

Genesis 38 Judah and Tamar

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Overview

At first glance, this chapter appears to be an interpolation.

- It focuses on Judah, not Joseph.
- It takes place in Canaan, not Egypt.
- It is surrounded by an external inclusion, marking it off as a diversion from the main story line. Compare
 - 37:36 And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, *and* captain of the guard.
 - 39:1 And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hands of the Ishmeelites, which had brought him down thither.

At the same time, there must be a reason for this material to be introduced, and this will become apparent as we move into the following chapters.

- This is, after all (37:2), the history of Jacob's family, not just of Joseph, so it should not surprise us to find other family members involved.
- In the short run (Gen 39). The point is to compare Judah and Joseph with respect to their moral character. Judah (now the senior son, after the disgrace of Simeon, Levi, and Reuben, who suggested selling Joseph into slavery) dishonors family responsibilities and goes after harlots, while Joseph is steadfast in the face of temptation by Potiphar's wife.
- In the long run, this chapter shows the danger of pollution by the morals of Canaan to which Jacob's family was susceptible. The abhorrence of Canaanite wives that they showed at Shechem has dissipated, and they are being sucked into marriages with unbelievers and cultic prostitution. This pollution is one reason that God needs to take them into Egypt—to protect them from the Canaanite influence. Egypt was no center of righteousness, but it was different enough from their own culture that they could see the distinction.

The story unfolds in five scenes, each separated by a lapse of time marking the natural rhythms of life:

1. Judah marries a Canaanite bride, and has three sons.
2. When the sons are grown, they marry, but are slain by the Lord.
3. After many days, Judah's wife dies, and he engages with a harlot.
4. After three months, his daughter in law is found to be with child.
5. Six months later, she gives birth to twins.

Behind the specifics of the story, the more general point is that while Joseph is in Egypt, life is going on back in Canaan. This chapter is all the detail that we have of what transpires during the 22 years between Joseph's sale and his reunion with his brothers.

1-5, Judah's Marriage to Shuah's Daughter

1-2, *Contracted*

The character of Judah, who originated the idea to sell Joseph into slavery, is reinforced by the history of his marriage to a Canaanite. Two things are distinctive about the marriages of the members of the chosen family up to this point:

- They are initiated with the approval and encouragement of the family.
- They place a premium on marriage to members of the family.

Examples:

- Abraham brings a bride from Haran for Isaac.
- Isaac sends Jacob back to Haran for a wife.
- Isaac and Rebekah disapprove of Esau's choice of Hittite wives.
- Jacob and his sons (presumably, Judah included) disapprove of the marriage of Dinah to Shechem in ch. 34.

Jacob's marriage violates both of these principles. "Judah went down from his brethren ... and saw ... and took her." His marriage was not a carefully planned family affair, but happened on a whim, while he was away from his family, and involved a Canaanite woman. God has already identified the inhabitants of this region ("Amorite" in the general sense) as under judgment (15:16), and destined for judgment. It is utterly inappropriate for Judah to form a covenant with them in this way.

Similarly, we have no business forming intimate personal bonds with the people of this world, who are under God's judgment.

Went down from his brethren.—The cause of this rupture is not known, but the fact of it is clear. The brothers thought they were "sticking together" in doing away with Joseph. In fact, once they had betrayed their duty as brothers toward him, they could not trust one another, and their conspiracy fell apart.

The place names in this chapter are all in the Shephelah, the foothills between the mountains of Judah and the Mediterranean coast: Adullam (1), (A)chzib (5), Timnath (12), Enaim (14, AV "open place"). This is the first time we find one of the patriarchs in this region. Up to now they have focused on the high country and the south land. The place names emphasize that Judah's visit to Hirah was not just a weekend jaunt, but that he had shifted the focus of his operations to distance himself from his brothers. Joseph has been separated from the family involuntarily, but Judah has separated himself.

Saw ... and took.—Other instances of marriages that result from seeing and taking show that this is *not* the right way to proceed:

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- Gen 6:2, the marriages of the demons with human women: “the sons of God **saw** the daughters of men that they were fair; and they **took** them wives of all which they chose.”
- Gen 34:2, Shechem’s marriage with Dinah: “when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, **saw** her, he **took** her, and lay with her, and defiled her.”
- Judg 14:2, Samson’s marriage to the woman of Timnah: “he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have **seen** a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore **get** (Heb. “take”) her for me to wife.”
- Judg 16:1, Samson’s liason to a harlot: “Then went Samson to Gaza, and **saw** there an harlot, and went in unto her.” (No “took” because that is an idiom for marriage.)
- 2 Sam 11:2-4, David’s marriage to Bathsheba: “David ... **saw** a woman washing herself; ... 4 And David sent messengers, and **took** her”
- Deut 21:11, taking a slave wife from among captives

The NT summarizes the principle in 1 Thes 4:4,5, “That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God.” To see the connection, it is necessary to recognize an improved translation opportunity here.

- “Vessel” is a figure of speech, and could refer either to a person’s own body (e.g., 1 Sam 21:5, of a man who has not had contact with a woman), or to a wife (“the weaker vessel,” 1 Pet 3:7).
- The verb “possess” can help us resolve this ambiguity. The Greek verb is inchoative, not stative. It describes the process of coming into possession of something, not the state of owning it. Thus “possess” is misleading; a better translation would be “acquire.”
 - “Possess” permits the ambiguity in “vessel” to remain.
 - “Acquire” is much less tolerant. It is difficult to see how a person can come to acquire his own body, but very clear that one can acquire a wife.

Thus 1 Thes 4:4,5 enjoins men not to acquire wives motivated by concupiscence. The Gentiles do this, and so did the demons, Shechem, Samson, David, and Judah. But the godly pattern is for a man to be much more deliberate and guided by a clear sense of the Lord’s direction, seeking a helper according to the Lord’s intent (2:18).

3-5, Children

Judah’s marriage with Shuah’s daughter was fruitful, and led to the birth of three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Note, though, that he does not appear to be an attentive father.

- He names the first son, but leaves the naming of the other two to his wife.
- In fact, he is away from home when the last son is born, a very strange circumstance for a pastoralist.

6-11, Judah's Sons and Tamar

The next phase of Judah's life comes after his sons are grown to maturity. He arranges marriage for the first one, and when he dies, follows the levirate custom with the second, but betrays it with the third. Here we see Judah's inability to perceive the actual root of wickedness in his family, and instead his tendency to blame it all on others.

6-7, The Marriage and Death of Er.—We do not know anything about Tamar's background, although Judah's own marriage to a Canaanite does not encourage us to think that he took special care about the spiritual credentials of his daughter-in-law. What we are told is that "Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD." In fact, his name is the Hebrew word for "wicked," spelled backward; Wenham suggests the render, "Er erred." The reference to "the sight of the Lord" reminds us of two things: the scope of his evil, and the breadth of the Lord's sovereignty.

8-10, The Marriage and Death of Onan.—This is the first reference in the Bible to the custom of levirate marriage.

- "Levirate" comes from the Latin word "levir," which means "husband's brother."
- If a man had no offspring, his brother was expected to take his wife. The first child born to that union would be counted as heir of the original husband, while the later ones would be reckoned descendants of the new husband.
- This custom later becomes part of Israel's law in Deut 25:5-10, and is the basis for the history in the book of Ruth.
- The fact that it was legislated indicated that sometimes a man would be reluctant to perform this duty. The closest kinsman in Ruth was afraid that he would "mar [his] inheritance" (Ruth 4:6).

Here, Onan demonstrates just such reluctance to raise an heir for his brother.

Onan's action is displeasing to the Lord. One naturally asks whether it is his practice of contraception itself, or his refusal to obey his father's instruction.

- In the immediate context, the focus is on his disobedience to his father and his neglect of his fraternal duty.
- However, more broadly, the whole trend of scripture ought to caution us concerning contraception. Fruitfulness is considered a blessing from the Lord (Gen 1), especially in the patriarchal family, whose seed is to bring blessing to all the earth (12:3). Barrenness is a great misfortune, sometimes made part of a curse (e.g., Hos 9:14). We should think twice before taking action to block what God intends as a blessing.

11, Judah withholds Shelah.—Moses has made it clear that the deaths of the first two sons are the Lord's judgment against them, but Judah thinks that Tamar somehow is responsible. He tells her to wait for Shelah to mature, but in fact resolves to withhold him from her indefinitely. Thus he is guilty of violating the same family responsibility that Onan did.

Thy father's house.—Asking her to wait at her father's house, rather than including her in his own household, may be part of this rejection of her. Alternatively, it may reflect a Canaanite

marriage pattern, seen later in Samson's marriage to the woman of Timnah (Judg 15:1), where the woman continues to live with her parents, and the husband comes to live with her.

12-23, Judah and Tamar

"In the process of time" is literally, "The days multiplied." Moses emphasizes the passage of time and the unfolding of the course of life.

12-14, Judah forgets his obligation

Several factors converge to set the stage for Tamar's seduction of Judah.

1. His wife has died, and he no longer has a natural channel for his appetites.
2. He has withheld his son Shelah from Tamar, violating the levirate obligation. Tamar has no channel to fulfill her obligation as a wife to bear children for the family into which she has married.
3. It is sheepshearing time. 1 Sam 25 and 2 Sam 13:23 show that these were times of celebration and merrymaking. Compare the celebrations at harvest, Isa 9:3. *Isn't there a reference in the minor prophets somewhere to impurity in connection with threshing?*

So Tamar conspires to conceive a child by her father-in-law, by posing as a harlot. The word used to describe her in v.21 means "temple prostitute," one who prostituted herself as a fertility ritual in connection with the Canaanite religion. (*Waltke calls attention to ANET p. 183, #40: at least in the Middle Assyrian period, ca. 1400-1100 BC, the veil distinguished a respectable woman, including a temple prostitute who later married, from a common harlot, but such a woman would not be in circulation.*) Because of the fertility associations, one can imagine that such prostitutes would be likely to offer themselves in connection with agricultural events such as harvest and sheepshearing.

Her behavior, while culpable, may be mitigated by the customs of the day. Waltke observes that both Hittite (14th-13th century, ANET 196 # 193) and Middle Assyrian (14th-12th century, ANET 182 # 33) laws make not only the brothers of a deceased man but also his father responsible for raising up children to a barren wife. If such expectations prevailed in Canaan at this time, Tamar is simply claiming what is her due.

Her desire to propagate the line of promise stands in stark contrast with the carelessness for progeny of Judah (and Onan). She, like Ruth several generations later, is an example of a Gentile who recognizes the promises of God through Abraham's seed and by faith lays hold on those promises. Thus she becomes one of the progenitors of the Messiah (Matt 1:3), and one of only four women so remembered (all Gentiles, if Uriah's wife was also a Hittite).

15-19, Judah goes in to Tamar

Judah has no compunctions about participating in such a pagan custom. He thinks only of gratifying himself. He goes out of the way to engage in impurity; we will see a contrast with Joseph in the next chapter, who avoids impurity even when it forces itself on him.

Tamar cleverly negotiates a pledge from him that will later establish his identity.

- The “seal” is a cylinder seal, which could be rolled over wax or clay to leave a signature identifying the owner. It is roughly parallel to one’s driver’s license or credit card today.
- The “bracelets” are better translated “cord,” a string threaded through the middle of the seal so that it could be hung about the neck.
- The staff, at least in Babylon, customarily had a distinguishing carving on its top to identify its owner. Herodotus (1.195), writing about 450 B.C., says of the Babylonians, “Every one carries a seal, and a walking-stick, carved at the top in to the form of an apple, a rose, a lily, an eagle, or something similar; for it is not their habit to use a stick without an ornament.”

20-23, The Harlot Disappears

Judah sends his Canaanite friend to pay the obligation, but Tamar has disappeared. He now appears reluctant to be associated with harlotry; perhaps the wine consumed at the sheepshearing has worn off. When Hirah cannot find her, Judah calls off the search, abandoning his valuables rather than calling attention to his own profligacy. The important point here is how someone who is so inconsiderate of the law of God, can be so concerned for the opinions of men.

Calvin: “Here we see that men who are not governed by the Spirit of God are always more solicitous about the opinion of the world than about the judgment of God. For why, when the lust of the flesh excited him, did it not come into his mind, “Behold now I shall become vile in the sight of God and of angels?” Why, at least, after his lust has cooled, does he not blush at the secret knowledge of his sin? But he is secure, if only he can protect himself from public infamy.”

Matthew Henry: “There are many who are more solicitous to preserve their reputation with men than to secure the favour of God and a good conscience; *lest we be shamed* goes further with them than *lest we be damned*.”

24-26, Tamar’s Discovery

about three months after.—When Tamar’s condition became obvious, she was brought to Judah. As she and Judah both recognize, her intended husband is Shelah. Thus she is in effect a betrothed woman, and any relations with another man constitute adultery (Deut 22), and would be punishable by death. Though she has been relegated to her father’s house (v.11), it is Judah who has jurisdiction over her.

25, Discern, I pray thee.—These are the very words with which Judah presented Joseph’s coat to Jacob (37:32). Her words contain a double rebuke to him.

- The rebuke she intends is calling to his attention how he has shirked his family responsibility in not giving her to Shelah.
- She probably is unaware of the other rebuke, but Judah will not be. Just as he deceived his father, who in turn had deceived his father, so he has now been deceived by his child. Moses draws our attention to the similarity among the three events by the involvement of a kid of the goats and intimate personal belongings (a garment in two cases, a signet and staff in the third). The principle of Prov 26:27 (Eccl 10:8) is sound: “Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein.” Deceivers will be deceived. Whatever a person sows, that shall he also reap (Gal 6:7).

26, more righteous than I.—His standard here is not God’s law, in the light of which the whole episode is tainted. But under the standards of the day, he has behaved inappropriately, and her behavior is justified in the light of his own shortcoming.

Chronologically, this admission comes shortly before Judah’s admission of guilt before Joseph in ch. 44. The Lord is humbling him, preparing him for that encounter.

He knew her again no more.—Harlotry, though despised, was not considered as serious as incest, which was punishable by death. There are limits to even Judah’s depravity.

27-30, Birth of Twins

The birth of Tamar’s sons looks in two directions: back to the history of Jacob and Esau, and forward to the later history of the tribe of Judah and the coming of the Messiah.

Looking back.—Like the birth of Jacob and Esau, we have

- Twins
- Contending in the womb
- With an inversion in birth order
- And involvement of the color “red.”

The Jacob/Esau story in turn is a continuation of the theme of God’s election at each stage in the unfolding of the chosen people: Abraham over Nahor and Lot, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Judah over his brethren, now Perez over Zerah. At each step, God sovereignly overrules. The midwife’s comment here is one of amazement: “How have you managed to break forth for yourself?” In her view, there is no way that one twin could pass another who has already appeared. The only explanation is divine direction.

Looking forward.—The importance of this birth is seen from Ruth 4:18-22 and Matt 1.

- Ruth 4:18-22 shows that King David is the ninth generation from Perez: Pharez –Hezron – Ram – Amminadab- Nahshon – Salmon - Boaz – Obed – Jesse - David. This unlikely child is thus the progenitor of Israel’s royal dynasty.
- Matt 1:3 traces the line further down to the Lord Jesus. Tamar’s faith is rewarded; she is indeed in the line of the promised blessing.

In this connection, note two things:

- Four women are named in the genealogy of Matt 1: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. All four are Gentiles either directly or by marriage. Like the Syrophenician woman of Mark 7:26, they covet the blessings God has promised Israel, and seek to lay claim to them. Thus they adumbrate the accession of the Gentiles into the church of God, the spiritual Israel.
 - Notes on Bathsheba’s ancestry: she is called the daughter of Eliam (2 Sam 11:3) or Ammiel (1 Chr 3:5).
 - Eliam is elsewhere the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite (2 Sam 23:34), who allied himself with Absalom (2 Sam 15:12). Giloh is in Judah, in the

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vicinity of Debir and Eshtemoa (Jos 15:51), so this would make her Judahite. But this might make her too young.

- Ammiel is elsewhere a Benjamite, also a friend of David (2 Sam 9:4,5; 17:27).
 - In either case, she would have been familiar in the court circles, where she probably met Uriah and married him. But it doesn't seem we can make a case for her being Gentile. If anything, Uriah has transferred his allegiance to the God of Israel.
- There is no merit of superior morality in the line that yields the Messiah. The Jews' claim in John 8:41, "we be not born of fornication," is patently false. Our saviour came "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3). His self-negation, described in Phil. 2, included joining a race so tainted with sin. This should lead us
 - To glorify him the more for accepting this humiliation for us;
 - To praise God for his grace in bringing salvation through such an unworthy channel;
 - To take courage when we feel inadequate or undeserving, recognizing that we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power might be of God, and not of us (2 Cor 4:7).