature concerning leadership. First and foremost, Laufer immediately provides a definition of leadership, which sets the stage for his discussion on leadership. Given the book's biblical focus, some may be pleased to note that Laufer bases his definitions on existing scholarly leadership

research. Laufer draws on the work of several researchers, including Drucker,[2] Burns,[3] and Gardner,[4] to develop his definitions of leadership and management theory. Based on his research, Laufer defines leadership as "envisioning and initiating change, by persuading others to alter the status quo, in response to an urgent challenge and/or compelling opportunity."[5] Laufer also cites the work of Kotter[6] when distinguishing leadership from management. In contrast to leadership, Laufer states management utilizes authority and control to maintain the status quo. Additionally, while the purpose of leadership is to affect long-term change through inspiration and encouragement, the purpose of management is to maintain the current state of affairs through command and control.

In addition to his definitions of leadership and his comparison to management theory, Laufer makes several other connections to scholarly leadership literature. For example, Laufer cites the work of Covey,[7] who posited the importance of seeking the roots of human behavior in character and by learning principles rather than just practices. Similarly, Laufer states that leadership is rooted in character and provides ten guiding principles leaders should utilize to direct their behaviors.

Laufer also cites the work of Kouzes and Posner,[8] which parallels the writings of Covey in 1990, that discusses the importance of attending to the needs of followers. Laufer explicitly states in his first subbook that building relationships is the key to leadership, and all leaders must be attuned to their "brothers and sisters." An additional link to scholarly literature in Laufer's text is the connection to the work of Heifetz[9]. Heifetz stresses the need for leaders to create a "holding environment" that produces a sense of trust, nurture, and empathy for followers. Laufer discusses this "holding environment" when speaking to the challenges leaders face. Laufer argues that if followers do not feel a sense of trust, nurture, and empathy from their leader, followers will not have faith in their leader and may resist their attempts at leadership altogether.

Beyond its connections to scholarly literature, Laufer's book exhibits strengths in several other areas. As previously indicated, Laufer's major premise is that one can learn how to become a successful leader by examining both the missteps and achievements of past leaders. He provides various examples and stories of early leadership found in the Bible. Much research has indicated that adults have various learning styles.[10] For instance, some learn by reading, others by experimenting, and

---

[2] Peter Ferdinand Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper, 1954).

[3] James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

[4] John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

[5] Laufer, *The Genesis of Leadership*, 9.

[6] John P. Kotter, "Leadership at the Turn of the Century," *John P. Kotter on What Leaders Really Do* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 1-26.

[7] Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

[8] James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

[9] Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[10] K. Patricia Cross, *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982); John Marshall Peters, *Adult Education: Evolution and Achievements in a Developing Field of Study* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991); and Raymond J. Wlodkowski, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching all Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

others by mimicking. As many people often relate to stories and narratives, Laufer's text specifically addresses these types of learners. In addition, the examples provided offer rich descriptions and clear connections to Laufer's guiding principles and challenges of leadership, as well as applicability to current-day leadership dilemmas. Laufer's detailed explanations of the guiding principles of leadership and the challenges of leadership allow his work to be easily applied to real-life situations—be it at home, in the classroom, or at the office. The book also does not predispose that readers are familiar with the biblical stories presented. Even if the reader has never read the Bible, Laufer provides adequate descriptions and sample scriptures so the reader can clearly understand the stories presented.

Limitations

While Laufer's text has many strengths, it can be argued that some of its strengths are also its weaknesses. Laufer provides several examples of biblical leadership throughout the text to provide lessons on leadership that can be applied today. He also provides several connections to leadership research to support his guiding principles of leadership, as well as common challenges leaders face. Laufer states these biblical stories explicate the process of leadership, while also providing insights into the beginnings of leadership as his title *The Genesis of Leadership* suggests. Many examples of leadership presented in the text have clear connections to scholarly literature and applicability to present-day leaders, and Laufer explains in great detail the lessons that can be learned from numerous biblical figures in the first subbooks of his text.

However, Book I and Book II contain so many stories describing even the most minor of biblical characters, it is easy to become wrapped up in familiarizing oneself with the characters instead of identifying the lessons on leadership these characters provide. At the end of Book II and all of Book III, Laufer focuses solely on the character of Moses. By focusing on one character, it is easier to identify lessons on leadership. The earlier chapters in the book would have benefited from focusing on fewer characters and on more lessons of leadership from a handful of major characters, such as Adam and Eve, Noah, and Abraham.

A second limitation is that while the examples provided by Laufer are applicable to today's leadership experiences, the inclusion of biblical stories might discourage people from reading his text. Laufer's assertions are strongly rooted in values or virtue-based leadership, including the values of caring, courage, and commitment. While this area of leadership has strong connections to scholarly research, such as the virtue-based research of Velasquez[11] and Pojman,[12] the book touts the values and virtues found in the Bible. Although many of these virtues and values are similar to widely accepted ideals of morality and good behavior, readers may not be able to look past biblical doctrine to apply Laufer's lessons to their own leadership experiences.

---

[11] Manuel G. Velasquez, *Business Ethics: Concepts and Cases*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992).

[12] Louis P. Pojman, *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995).

Furthermore, Laufer utilizes the stories and narratives of early biblical leaders to support his assertions, which are clearly based on his interpretations and opinions of biblical doctrine. While many can learn directly from these stories and narratives, Laufer provides no empirical data to support his premises of ethical leadership. Therefore, like the writings of his fellow ethical leadership researchers, Laufer's text can simply be characterized as descriptive and anecdotal in nature.

Finally, Laufer provides no quantifiable method for determining the success of a leader, despite providing clear steps on becoming a more successful leader. Laufer provides three methods for determining the success of a leader, including the actualization of the leader's vision, the ability to make his physical presence unnecessary to the continued success of his followers, and the favorable comparison to a similar leader. Laufer even provides specific examples of how Moses, considered to be a successful leader, met each of these criteria.

However, concrete guidelines for meeting each of these criteria are not provided, creating several gaps to Laufer's claims. For instance, what happens when circumstances necessitate a change to the leader's original vision? According to Laufer's measurement structure, it could be argued that the leader did not fulfill his original vision, because the vision required change. However, if the leader successfully implemented the revised vision, would Laufer still consider him a failure simply because he implemented a vision differing from the original, particularly when Laufer argues leaders must be flexible and open to change? More concrete guidelines, and preferably quantifiable guidelines, are required to measure the success of a leader utilizing Laufer's guiding principles of effective leadership.

III: Conclusion

In conclusion, Laufer posits several worthwhile assertions regarding the values, vision, and characteristics of leadership that can be learned from the Bible. First, he clearly stresses the importance of caring and commitment and the courage to take responsibility so leaders can guide their followers to greatness and prosperity. Next, he outlines several guiding principles one can follow in becoming a successful leader, such as creating a sense of urgency, securing the legitimacy and authority to lead, and visualizing and enacting a vision of change. Third, Laufer provides several challenges leaders should be prepared for, including overconfidence and lack of communication. Finally, he states leaders must be prepared to continue their legacy by cultivating leaders to assume leadership when the time comes to step down. To support his assertions, Laufer draws on early biblical leaders from the first five books of the Bible to provide lessons on leadership. The examples provided in the text offer rich descriptions of biblical narrative, while making clear associations to Laufer's principles of leadership. These stories help readers to easily relate to Laufer's concepts on leadership and demonstrate how to apply his principles to their own leadership experiences.

Furthermore, given Laufer's biblical approach to lessons on leadership, it may be surprising to find numerous connections to scholarly literature. However, Laufer clearly makes connections to Burns'[13] theoretical framework of both transformational

---

[13] Burns, *Leadership.*

leadership, as well as ideals of ethical leadership touted by Heifetz.[14] In addition, Laufer draws upon the existing leadership and management theory of Drucker,[15] Burns,[16] Gardner,[17] and Kotter[18] when creating his own definitions of leadership. Drawing upon these areas of research, as well as biblical ideals, Laufer argues for a value- or virtue-based leadership style, particularly emphasizing the values of caring, commitment, and courage. Laufer also clearly sides with researchers that argue people are not born leaders, contending leadership is a skill that can be learned and acquired. Laufer provides specific principles that a leader can learn and acquire to achieve success. While at first glance these principles may appear idealistic, he also explains leaders will make mistakes. Yet, like Moses, he states leaders must learn from their mistakes as well.

A final note is that Laufer seems to have the strongest theoretical connections to researchers such as Pojman,[19] who argue virtues and values are central to one's disposition. These virtues and values are not innate, however, but are attained and learned through practice. We learn these values from our families, friends, and communities. And as Laufer argues, these values may also be learned from the example of biblical leaders.

About the Author

Stephanie A. Slingerland is a recent graduate of Western Michigan University (WMU), receiving a master of arts in communication. Her study focus included organizational communication, leadership, and public relations. She is currently an external communications specialist at the Kellogg Company, working primarily in media and public relations. Her bachelor of arts is in journalism, also from WMU.
E-mail: saslingerland@hotmail.com

---

[14] Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*.

[15] Peter Ferdinand Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper, 1954).

[16] Burns, *Leadership*.

[17] Gardner, *On leadership*.

[18] Kotter, "Leadership at the Turn of the Century." *John P. Kotter on what Leaders Really Do*.

[19] Pojman, *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*.