

Genesis 38:1-11
Judah and Tamar, part 1

Last time, we saw that, much like going “from the frying pan into the fire,” Joseph had gone from the bottom of a well into slavery. His brothers’ plan to kill him had been downgraded to simply letting him die of exposure and thirst, with Reuben all the while hoping to rescue him. But the arrival of the Ishamelite caravan provided Judah and his brothers the opportunity to make a profit from their wickedness, and so Joseph was pulled up from the well and sent down into Egypt into slavery.

The passage we study today is a strange and sometimes puzzling account. But before we begin to work through the details of the story, we must confess that the narrative also presents a literary challenge. As we followed the story of Joseph recorded in Genesis 37, Joseph was being sold “to Potiphar, Pharaoh’s officer, the captain of the bodyguard” (Genesis 37:36). We will notice that when we begin Genesis 39, Scripture will state that “Joseph had been taken down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the bodyguard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there” (Genesis 39:1). Thus, it seems as if chapters 37 and 39 of Genesis form a single narrative and ought to be consecutive. In other words, the literary challenge is that chapter 38 of Genesis is inserted into, and seems to interrupt the flow of, the Joseph narrative. As a student of Scripture, it is reasonable to wonder why.

It seems the answer is that this is the only logical place to put the narrative of Judah and Tamar. If it had come before chapter 37, it would have been out of place chronologically, since Joseph was only seventeen then, and Judah seems to be single and helping to manage his father’s estate at that time. It could be argued that Judah was born many years before Joseph, and it might seem logical that Judah, in his thirties, would already have selected a wife. But Scripture reminds us that Isaac did not marry until he was forty years old (Genesis 25:20), and Esau was forty as well when he took a wife (Genesis 26:34). So not taking a wife until a man was forty or so was certainly not unusual at this time and in this culture.

Since, in the narrative we find in chapter 38, Judah is married with three grown sons, to reverse the two accounts and place the Judah-Tamar account before chapter 37 would present difficulties of chronology. But to insert the Judah story later in Genesis would be equally odd, since to have a story about Judah’s life in Canaan when the brothers have already gone into Egypt would be out-of-place and geographically inconsistent. In other words, the Judah-Tamar narrative fits best exactly where it is in Scripture.

And there are some thematic comparisons and contrasts as well that provide good reason to locate the narrative in this place in the overall story of the patriarchs. For similarities we will see that in chapter 38, Tamar deceives Judah by disguising herself as a prostitute. This parallels chapter 37 where Jacob's sons deceived him with Joseph’s bloody coat. We will also see the continued fraternal rivalry that helps define the family, in this case where Onan feels about Er as Joseph’s brothers did about him. Also, we will see that both Judah and Joseph live apart from their family in foreign lands, both prosper, and both take foreign wives from whom come tribes of the nation of Israel.

By way of contrast with the surrounding narratives, Tamar is a seductress, as is Potiphar's wife, but in a more sympathetic reading she may be seen as simply trying to overcome the fact that she had been cast aside and that the cultural traditions related to her widowhood had been ignored. Also in these narratives the chaste Joseph is contrasted with the lustful Judah. Finally, there is the contrast between Jacob mourning Joseph's presumed death and Judah's lack of concern over the death of his two sons.

Thus, the insertion of the Judah-Tamar narrative here is the only sensible place for the story to be. It fits chronologically, geographically, and thematically. It continues to develop the motifs of the disintegration of morality in Jacob's household and the decaying character of his sons. And the narrative continues to establish the argument that God works through the actions of evil and wicked men, and women in this case, to bring about His sovereign plan. So, since we know that all Scripture is useful for our edification, we must be attentive to it, as awkward, curious, and foreign as we may find some of its elements.

Judah's Family

Judah is an increasingly important figure in the narrative of the patriarchs. We have already discussed the role he played in having Joseph sold into slavery. In addition, we will learn later on, after the brothers have journeyed into Egypt, that his will be the most eloquent voice in pleading for mercy when it appears that Benjamin is a thief and is about to be put into slavery (Genesis 44:18-34). And we also will discover that it will be Judah, not the firstborn Reuben, from whom God had chosen to establish the royal line of Israel. As Jacob foresaw when he was about to die,

⁸“As for you, Judah, your brothers shall praise you;

Your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;

Your father's sons shall bow down to you.

⁹Judah is a lion's cub;

From the prey, my son, you have gone up.

He crouches, he lies down as a lion,

And as a lion, who dares to stir him up?

¹⁰The scepter will not depart from Judah,

Nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,

Until Shiloh comes,

And to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

¹¹He ties his foal to the vine,

And his donkey's colt to the choice vine;

He washes his garments in wine,

And his robes in the blood of grapes.

¹²His eyes are dull from wine,

And his teeth white from milk” (Genesis 49:8-12).

Thus the line of Judah was to be the powerful, affluent, and in authority over his brothers and their descendants. About seven hundred years later, at the national level, Judah would provide two of the kings of Israel during the United Kingdom (David, Solomon), and even after the kingdom divided following the reign of Solomon, the tribe of Judah would be the most significant of the tribes in the Southern Kingdom.

There were practical reasons why this elevating of Judah in the eyes of his father may have occurred. Though he was the fourth born of Leah's sons to Jacob, the three older sons had made decisions that brought difficult times to the family. Remember that Reuben had disgraced himself by having relations with his father concubine, Bilhah (Genesis 35:22), and that Simeon and Levi had frustrated Jacob by instigating the attack on Shechem after Dinah's rape (Genesis 34:25). Thus Judah had displaced them in the opinion of their father. But, as reasonable as this may be to provide reasons for Judah's ascendancy within the family hierarchy, we cannot overlook the fact that it is God Who chooses, and God chose Judah to be the ancestor of Israel's kings and of the Messiah.

So, at some undetermined time after orchestrating the ruse of eliminating Joseph by selling him into slavery and deceiving their father with the torn and bloody coat, "it came about at that time, that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah" (v. 1). The city of Adullam has been located about seven or eight miles northwest of Hebron. Ironically it will be included in the lands given to the tribe of Judah upon returning to Canaan after the exodus. And, a man named Hirah apparently lived there. That Judah 'visited' him may not necessarily mean that they knew each other previously. It could also imply that when Judah arrived in the area and set up camp, the two men encountered each other and became friends.

Scripture does not say why Judah left his family settlement. Perhaps he was grazing some of the flocks on behalf of his father, though that seems unlikely since Judah is clearly acting on his own in many respects. Perhaps, like the prodigal son, Judah had demanded his inheritance, or share of the family estate, and set out on his own. It also may be that guilt over his actions regarding Joseph and the knowledge that his brothers knew his role compelled him to leave. Perhaps he was simply in search of a wife and eventually planned to return to Hebron. In any case, upon reaching Adullam, "Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her as a wife and had relations with her" (v. 2).

The language is confusing and supports the argument either that Shua was the name of Judah's wife, or it could be the name of her father. What is clearer is that she was a Canaanite. This fact shows that Judah had little regard for the admonitions of both his great-grandfather, Abraham, and his grandfather, Isaac, both of whom had urged their sons not to take a wife from among the local pagan women. Instead, Judah chose to follow in the footsteps of Esau, his uncle. We can discern from this that after the rape of Dinah and the murder of the men of Shechem, Jacob had lost control of his family. He seems more of a figurehead than a leader with any real influence.

Little is said about the relationship between Judah and his wife, in fact the language is quite terse. Judah "took her as his wife" and "had relations with her (v. 2). Then, "she conceived" and "gave birth to a son" (v. 3). The boy was named Er, which can mean either 'watcher' or 'watchful' though some ancient Jewish texts argue that the name could also mean 'childless,' which would also fit the narrative since Er, the firstborn, will die without progeny.

The relationship between Judah and his wife was fruitful as she "conceived again and gave birth to a son, and she named him Onan" (v. 4). Here the meaning of the name is more straightforward. It can mean

either ‘wealth,’ ‘vigor,’ or strength.’ Eventually a third son followed. Judah’s wife “named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she gave birth to him” (v. 5). Chezib’s location is not known to us, and this is the only mention of the place in Scripture. But it is likely that this was just another city-state in the region of Canaan to which Judah and his increasingly large family moved, now that they had broken away from the family settlement at Hebron.

Tamar the Childless Widow

After this brief introduction to Judah’s family, time moves forward many years. Judah’s sons, at least two of them, are now grown. Also, another main character enters the narrative. While Judah took it upon himself to select his own wife, he did not leave the same prerogative to his son. “Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar” (v. 6). Nothing is known of her background, but it seems likely she was a local Canaanite woman from the nearby area. Though it is always difficult to argue from omission, since this narrative is generally an unfavorable portrayal of lust and deceit, had Tamar been an extended member of the family and a wise choice in that regard by Judah, such an aberration would have been mentioned. We can assume that the bridal transaction was similar to those we have already witnessed in the patriarchal accounts (Rebekah for Isaac, and Leah and Rachel for Jacob). That is, a bride price was paid by Judah, and Tamar was taken from her father’s house to live with Judah’s family.

We do not know how long Er and Tamar were married, but we do know that however long it was, their marriage proved childless. And we can also see again that despite the strength of primogeniture in this culture, it is God Who selects Whom He will bless and Whom He will not. For no specifically stated reason, “Er, Judah’s firstborn, was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord took his life” (v. 7). While we cannot know the specific nature of Er’s offense, clearly it must have been extraordinary. The phrase “evil in the sight of the Lord” is used to describe many sinful behaviors throughout the Old Testament, but it is most frequently associated with idolatry. For example,

“²⁵when you father children and have grandchildren, and you grow old in the land, and you act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God to provoke Him to anger, ²⁶I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today, that you will certainly perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to take possession of it. You will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed”
(Deuteronomy 4:25-26).

Scripture does not record God taking the life of anyone in this way since the events at Sodom and Gomorrah, and there His wrath fell on hundreds not just a single individual. This is the first individual in Scripture that God kills personally.

Curiously, Scripture does not give any account of Judah going into mourning over the loss of his son. He did not repeat the scene of Jacob tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth, and mourning many days (Genesis 37:34). He did not even feel Reuben’s anguish at finding Joseph missing from the well (Genesis 37:29). Perhaps Er’s sins involved troubling his father in some spectacular way, but still it seems out of context for this culture. After all, even David mourned the death of the routinely troublesome and rebellious Absalom (2 Samuel 19:4). Rather, it seems that Judah’s immediate concern was that there was no immediate heir.

To remedy that unfortunate situation, “Judah said to Onan, ‘have relations with your brother’s wife and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up a child for your brother’” (v. 8). Notice that Judah does not ask Onan to marry Tamar, simply to have relations with her and provide an heir for Er. Notice also that he appeals to Onan's presumed affection for his brother, since he refers to Er as “your brother” not as his son. Finally, notice that Judah never refers to Tamar by her name; she is simply “your brother’s wife” (v. 8).

While this may seem an unusual request to our modern eyes, it was in keeping with the social mores of the culture at that time and was a custom that would eventually be codified into law.

“⁵When brothers live together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband’s brother shall have relations with her and take her to himself as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. ⁶It shall then be that the firstborn to whom she gives birth shall assume the name of his father’s deceased brother, so that his name will not be wiped out from Israel. ⁷But if the man does not desire to take his brother’s widow, then his brother’s widow shall go up to the gate to the elders, and say, ‘my husband’s brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.’ ⁸Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And if he persists and says, ‘I do not desire to take her,’ ⁹then his brother’s widow shall come up to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, ‘this is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house!’ ¹⁰And in Israel his family shall be called by the name, ‘the house of him whose sandal was removed’” (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

Thus the Law stated that if two brothers shared the same home, and one of them died without a male heir, the other brother was obligated to take his widow as his wife and provide an heir for him. The brother could refuse, but if he did so, he suffered a very public humiliation, and his descendants were to be shamed and disgraced. In a culture where family heritage and pride were paramount, such a threat carried significant weight.

This element of the Law is also alluded to in Ruth.

“³Then Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. ⁴And they took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other, Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. ⁵Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. . . . ¹¹But Naomi said, ‘return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? ¹²Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I were even to have a husband tonight and also give birth to sons, ¹³would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is much more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has come out against me’” (Ruth 1:3-5, 11-13).

And this practice remained a part of Israel's culture until the time of Christ.

¹⁸Some Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection) came to Jesus, and began questioning Him, saying, ¹⁹“teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves behind a wife and does not leave a child, his brother is to marry the wife and raise up children for his brother. ²⁰There were seven brothers; and the first took a wife, and died leaving no children. ²¹The second one married her, and died leaving behind no children; and the third likewise; ²²and so the seven together left no children. Last of all the woman also died. ²³In the resurrection, which one's wife will she be? For each of the seven had her as his wife.” ²⁴Jesus said to them, ‘is this not the reason you are mistaken, that you do not understand the Scriptures nor the power of God? ²⁵For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven’” (Mark 12:18-25).

This custom is known as levirate marriage, from the Latin *levir* and the Hebrew *yābām*. The intent of the law was to provide protection and provision for a widow. She had left her father's house, and was now dependent upon her husband's family to provide for her. She was not freed from marrying within her deceased husband's family, unless the brothers of her dead husband refused to honor their obligation. Only then could she seek protection and provision from another family. In Hebrew culture, this obligation clearly fell only on the brothers of the deceased husband, though in other Near Eastern cultures (specifically the Assyrians and Hittites) the widow's father-in-law was also eligible to take her as his wife. But such an act was prohibited among the Hebrews by the Mosaic Law, “you shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law. She is your son's wife; you shall not uncover her nakedness” (Leviticus 18:15).

Now, obviously the events we are discussing in this passage occurred before the giving of the Law. And, we must also affirm that the Law was prescriptive, not descriptive. That is, it stated what people ought to do, not what they were doing. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that the Law, when given, reflected the influence of current traditions and values common among the Hebrews and was not something entirely alien to them. But there are some differences we ought to take into consideration as well. First, again notice that Judah made no requirement for Onan to take Tamar as his wife, he simply wanted an heir. Second, there is no suggestion that the brothers actually lived together, though certainly in extended family groupings common in the day, they could have.

Presuming this to be a reasonable request, consistent with the social mores of the time and culture, it is perhaps surprising that Onan refused to play his part. And Scripture makes clear his motives, “Onan knew that the child would not be his; so when he had relations with his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground so that he would not give a child to his brother” (v. 9). In other words, he went to Tamar, had relations with her, but took the necessary steps to make certain that no child was conceived. And the language used makes it clear that this was not a singular act. The word translated ‘when’ can also be translated ‘whenever’ and implies that the act of Onan having relations with Tamar but not fulfilling his brotherly duties was a regular occurrence. That is, Onan enjoyed the pleasures of having Tamar, but without assuming the responsibility of producing an heir for his brother through her. Clearly, the struggles among the men of Abraham's line for ascendancy continued in this generation.

But there was a deeper and more practical motivation, perhaps, than simply not wanting to father a child that would not be his. Onan was putting his own economic interests ahead of his family obligations. As given in the Law, God said,

“⁸Further, you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘if a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter. ⁹And if he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. ¹⁰If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father’s brothers. ¹¹And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his nearest relative in his own family, and he shall take possession of it; and it shall be a statutory ordinance to the sons of Israel, just as the Lord has commanded Moses” (Numbers 27:8-11).

Again assuming that the Law, when given, reflected at least some of the current practices of the society, it is clear that if Er had no children, then Onan would inherit his property. So, Onan did not want to father a child that would impede his being able to inherit Er’s flocks and other personal possessions. And to compound his sin, we must point out that he did not refuse to accept his obligation to provide an heir for his brother. That is, he did not risk the humiliation of being spat upon and having his sandal removed. He did not accept the disgrace to himself and his heirs. Rather, through subterfuge, he pretended to fulfill his brotherly obligation, but then intentionally did not.

We do not know what Tamar thought of this or if she reported Onan’s actions to Judah. But clearly God noticed, and such an act, while perhaps trivial to us, cost Onan his life. Scripture clearly states that “what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord; so He took his life also” (v. 10). As with Er, Onan had done something so displeasing in the sight of God, that he was destroyed.

Though many years had passed, Judah’s third son, it seems, was yet too young to assume the role of husband and father a child. So, “Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, ‘remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up’; for he thought, ‘I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers” (v. 11). Notice that Judah did not provide for, or shelter, Tamar. In fact he sent her away to her father’s home. Yet, Judah betrothed his youngest son to her as if to promise that one day Shelah and Tamar would wed. When that event occurred, Tamar would be provided for, and the family line of Er would be given the opportunity to continue.

But Judah’s concern at this moment was not for Tamar, or even the lack of future heirs. His concern was for his youngest, and apparently only, surviving son. If anything happened to Shelah, Judah would become like Er, a man with no surviving male heirs whose property would go into the hands of others. For some unexplained reason, Judah seems to think that Tamar is somehow responsible for the deaths of his two sons, and he does not want to lose his third, and last, son to whatever evil curse she bore. So, we know from what happened next what Tamar did not know, that she was never to be given in marriage to Shelah, because of Judah’s fear. Still we can commend Tamar for her obedience. “Tamar went and lived in her father’s house” (v. 11). Tamar had little choice, in fact, but to wait until Shelah came of age and hope that Judah was a man of his word.

This act will relegate Tamar to the status of a widow. Widows enjoyed certain protections under the Law, “You shall not oppress any widow or orphan” (Exodus 22:22).

“¹⁷You shall not pervert the justice due a stranger or an orphan, nor seize a widow’s garment as a pledge. ¹⁸But you are to remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing. ¹⁹When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you are not to go back to get it; it shall belong to the stranger, the orphan, and to the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰When you beat the olives off your olive tree, you are not to search through the branches again; that shall be left for the stranger, the orphan, and for the widow. ²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you are not to go over it again; that shall be left for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow” (Deuteronomy 24:17-21).

But they also were very vulnerable at this time, and far into the future,

“³How long, Lord, shall the wicked—
How long shall the wicked triumph?
⁴They pour out words, they speak arrogantly;
All who do injustice boast.
⁵They crush Your people, Lord,
And afflict Your inheritance.
⁶They kill the widow and the stranger
And murder the orphans” (Psalm 94:3-6).
“¹Woe to those who enact unjust statutes
And to those who constantly record harmful decisions,
²So as to deprive the needy of justice
And rob the poor among My people of their rights,
So that widows may be their spoil
And that they may plunder the orphans” (Isaiah 10:1-2).

“³⁸And in His teaching He was saying: ‘beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like personal greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹and seats of honor in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets, ⁴⁰who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers. These will receive all the more condemnation” (Mark 12:38-40).

Thus was Tamar, betrothed to Shelah and safe in her father’s home, but her future was dependent upon Judah keeping his promise. If he did not, once her father died, she would be at the mercy of her brothers, if she had any, or the generosity of society. That was not a promising future.

Takeaways

In this curious and obscure narrative, what is again apparent is the wickedness of men. Yet, what is equally consistent is the fact that God continues to work in the lives of sinful people for their good and His glory.