

## SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

### Genesis 38 – Judah and Tamar

#### Genesis 38 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. <sup>2</sup> There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. <sup>3</sup> She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. <sup>4</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. <sup>5</sup> Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him. <sup>6</sup> Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. <sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother." <sup>9</sup> But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. <sup>10</sup> What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. <sup>11</sup> Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house. <sup>12</sup> In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup> When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," <sup>14</sup> she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. <sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup> He went over 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?" <sup>17</sup> He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it." <sup>18</sup> He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. <sup>19</sup> Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. <sup>20</sup> When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. <sup>21</sup> He asked the townspeople, "Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?" But they said, "No prostitute has been here." <sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah, and said, "I have not found her; moreover the townspeople said, 'No prostitute has been here.'" <sup>23</sup> Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her." <sup>24</sup> About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." <sup>25</sup> As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." <sup>26</sup> Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again. <sup>27</sup> When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. <sup>28</sup> While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, "This one came out first." <sup>29</sup> But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore he was named Perez. <sup>30</sup> Afterward his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

**Source Theory:** J Source – normal; E source = **Bold**; P Source = *italicized*; Redactor = ***Bold Italicized***

Notice that all of Chapter 38 is said to be from the J Source.

**JUDAH** – The eponymous ancestor of the Jews, Judah is the most prominent of the brothers in the Joseph stories, and here he is the only one of Jacob's sons besides Joseph to have a separate story about him. Some say that the word יהודה means "to be thankful" or "praised."

## CHAPTER 38 – JUDAH AND TAMAR

It is strange the way that chapter 38 interrupts our story the way it does; almost like a commercial break from the Joseph story. Why does this story appear here? What is it doing? What is it trying to introduce?

Judah marries a Canaanite woman and has three sons by her. The first, Er, died after marrying Tamar (Hebrew meaning “date palm”). God kills him while Tamar is still childless because he is wicked. Judah tells his next oldest son, Onan, to do his duty as a brother-in-law and have sex with Tamar in order that she might bear children to continue Er’s line. (For details on ‘levirate marriage’ see Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Onan, however, doesn’t like the idea of producing offspring for his deceased brother, so each time he has intercourse with Tamar, he spills his semen on the ground. God is angered by this and kills Onan as well. Judah promises Tamar that he will give her his next son, Shelah, when he is old enough, but the boy grows up and Judah does not keep his promise, because he is afraid of losing another son.

### Deuteronomy 25:5–10 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, <sup>6</sup> and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. <sup>7</sup> But if the man has no desire to marry his brother’s widow, then his brother’s widow shall go up to the elders at the gate and say, “My husband’s brother refuses to perpetuate his brother’s name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.” <sup>8</sup> Then the elders of his town shall summon him and speak to him. If he persists, saying, “I have no desire to marry her,” <sup>9</sup> then his brother’s wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare, “This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.” <sup>10</sup> Throughout Israel his family shall be known as “the house of him whose sandal was pulled off.”

Finally, Tamar takes matters into her own hands. She puts on a veil and sits by the roadside when Judah, whose wife has died, goes to shear his sheep. Judah mistakes her for a temple prostitute and ends up impregnating her himself. When he learns that she is pregnant, he initially decrees that she is to be burned for having played the whore (see Leviticus 21:9), but Tamar then produces Judah’s own signet, cord, and staff (which she had procured from him as a pledge of payment) and says, “It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.” With deception running in the family, Judah declares that she has acted more righteously than he, since he had failed to give her his son Shelah. Tamar subsequently bears twins, Perez and Zerah.

### Leviticus 21:9 (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup> When the daughter of a priest profanes herself through prostitution, she profanes her father; she shall be burned to death.

Perez was an ancestor of King David (see Ruth 4:12, 18-22 and 1 Chronicles 2:4). Both Tamar and Perez are also listed in the New Testament as ancestors of Jesus (Matthew 1:3).

### Ruth 4:12, 18-22 (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup> and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah... <sup>18</sup> Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, <sup>19</sup> Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, <sup>20</sup> Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, <sup>21</sup> Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, <sup>22</sup> Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

### 1 Chronicles 2:3–4 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> The sons of Judah: Er, Onan, and Shelah; these three the Canaanite woman Bath-shua bore to him. Now Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death. <sup>4</sup> His daughter-in-law Tamar also bore him Perez and Zerah. Judah had five sons in all.

### Matthew 1:1–3 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. <sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup> and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram,

There are several similarities between the story of Judah & Tamar and the story of David & Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11):

- Both Judah and David are shepherds.
- Both separate from their kinsmen to Adullam (Genesis 38:1; 1 Samuel 22:1).
- Judah has a friend Hirah and David has a friend Hiram.
- Judah's wife is referred to as the "daughter of Shua," which in Hebrew is bathshua—which is very suggestive of David's Bathsheba. In fact, 1 Chronicles, to make the connection clear, lists Bathshua as the name of Judah's wife (1 Chronicles 2:3) AND the name of David's wife (rather than Bathsheba, 1 Chronicles 3:5). See below.

**1 Chronicles 2:1–4 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> *These are the sons of Israel:* Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, <sup>2</sup> Dan, Joseph, Benjamin, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. <sup>3</sup> *The sons of Judah:* Er, Onan, and Shelah; these three the Canaanite woman **Bathshua** bore to him. Now Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death. <sup>4</sup> *His daughter-in-law Tamar* also bore him Perez and Zerah. Judah had five sons in all.

**1 Chronicles 3:1–5 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> *These are the sons of David who were born to him in Hebron:* the firstborn Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelite; the second Daniel, by Abigail the Carmelite; <sup>2</sup> the third Absalom, son of Maacah, daughter of King Talmai of Geshur; the fourth Adonijah, son of Haggith; <sup>3</sup> the fifth Shephatiah, by Abital; the sixth Ithream, by his wife Eglah; <sup>4</sup> six were born to him in Hebron, where he reigned for seven years and six months. And he reigned thirty-three years in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> *These were born to him in Jerusalem:* Shimea, Shobab, Nathan, and **Solomon**, four by **Bathshua**, daughter of Ammiel;

**Matthew 1:1–7 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.* <sup>2</sup> *Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,* <sup>3</sup> and **Judah** the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup> and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup> and Salmon the father of **Boaz** by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David. **And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah...**

- Both stories involve a woman named Tamar. In David's case, Tamar is his daughter, not daughter-in-law (as with Judah). Moreover, David does not have sex with this Tamar, but rather she is raped by Amnon, Tamar's half-brother. However, the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is routinely understood as an implicit (and politically delicate) critique of David's rape of Bathsheba 2 chapters earlier—much like Genesis 38.
- Both David and Judah are publicly forced to admit their guilt (see Genesis 38:26 and 2 Samuel 12:13).

Is it mere coincidence that the Judah and Tamar story so closely resembles the story of David and Bathsheba? Or could it be that the ancient Israelites during the Monarchical period were shaping the story of Judah to address subtly and indirectly David's unjust treatment of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah? Not wanting to let him off the hook, could it be that they shaped this earlier story of Judah, someone from the past who is still honored, to provide David with cover?

**CONNECTION TO RUTH** – While the story of Ruth (the great-grandmother of David) occurs much later in history, there are a number of very strong connections between Tamar and Ruth.

- They are both widows who bear children to older relatives.
- After their first husbands died, they made efforts to win their second husbands.

- In doing so, both of them acted properly for the sake of kindness to the dead [by bearing children who would perpetuate their memory].”
- They are both are found in the genealogy of King David, the Israelite King, who was a descendant of the tribe of Judah.

**Who was Ruth?** She was of Moabite descent. Her name is a play on the word רַחֵם meaning “abundance” or “fruitfulness.” See Psalm 23 “my cup *overflows*.”

**Who were the Moabites?** Remember, Lots daughters slept with him to have children after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the death of their mother who turned into a pillar of salt (see Genesis 19). Who is Boaz? He is a descendant of Judah.

It is through this link that we get King David, King Solomon, and the Messiah. Tamar and Ruth – from whom the line of Judah was built, and from whom issued King David, King Solomon, and the Messiah. The importance of their roles is clear: both are joined together and both anticipate the Lion from the Tribe of Judah who will one day rise up to govern Israel and the entire world (Gen. 49:8-12).

**LEVIRATE MARRIAGE** – The custom of levirate marriage was simple. If a man died without any heirs, his brother was obligated to marry his widow, and her firstborn son would be considered as the offspring of the deceased brother. Thus his line lives on.

**TEMPLE PROSTITUTE** – When speaking of cultic prostitution, scholars normally refer to religiously legitimated intercourse with strangers in or in the vicinity of the sanctuary. It had a ritual character and was organized or at least condoned by the priesthood, as a means to increase fecundity and fertility. There is, however, another, more restricted way in which one can speak of cultic prostitution. We may use the term to call attention to the fact that the money or the goods which the prostitutes received went to the temple funds. A careful scrutiny of the evidence will show such as “prostitution that was profitable to, and at times organized by, the temple and its administration.”

This story of Tamar plays upon the distinction between Hebrew זֹנֵה, meaning “prostitute,” and Hebrew קְדֻשָּׁה, meaning something higher than a regular prostitute. Judah is described as thinking that Tamar is a זֹנֵה (38:15), but Judah’s friend uses the word קְדֻשָּׁה when he discreetly inquires about her later (38:21). It is possible that the distinction there is between levels of prostitutes or between more and less pejorative terms (comparable to English “whore” versus “prostitute”). But, since this is uncertain, scholars still weigh in favor of the meaning of “sacred prostitute.” Regular prostitution is not necessarily prohibited by law in the Tanak, but it is disdained. The symbolism of the prophet Hosea’s marriage to a prostitute indicates this (Hosea 1–3).

**GENESIS 38:25** – Tamar lays down the evidence and uses the same word that Joseph’s brothers used when they laid down the evidence of Joseph’s demise (the bloodstained coat of many colors) in front of Jacob. Like father, like son: Judah might well feel a chill down his back when he hears the word and knows that he was a guilty party on both occasions. We might even imagine that this double sense of his own errors is what moves him to declare: “She’s more right than I am.”

**ANOTHER ANALYSIS** – After the death of his first son, Judah’s second son married Tamar, but he refused to produce a son for his dead brother. As a result, the LORD took his life as a punishment. Judah’s second son Onan, after each intercourse with Tamar, deliberately spilled his seed on the ground. Onan seems to have reasoned that if a child was born as a result of his sexual union with Tamar, not only would he have to spend his family resources on a child that did not legally belong to him, but he would also forfeit the right to his brother’s inheritance as next in line.

He failed to act responsibly and righteously towards this community of faith that God was forming from the children of Jacob/Israel. When Onan died, Judah promised Tamar that when his third son was old enough to marry he would become her husband. But Judah did not honor his promise and did not act righteously as well.

Judah's concern is understandable. Two of his sons already died while they were married to Tamar. Maybe something is wrong with her? He was afraid that the same fate would befall his youngest child. Even though the chapter seems oddly placed, Judah's moral failure in withholding his youngest son from Tamar ties back in some important ways to the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob narratives, as well as to the main drama of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was the youngest (except Benjamin) and most treasured.

Tamar was desperate and took matters into her own hands. She determined that her father-in-law's unfaithfulness will not stop her from having children and being a part of God's family. Tamar pretends to be a prostitute. Judah, after a period of mourning (his wife had died some time ago), seeks a one-time sexual service from a (presumed) prostitute who unknown to him, is actually Tamar in disguise. Tamar becomes pregnant and when the news of Tamar's extra-marital pregnancy became known to Judah, he harshly condemned her to death. When he was presented with his personal items, given to the prostitute as a pledge, he had a change of heart. (Gen. 38:24-26).

When Tamar showed Judah's personal items to him she said in Hebrew הַכֵּר־נָא (haker na) "please examine" (vs. 25). Ironically these are the exact same words Judah and the brothers said to Israel, הַכֵּר־נָא (haker na) "please examine" (Gen 37:32), while showing him Joseph's torn clothes. Judah's deception returned to him in his own words. What is striking to most modern readers is that Tamar's action of pretending to be a prostitute is not exactly condemned in any way. There is no condemnation of Judah's use of a prostitute either. Rather, the focus of Torah's text is on Judah's sin of mistreating Tamar.

One interpretation is that this demonstrates that the overall concern of the chapter (and probably by extension the entire story of Jacob's children) is focused not on individual purity of life, but on communal responsibility towards the well-being of a group. What was asked of Judah was "that he risk his son for the sake of the community, that he make his son, even his last son, available for the solidarity and future of the community now focused in the person of this defenseless widow."

Unrighteous/unjust behaviors are not viewed as merely personal failings, but communal issues. "What is taken most seriously is not a violation of sexual convention, but damage to the community which includes a poor, diminished female." The story of Tamar and Judah seems to operate according to the principle: "From one to whom much is given, much is required." Tamar had the right to a child by the nearest of kin of her dead husband. The right was deliberately withheld from her. Judah later repented of his action:

צְדָקָה מִמֶּנִּי כִּי־עָלֶיךָ לֹא־נָתַתִּיָּהּ לְשָׁלָה בְנִי וְלֹא־יָסַרְךָ עוֹד לְדַעְתָּהּ

*"She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah."*

And he was not intimate with her again. (Gen. 38:26b).

After Tamar became pregnant with the twin children of Judah (Perez and Zerah), Judah does not approach her sexually again. This is a very important observation and a point that the writer/compiler(s) of Torah narrative seek(s) to communicate. Yes, Judah is a man of flawed character. Like others, he sometimes does things that are both unwise and plainly wrong. But he is Jacob/Israel's true son. Like Jacob, Judah is a man who is able to "own" his guilt, thereby chartering a new repentant course for his future. Judah's destiny will soon become clear. It is his family that will lead Israel, bringing forth the quintessential Israelite King (Gen. 49:8-10) in the person of David, who himself will exhibit both Judah's vices and his virtues.