

Genesis 38 – Judah and Tamar

Review

Last time, we began our study of the final major section of the book of Genesis – the story of Jacob’s second-youngest son Joseph. Recall that Joseph and his younger brother Benjamin were their father’s favorites. This naturally made Joseph’s other ten sons very jealous. Their jealousy was then fanned into abject hatred of Joseph due to some dreams he had which seemed to foretell that Joseph would one day rule over his entire family.

Joseph’s brothers plotted to kill him, but then an opportunity arose to sell him instead to some itinerant merchants who then took Joseph down to Egypt and sold him as a slave in the household of Potiphar the captain of the Egyptian guard.

We need to keep in mind, however, that although Joseph’s brothers intended their scheme against Joseph for evil, God was using them all to carry out His eternal plan of salvation for all mankind through the birth, sacrificial death, and resurrection of our LORD Jesus Christ. God knew all along what none of these men could have predicted – that a great famine would come soon to the entire region. God allowed Joseph to be sold into slavery in Egypt so that He could then use Joseph who later rose to a position of prominence and power in the Egyptian government to rescue his family out of starvation during the coming famine. The family’s survival was essential because Jesus’ earthly mother Mary and Her husband Joseph were descendants of King David who in turn was a descendant of Joseph’s brother Judah. Therefore, Jesus of Nazareth was born of the line of Judah and of David in fulfillment of prophecy.

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In chapter 38, the Genesis narrative takes a brief detour into a sordid little tale of deception and sexual misconduct between Jacob’s son Judah and Judah’s widowed daughter-in-law Tamar. Although the story is somewhat distasteful, God used their dalliance to bring Judah’s son Perez into the world. Perez then became the forefather of King David whose line led eventually to Jesus our LORD (Ruth 4:18-22).

¹It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ²There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua [שׁוּא šôa’ - wealth]. He took her and went in to her, ³and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er [עֵר ‘ēr - awake]. ⁴She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan [וֹנָן ’ônān - strong]. ⁵Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah [שֵׁלָה šēlâ - a petition]. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him. Genesis 38:1-5 (ESV)

“...*That time*” mentioned in Genesis 38:1 was apparently immediately following the sale of Joseph into slavery by his brothers. Judah may have taken his portion of the “*twenty of silver*” the brothers received for Joseph to party hearty with his Adullamite friend Hirah. Adullam was a Canaanite town in the foothills of the Judean mountains about 5 miles northwest of Hebron where you may recall that Jacob and his family were living following the death of Isaac after Jacob returned from his 20-year sojourn in Paddan-Aram. After selling him to the Midianite/Ishmaelite traders, Joseph’s brothers returned from Dothan to Jacob at Mamre (Hebron) bringing with them the special coat that Jacob had made for Joseph stained with the blood of the goat they had slaughtered (Genesis 37:31-32).

Although Genesis 38:2 doesn’t say so explicitly, Judah took Shua the Canaanite’s daughter as his wife (Genesis 38:12). Interestingly, the daughter’s own name is never mentioned, but only her father’s.

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Biblical genealogies rarely mention the maternal line except where the mother features significantly in the narrative itself.

This is quite ironic, because in Israeli society today, Jewish heritage is verified via the maternal rather than the paternal line. In the State of Israel, one is officially and verifiably Jewish if one's mother or one's grandmother is a Jew. The lineage of the father is not considered relevant to this determination. Notice also that since God had not yet given the Law of Moses in Judah's time, he was not violating the later prohibition against Israelites marrying Canaanite women.

We'll learn more about Judah's half-Canaanite sons in the coming verses. For now, although the ESV translates the latter half of Genesis 38:5 as "***Judah was in Chezib when she bore him***," the Hebrew in this verse reads וְהָיָה בְּכֶזֶיב בְּלִדְתָּהּ אֹתוֹ – it was in Chezib that she bore him. Although the ESV and others emphasize that *Judah* was in Chezib when his unnamed wife bore Shelah, we shouldn't infer that the couple was apart at the time of Shelah's birth.

6And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar [תָּמָר
tāmār – palm tree]. ***7But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the
LORD, and the LORD put him to death.*** Genesis 38:6-7 (ESV)

We are not told exactly what wickedness caused God to put Er to death. The text implies that Er's wickedness wasn't just a single instance of bad behavior or a few. Er was apparently evil through and through. Furthermore, Er's death was untimely and wasn't due to some accident, disease, or human violence. The text emphasizes that God Himself killed Er.

This idea puts a literal fear of God into our hearts. If God simply snuffed Er out because of his sinfulness, couldn't God do the same to us? If we're honest with ourselves, we recognize our own sinfulness. In fact, Paul says in Romans 3:23 that *all* of us have sinned, and John says in 1 John 1:10 that if we deny our sin, we make God a liar and His truth is not in us. Of course, in the previous verse, John tells us that we can be forgiven of our sins if we simply acknowledge them.

***9If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to
cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*** 1 John 1:9 (ESV)

Jesus Himself also taught extensively about sinfulness and forgiveness. In fact, Jesus sacrificed His own life in our place so that we wouldn't need to suffer the same fate as Er. Indeed, Jesus – God the Son was born into the flesh of the sinless man Jesus of Nazareth for the very purpose of providing the means for our sins to be forgiven. Still, the story of Er raises questions in our minds. Did Jesus' sacrifice on the cross also provide the means for those like Er who died before Jesus' advent to be forgiven of their sins? Apparently not for Er.

Furthermore, is it possible for us to be so entirely wicked as Er apparently was that even Jesus' substitutionary atonement can't save us? Jesus taught specifically about this.

***30Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with
me scatters. 31Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be
forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.
32And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but
whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this
age or in the age to come.*** Matthew 12:30-32 (ESV)

But what exactly did Jesus mean by ***blasphemy against the Spirit***? To understand this, we must first recognize the context in which Jesus made this declaration. He had just cast a demon out of a blind and mute man, restoring him to full health. Then the Pharisees accused Him in the presence of

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many witnesses of doing so by the power of “*...Beelzebul, the prince of demons*” – that is Satan. Small wonder that Jesus called this blasphemy against God’s Holy Spirit by whom the demon-possessed man had *really* been healed.

But what does that mean for us today? Is it possible for us to do, say, or think something that God would consider an unforgiveable blasphemy against His Spirit? Many modern theologians believe that the only such blasphemy would be if God’s Spirit spoke to us to convict us of the Truth of Jesus’ Gospel, but we continue to deny Jesus as our LORD and Savior. That is strong reassurance for those of us who *have* confessed with our mouths Jesus as LORD and believed in our hearts that God has raised Jesus from the dead. Still, I must frankly admit that the idea of God taking Er’s life remains a little disconcerting for me personally.

But meanwhile, back in Genesis 38...

8Then Judah said to Onan, “Go in to your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.”

Genesis 38:8 (ESV)

Most of today’s readers will likely find this verse confusing and distasteful. It pertains to so-called levirate marriage. In ancient Hebrew society, a man was obliged to take his widowed sister-in-law as his own wife so that she could bear children to continue the line of his deceased brother. Centuries after the time of Judah and Tamar, God incorporated the tradition of levirate marriage into the Law of Moses.

5“If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. 6And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. Deuteronomy 25:5-6 (ESV)

The Law goes on to spell out a specific penalty of shunning for any man who refused to fulfill the obligation to father offspring for his dead brother by his brother’s widow. The purpose of levirate marriage is two-fold. Not only did the surviving brother who fathered sons by his widowed sister-in-law ensure that his brother’s line continued, but he also ensured that his brother’s widow was cared for in her widowhood. Notice that the law (and presumably the ancient tradition that preceded it) forbade the widow from marrying outside the family of her deceased husband.

We might well question why continuation of the dead man’s line of succession was considered so important. During the time of Judah and Tamar, the Israelites were nomadic herdsman and itinerant farmers sojourning in the land of Canaan. Certainly, some of them owned lands in Canaan that they had purchased individually from the Canaanites. The best example of this is the cave of Machpelah in Hebron which Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite as a burial place for his family (Genesis 23). But for the most part, the Israelites didn’t own any of the land in which they lived. But some five centuries later after the Israelites conquered Canaan under Joshua, the land was divided by lot among the twelve tribes and subdivided to the leaders of the clans within each tribe. Under the Law of Moses, Israelites were allowed to buy and sell their lands to other Israelites, but every fiftieth year (the year of Jubilee), the lands reverted to the original owners (Leviticus 25). Thus, we can see that continuing the line of a childless dead man was tied together with perpetuating the ownership rights of his family’s lands.

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But what if a childless man died and had no brothers who could take his widow as a levirate wife? Although it is not codified in the Law of Moses, Hebrew tradition covered this case with the idea of a “kinsman redeemer.” In this case, the dead man’s closest male relative had the option of taking the widow as his wife, and with her the ownership of the dead man’s lands. The book of Ruth revolves around this idea. Although Ruth herself was a Moabite, the man Boaz was Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi’s nearest male relative willing to redeem them. Of course, in this Boaz (the great-grandfather of King David) modeled his own descendant Jesus of Nazareth – our Kinsman Redeemer who has purchased us out of death with His redeeming blood on the cross. But that’s another story.

9But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother’s wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. 10And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. Genesis 38:9-10 (ESV)

Of course, levirate marriage carried no financial benefit for the redeeming brother. The land and possessions of the redeemed widow’s husband were inherited by the sons fathered by the redeeming brother. In fact, levirate marriage carried with it a financial burden since the costs of caring for the widow and her children fell to the redeeming brother. Clearly, Onan had no romantic interest in Tamar. Although he gave the appearance of fulfilling his obligations under the levirate marriage tradition, he had no intention of shouldering the financial burden of raising Tamar’s children along with taking care of Tamar herself.

Genesis 38:9 has been taken as a prohibition against masturbation. In fact, the word onanism is a synonym for masturbation. But it was not Onan’s discharge of his semen on the ground for which God punished him. It was Onan’s disobedience of the levirate marriage tradition and his unwillingness to take on the burdens that his levirate marriage duties carried with them for which God took Onan’s life.

11Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in your father’s house, till Shelah my son grows up”—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father’s house.

Genesis 38:11 (ESV)

From Genesis 38:11 we can infer that Shelah was somewhat younger than his brothers Er and Onan – enough so that Judah could justify to Tamar his unwillingness to give Shelah to her as a levirate husband (at least not immediately). Apparently, Judah was unaware of Onan’s disobedience of his duty to father children by Tamar. It seems that Judah superstitiously believed there was some sort of curse surrounding marriage to Tamar that had caused the deaths of his elder two sons, and he was afraid his only remaining son Shelah might fall victim to it as well.

Notice also that Judah didn’t take on the burden of caring for Tamar in her widowhood himself. Instead, Tamar returned to her father’s household. Recall that when we studied Genesis 31, we looked at the concept of the dowry or bride price paid to the father of a betrothed woman by her prospective groom’s father. This bride price was to be held in trust by the bride’s father in case she needed to return to his household as a widow which Tamar eventually did.

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¹²In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," ¹⁴she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage.

Genesis 38:12-14 (ESV)

The ESV translation of the Hebrew נִחַם as *"When Judah was comforted..."* in Genesis 38:12 is somewhat problematic. The root verb נָחַם *nāḥam* in this grammatical sense can mean to be sorry, be moved to pity, have compassion, rue, suffer grief, repent, comfort oneself, be comforted, or ease oneself. The KJV translates it as *"was comforted,"* and some other English translations including the ESV seem to have simply followed suit. But the NLT renders נִחַם here in this verse as *"After the time of mourning was over,..."* Others, including the NIV, CSB, and NASB, take this same approach. So, the verse can either mean that Judah didn't visit his friends in Timnah until after he had recovered from his grief over the death of his (unnamed) wife, or that Judah visited his friends to be comforted.

In either case, Tamar took the opportunity Judah's road trip afforded to teach him a lesson as we shall soon see. The exact location of Enaim is unknown. But it must have been in the vicinity of Timnah somewhere near where the herdsmen took their flocks for shearing.

We don't know biblically how much time had passed between the death of Onan and the death of his unnamed mother. But it must have been at least as long as the age difference between Onan and Shelah since Shelah had fully grown into manhood by the time Judah's time of mourning for his wife was completed.

¹⁵When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" ¹⁷He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" ¹⁸He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. Genesis 38:15-19 (ESV)

The idea that Judah didn't recognize Tamar – his own daughter-in-law of many years – seems a bit incongruous to me. We are told that her face was covered, yet it seems Judah could nevertheless easily have recognized her voice. Furthermore, once they got behind closed doors, they both must have disrobed at least partially. I find it odd that Tamar didn't remove her face covering during her tryst with Judah, but perhaps this was the *modus operandi* of the temple prostitutes serving the Canaanite gods that Tamar was impersonating. Regardless of that, we are told right in the text of the passage that Judah didn't recognize her, so we'll just have to take that at face value.

A young goat seems to us a strange price for a prostitute's services. In that society though, wealth was usually measured by the number of livestock in a man's herds and flocks. Indeed, there are some societies even in the modern world which count a man's prosperity by the amount of his livestock. Furthermore, perhaps the temple prostitutes of the Canaanite religions gave the animals with which

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they were paid to the temple priests for use in sacrifices. In turn, the priests no doubt gave the prostitutes their room and board.

The deposit that Tamar exacted from Judah as surety that he would give her the goat he had promised was specifically chosen by Tamar for her intended purpose. The signet ring or cylinder she requested was used by Judah to authenticate official documents of his family business. The cord may have been used to secure the signet to Judah's person or clothing. The staff which Judah carried on his journeys was a symbol of his status as the head of his family and master of his herds and flocks. Together these items served as Judah's personal ID. Later, as we shall see, Tamar used these items that Judah foolishly left with her as proof of her claims against him. But we're getting a little ahead of ourselves.

For married couples who struggle with fertility challenges in the modern world, it may seem a bit unfair that Tamar became pregnant by Judah during their first and only sexual union – an encounter not legitimized by the bonds of matrimony or even levirate marriage. Yet we must recall as always that God was using Judah and Tamar to lay the groundwork for the eventual birth of Jesus of Nazareth through whom God would carry out His eternal plan of salvation for all mankind.

20When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. 21And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute [הַזְנָנִית הַקֹּדֶשֶׁת] who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." 22So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" 23And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her." Genesis 38:20-23 (ESV)

The Hebrew word **הַזְנָנִית הַקֹּדֶשֶׁת** we see translated as "**cult prostitute**" in Genesis 38:21 is found only five times in God's Word – four of them here in Genesis 38. It refers to female prostitutes associated with the fertility rites practiced in the worship of Canaanite idols – particularly Ashtoreth. This word is distinct from **זָנָא** – the Hebrew word used to refer to ordinary prostitutes. There may have been a shrine to Ashtoreth or one of the other Canaanite idols in Enaim where Judah encountered Tamar impersonating a **הַזְנָנִית הַקֹּדֶשֶׁת**. We can only speculate, since the precise location of Enaim remains unknown.

What is perfectly clear though is that Judah *believed* Tamar was a **הַזְנָנִית הַקֹּדֶשֶׁת** when he "went in" to her. Thus, Judah's sexual relations with Tamar were not simple fornication. Judah unknowingly copulated with his own daughter-in-law. But what's worse is that he purposely performed this act knowing that the Canaanites would consider it a form of worship to one of their false gods, even if Judah himself didn't consider it as such.

Clearly, Judah knew it was improper and that he would be ridiculed for it if the matter ever came to light. Thus, he allowed Tamar to keep the items of his "ID" that he had left with her as collateral. As we shall soon see, in doing so, Judah was springing the trap that Tamar had set for him.

24About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral [זָנָא]. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." Genesis 38:24 (ESV)

It is quite intriguing that the word for Tamar's "immorality" is **זָנָא** – the Hebrew word for ordinary (not idol cult) prostitution. Indeed, of the English language translations I looked at, only the

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ESV translates it as “*been immoral*.” The others all call Tamar a harlot or prostitute. Clearly, those who reported it to Judah didn’t even consider that Tamar had been a **מִזְדִּיקָה** *q’dēšâ* – a temple or cult prostitute. This lends credence to the idea that temple or cult prostitution wasn’t practiced in ancient Hebrew society as it was by the Canaanite peoples in whose lands they sojourned before the Egyptian captivity. In any case, Judah must have thought Tamar’s pregnancy was a blessing, because it meant he would no longer be required to give his only surviving son Shelah to her in levirate marriage.

I always find it a little distasteful when I read in God’s Word the stories of women caught in adultery, fornication, or prostitution. There never seems to be any effort to track down the *man* with whom the woman did the dirty deed even though both were clearly culpable for whatever act of “immorality” the woman was accused of. Here in Genesis 38:24, Judah doesn’t even ask who Tamar’s “johns” may have been.

It is also quite disturbing that Tamar’s innocent unborn children would also have been burned to death in their mother’s womb if Judah had carried out Tamar’s execution.

25As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.” And she said, “Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.” 26Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not know her again. Genesis 38:25-26 (ESV)

Neither Judah nor Tamar could really be called righteous, but at least Tamar didn’t publicly humiliate Judah when she revealed his identity as her children’s father. The genealogical listings of the LORD Jesus we find in 1 Chronicles 2:3-4, Luke 3:33, and Matthew 1:3, confirm Judah as the father of Tamar’s son Perez.

We have no record of anyone apart from Judah ever taking Tamar as wife including Judah’s son Shelah in levirate marriage. All we know for sure is that Judah never had sexual relations with Tamar after the birth of his twin sons by her.

27When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. 28And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.” 29But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore his name was called Perez [פֶּרֶץ peres - breach]. 30Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah [זֶרַח zerah - rising]. Genesis 38:27-30 (ESV)

We are left to wonder whether Judah raised Tamar’s children as his own. We can only assume that Judah assumed his proper duties in raising them, since they *were indeed* his sons. Judah’s sons Perez and Zerah and their mother Tamar aren’t mentioned further in God’s Word apart from genealogical listings and in stories about some of their descendants.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we’ll pick up the story of Joseph’s life in Egypt as a servant in the house of Potiphar the Egyptian captain of the guard.