

Genesis 38:12-30
Judah and Tamar, part 2

Judah, Jacob's fourth son by Leah, had attained a certain superiority in the family line. Reuben had sinned against his father by taking his father's concubine as his own. Simeon and Levi had acted rashly and brought the family into danger with their treacherous attack on the men of Shechem. But despite his pride of place in the family, Judah had left the family settlement at Hebron and set out on his own. He did not move far away, just a few miles, but there he made new friends and found a wife from among the local Canaanite women. In some ways he prospered. It seems clear that his flocks and herds increased, and the marriage with his wife produced three sons. But all was not as well as it might seem.

His firstborn son, Er, grew to be such a wicked man that God destroyed him. But before He had done so, Er had taken a wife, or rather Judah had chosen a wife for him from among the local Canaanites. Her name was Tamar, and she and Er had not yet produced a son. So, after Er's death Judah, in keeping with the customs of the time, asked Onan, Er's younger brother, to have relations with Tamar and produce an heir for him. However, Onan only pretended to try to produce an heir for his deceased brother, for whenever he went in to Tamar, he took steps to make certain she did not become pregnant. This act was so offensive to God, that the Lord destroyed him as well.

Judah did not seem particularly distraught that his two oldest sons had been killed by God. Rather, his concern was for his third, and presumably last son, Shelah. Shelah was still young, but if he died, then Judah would be left without a male heir, and his family line would die out. So, though he was supposed to wed Shelah to Tamar according to the customs of the time, and though he promised to do so, Judah had no intention of keeping his word.

Tamar Deceives Judah

As we resume the narrative, many years have passed. "Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died" (v. 12). Apparently the fertility the couple enjoyed in the early years of their marriage did not continue, since no other children are mentioned. So Judah was left alone with his son, Shelah. Nothing is said of Judah mourning for either of his first two sons, but he does go into a period of mourning over the loss of his wife, "and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheep shearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite" (v. 12).

Sheep shearing became a significant festival later in the history of the Israelites, it was an event accompanied by feasting and drinking. After his time of mourning, no doubt Judah was ready to resume the more enjoyable aspects of life. So, Judah had resumed his normal daily activities and had gone off to supervise his flocks, along with his Canaanite friend, who undoubtedly also had flocks and herds in the area as well and would be a welcome member of the party.

Shelah, by now old enough to fulfill his role and take Tamar as his wife, is not mentioned. We never hear from him in this story so we cannot know his wishes. In any case, Tamar "was told, 'behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep'" (v. 13). She realized that Judah was not going to honor his promise to give Shelah as a husband to her to raise up a son for Er. So, "she removed her

widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah" (v.14).

She had worn the garments befitting a widow since the death of Onan, when Judah had returned her to her father's house (Genesis 37:11). At that time, she had dutifully obeyed her father-in-law because she believed that eventually Shelah would be given to her as a husband. But now she knew better. For "she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife" (v. 14). So two elements of the narrative prompt Tamar's behavior. First, Shelah had become a man and Tamar had realized that he would not be given to her as a husband and second, Judah's wife had died and now he would likely be more vulnerable to sexual temptation.

To put her plan into action, she first changed out of the distinctive appearance of a woman in mourning, which may have included having her head anointed with oil (2 Samuel 14:2). The clothes she put on were also specific to their purpose. Scripture specifically records that she "covered herself with a veil" (v.14). In many Near Eastern cultures of the time, a veil was worn as an ornament to accentuate a woman's attractiveness and to indicate status. It was part of a larger accoutrement that included bracelets, anklets, necklaces, and earrings (Isaiah 3:18-23).

But the veil was not merely ornamental. It helped Tamar stay concealed so that Judah would not recognize her. But there is more. A veil was worn not only by a shrine prostitute, but also by a betrothed woman. Remember the actions of Rebekah upon meeting her future husband, Isaac, "She said to the servant, 'who is that man walking in the field to meet us?' And the servant said, 'he is my master.' Then she took her veil and covered herself" (Genesis 24:65). The irony that the veil was a sign that she should have been betrothed to Shelah cannot go unnoticed.

But it is also where Tamar sat that signals to Judah that she is a prostitute. Knowing Judah's destination, Tamar "sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah" (v. 14). Timnah was several miles northeast of Abdullam, and Enaim must have been a small town along the main route there. There is no biblical or extra-biblical record of such a town, and the fact that the word means "opening of the eyes" may indicate that Tamar simply positioned herself where she could be easily seen by passersby. Sitting at the entrance to the town, a prostitute would encounter travelers that she might persuade to have relations with her (Jeremiah 3:2; Ezekiel 16:23-25).

Her plan worked as she had hoped. "When Judah saw her, he assumed she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face" (v. 15). Ritual sexual acts often accompanied feasts and celebrations, and Judah assumed that a woman sitting in so public a place without any other reason than to attract the attentions of passing men, must be a shrine prostitute. In this case, Judah must have assumed that the veil was a symbol of the modesty required of many pagan cult prostitutes when they went out into public.

Judah's ignorance is a theme in this narrative. He does not know that Tamar is not responsible for the death of his sons. He does not know Tamar is the shrine prostitute. He does not know why she will ask him for his signet ring, cords, and staff as a pledge. Throughout, Judah is ignorant of the realities around him.

Seeing her, and finding her attractive, Judah “turned aside to her by the road, and said, ‘here now, let me have relations with you’; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, ‘what will you give me, that you may have relations with me?’” (v. 16). There is no small talk, no seduction, no flirtation. Judah gets directly down to business. She responds just as professionally. The only thing under discussion is the price.

Judah made his offer. “He said, therefore, ‘I will send you a young goat from the flock’” (v. 17). This seems like a generous offer. The only other record in Scripture of such a transaction is,

“For the price of a prostitute reduces one to a loaf of bread,
And an adulteress hunts for a precious life” (Proverbs 6:26).

So to offer a goat is quite a fair offer for an encounter with a cult prostitute. But obviously Judah does not have the goat with him. Remember he is going to visit his sheep shearers who are tending the flock, and a young goat is not something even a shepherd normally carried about with him on a journey. So not being able to be paid in advance, the woman said “will you give a pledge until you send it” (v. 17). She wanted some sort of tangible verification of their interaction. Judah’s word would not be good enough. Tamar knew him better.

While Judah was given the prerogative of deciding on the price, the woman determined what the pledge would be. “Judah said ‘what pledge shall I give you?’ And she said, ‘your seal and your cord, and your staff that is in your hand’” (v. 18). The giving and taking of a pledge was common practice in the ancient world, and is well attested in Scripture. It was governed by certain laws and overseen by God.

“²⁶If you ever seize your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, ²⁷for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else is he to sleep in? And it will come about that when he cries out to Me, I will listen to him, for I am gracious” (Exodus 22:26-27).

“⁶No one shall seize a handmill or an upper millstone as a pledge for a loan, since he would be seizing the debtor’s means of life as a pledge. . . . ¹⁰When you make your neighbor a loan of any kind, you shall not enter his house to take his pledge. ¹¹You shall stand outside, and the person to whom you are making the loan shall bring the pledge outside to you. ¹²And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep with his pledge. ¹³When the sun goes down you shall certainly return the pledge to him, so that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it will be righteousness for you before the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 24:6, 10-13).

The seal Judah gave her could have been a metal or stone object usually worn about the neck on a chain. It was more likely part of a ring (Jeremiah 22:24), as seems to be the case here (v. 25), and was distinctive to the wearer. They were usually well-crafted and artistically designed. The cord was likely what Judah used to hold the seal about his neck, or it could have been wrapped around a cylinder that also served as seal. His staff was also probably a distinctive walking stick he used. The head of it was likely carved with a signifying mark, and it not only was a most useful tool in shepherding his sheep, but served as his sign of authority. These were valuable and very personal belongings, and it was clearly foolish for Judah to part with them so lightly. Since they were used in business transactions and other formal agreements, Tamar could have taken more advantage of Judah than she did. In any case, the purpose of Tamar in

acquiring these objects was not, as the unaware Judah thought, to retain them as promissory notes until she received the payment of the goat, but rather to identify Judah as the man with whom she had had relations.

The bargain agreed to, Judah “¹⁸gave them to her and had relations with her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹Then she got up and departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow’s garments” (v. 18-19). Having gotten what she wanted from Judah, Tamar changed her clothes and waited.

Tamar is Exonerated

After the encounter, Judah continued on his way to join the men supervising his flocks. When he arrived, he remembered his pledge and “sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman’s hand” (v. 20). We do not know why Judah sent Hirah instead of going back himself. Perhaps he was embarrassed by the encounter and did not want to show his face again in the area. But this was also not just a matter of Judah being a man of integrity. He surely realized that, even though his encounter was with a lowly cult prostitute, she did have personal possessions of his that were valuable. Judah wanted them back. So he sent a man who apparently by now had become a trusted friend, Hirah. Unfortunately, “he did not find her” (v. 20).

But Hirah, it seems, was not a man who gave up easily. Not finding the woman by the road, where no doubt, Judah had directed him, “he asked the people of her place, saying, ‘where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?’ But they said, ‘there has been no temple prostitute here’” (v. 21). The people of the town must have given Hirah curious looks as he boldly asked to find a local prostitute. Such a cult, or shrine, prostitute was a common element of many Near Eastern worship practices. The obvious connection with fertility for crops and animals was the usual usage of the rite. It was a practice forbidden to the Israelites.

“¹⁷None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute. ¹⁸You shall not bring the earnings of a prostitute or the money for a dog into the house of the Lord your God as payment for any vowed offering, because both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 23:17-18).

But, obviously, the woman was nowhere to be found. So, after searching for some time, Hirah returned to where the men were shearing the flocks and reported his lack of success to Judah,

“Then Judah said, ‘let her keep them, otherwise we will become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this young goat, but you did not find her’” (v. 23). Judah did not go in search of his belongings. He was concerned that in seeking out this prostitute, his reputation would suffer more damage than to leave the items in her possession. He did not want it to appear that he had been outwitted by a simple prostitute. It is never a good idea to advertise one’s follies. So, after justifying himself to his friend, and making certain that it was understood that he had tried to be a man of honor, he cut his losses and returned to his home.

After a few months, Judah received a visitor who brought some alarming news. “Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, ‘your daughter-in-law Tamar has prostituted herself, and behold,

she is also pregnant by prostitution” (v. 24). Perhaps a busybody servant, maybe even the one who had originally told Tamar that Judah had gone to Timnah, related this disturbing news.

Judah’s response was immediate and decisive. “Bring her out and have her burned!” (v. 24). He believed without question the report he had heard. He did not wait to gather more facts or to hear Tamar’s defense of herself. He simply assumed that if she was pregnant, she had prostituted herself. He quickly came to the conclusion that while he was out attending to his flocks, Tamar had left the confines of her father’s house, and allowed herself to get pregnant.

His punishment is severe, and irregular. There were only two circumstances for which burning was a punishment in the Old Testament Law.

“If there is a man who marries a woman and her mother, it is an outrageous sin; both he and they shall be burned with fire, so that there will be no such outrageous sin in your midst” (Leviticus 20:14).

“Also the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by prostitution, she profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire” (Leviticus 21:9).

In fact, the appropriate punishment for adultery was stoning.

“If there is a man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, one who commits adultery with his friend’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10).

The most accurate application of the later Law to this circumstance would be “if there is a man who sleeps with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be put to death. They have committed incest, and have brought their own deaths upon themselves” (Leviticus 20:12), but it is unlikely that Judah would invoke this, since he would suffer punishment as well.

It is also interesting to wonder why Judah gets to pass any judgment at all. After all, he had sent Tamar back to her father’s house. And she was a widow, not a married woman. Perhaps she had returned to Judah’s family, or at least she seems to be living in the area, though that still could mean she lived with her father’s family, since Scripture says nothing about them or their whereabouts. More likely, Judah was invoking his former, and long forgotten, pledge to have his son, Shelah, take Tamar as his wife. In other words, since he had not formally released Tamar from the obligations of betrothal according to Deuteronomy 25:5-10, he demanded the right to pass sentence. If so, that was certainly manipulating the situation to his own advantage.

Tamar did not deny, indeed being pregnant she could not deny, her sin. Instead, “while she was being brought out that she sent word to her father-in-law, saying, “I am pregnant by the man to whom these things belong” (v. 25). Becoming bolder, “she also said, ‘please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?’” (v. 25). Rather than accuse, she brought forth evidence that spoke for itself. One cannot but recall the presentation of Joseph’s bloodied and torn cloak to Jacob as proof of his death. And again, her plan worked. “Judah recognized them, and said, ‘she is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.’ And he did not have relations with her again” (v. 26).

Judah did not outwardly claim that the ring, cords, and staff were his, but his response implied it. Furthermore, everyone who saw those items would have known they were Judah's. And it seems he understood Tamar's motivation as well. He recognized not only that the child Tamar was carrying was his, but that Tamar had been driven into this behavior by his own selfishness.

One cannot miss the parallels with the narrative of David and Bathsheba. Both accounts focus on an illicit relationship. In both accounts the men expressed righteous indignation at what they presumed was the sinful behavior of another (Genesis 38:24; 2 Samuel 12:5). And both men, upon learning the truth, confessed their culpability (Genesis 38:26, 2 Samuel 12:13).

The Births of Perez and Zerah

Several more months passed. Finally, "It came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb" (v. 27). Immediately the reader's mind returns to Rebekah, carrying the twins Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:22-23). And as in that case, the delivery of the twin boys was not without its challenges. "²⁸It took place while she was giving birth, that one baby put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, 'this one came out first.' ²⁹But it came about as he drew back his hand that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, 'what a breach you have made for yourself!' So he was named Perez. ³⁰Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah" (v. 28-30).

First, we can see that Judah played no role in this. It is perhaps not surprising that he was not present during the delivery, but that he had no say in the naming of the boys was a sign that he had left Tamar alone. Also, we can see the importance of primogeniture, and the role God plays in choosing. The midwife, apparently aware that Tamar was carrying twins, tied a red thread around the hand of the boy that seemed to be emerging first from the womb. However, his more aggressive brother shoved him aside and took his place as the first born. The family's sibling rivalry began even at birth it seems.

Perhaps Zerah's most famous descendant was Achan, who kept for himself the things designated for destruction after the fall of Jericho (Joshua 7:16-20). Perez, however, was chosen by God to become the ancestor of kings.

¹⁸Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, ¹⁹Hezron fathered Ram, and Ram fathered Amminadab, ²⁰and Amminadab fathered Nahshon, and Nahshon fathered Salmon, ²¹and Salmon fathered Boaz, and Boaz fathered Obed, ²²and Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David" (Ruth 4:18-22).

Thus, the roots of Israel's greatest king was in the sordid affair between a lustful and selfish son of Jacob and his daughter-in-law.

Interesting, also, is that Tamar is one of only four women, besides Mary, acknowledged in the genealogy of Christ given in Matthew (Matthew 1:1-17). She is mentioned alongside Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (though the latter is referred to only as the wife of Uriah the Hittite). Noticeable by their omission from that genealogy are Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah. Some might argue that the inclusion of those four women, and not others, is meaningful because they are sinners, and Christ came to save sinful humankind from its wickedness. Others might point out that these are all gentile women - Tamar and Rahab were

both Canaanite, Ruth was a Moabite, and Bathsheba was probably a Hittite. Thus, these women demonstrated God's plan for all of humanity, not merely the nation of Israel. A third commonality is that each of these women had some sort of scandalous sexual relationship. Tamar's we have already discussed, Rahab was a prostitute (Joshua 2:1), Ruth went in to Boaz (Ruth 3:7), and Bathsheba committed adultery with David (2 Samuel 11:3-5). Thus we see that God uses all people for His purposes.

Takeaways

In the past two weeks we have analyzed and digested a very foreign and disturbing account. Yet, despite its strangeness, we can still see things we recognize and are familiar with. The selfishness of Onan, the sensuality of Judah, and the disgraceful actions of Tamar do not stand in the way of God unfolding His plan for His people. Indeed, we must be thankful for the fact that He worked through them all to provide a child that will have a royal legacy, Perez, and be an ancestor of the Messiah.