

# **GENESIS**

## **A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY**

***THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB***

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## JUDAH AND TAMAR (*GENESIS 38*)

This story concerning Judah and Tamar is difficult to deal with on at least two counts: *first*, the sexual themes. *Second*, it doesn't appear, at first glance, to have anything to do with the storyline of the Covenant with Abraham. It's as if the author pauses in his narrative about the Covenant, and digresses from his developing timeline, simply to show us a weakness in Judah's character. Why?

Actually there are profound things going on in this chapter that are very relevant to the Covenant story. For one thing, it comes right on the heels of Joseph's dreams about his future dominance in Jacob's family. We who know of Judah's preeminence in Israel's history (the line of David, the southern tribes gathered together under Judah's banner) may just wonder why Judah, instead of Joseph, wasn't chosen to be the Designated Heir of the Family. With this account of Judah's sin (and it involves much more than going after a supposed prostitute) we now have eliminated both Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob's sons, and Judah as men of the required character to be the executors of the Family's inheritance. Both had claims to it, and both failed the test. This story explains why Judah was eliminated.

And yet because of the tribe of Judah's later preeminence in Israel's history, the Patriarch gets involved in an incident that lays the foundation for two of the Covenant promises made to Abraham: that he would become "a great nation," and that "all the peoples on earth" would be blessed through him. (Genesis 12) The beginning of the expansion of the Covenant to include the Gentiles is here in this story of Tamar.

What we have to be careful of, as with many stories in Genesis, is the tendency to read our own morals and life principles into the story and judge the characters as if they were part of our culture, breaking our rules, and subject to our judgment. Some moral principles are timeless; some were integral to the culture in which they were found. And some principles reflect the way God runs his own Kingdom – eternal concepts that are foreign to us as well as to the people in Bible times who were learning about God's ways. Many times God will surprise us both – we moderns as well as the people in the times of Genesis – with a Plan and a Purpose that he uses to build his Kingdom. If we don't recognize or accept the special work that God is doing among men and nations, then we will never get the point of the story.

And to help us understand God's works in this chapter, we have a "commentary" in the book of Ruth that will open it up for us.

**Judah's marriage** – Jacob was a force to be reckoned with, as we saw in the story of the Family's encounter with the Shechemites (Genesis 34) He was rich in family, herds, and servants; a virtual community surrounded him wherever he went. At the time of this story, they were all living in the area of Shechem, north of Jerusalem in the future area of the tribe of Manasseh.

Judah decided to strike out on his own: he left the family estate, married a local girl, and started his own business. The text specifically locates Judah's whereabouts with the reference to Kezib, a town about 15 miles W-S-W of Jerusalem. No doubt this was for the sake of the reader, who would immediately recognize the area as solidly within the borders of the future tribe of Judah. His activities here, in other words,

were preparatory for his descendants' future inheritance.

One may wonder why Judah was going outside the family to find a wife. But with the transfer of the headship of the family, which happened when Jacob left Laban, going back home to Haran for a wife was no longer necessary; Haran wasn't "home" anymore for the children of Abraham. From this point on, the descendants of Jacob would find wives along the way between Canaan and Egypt. They wouldn't be compromising their faith by subjecting themselves to Canaanite fathers-in-law, since their wives became part of Israel's community.

**Sons of Judah** – It seems that Judah had family problems. His sons angered the LORD so much that he killed them both. His firstborn son – Er – married a local girl named Tamar, but Er “was wicked in the LORD’s sight.” We are not told his sin, but we are told that his death was caused by Judah’s God.

According to cultural tradition, Judah’s second son – Onan – was obligated to take Er’s widow and have children by her. The reason for this is that the firstborn son has the right of inheritance; and even if he doesn’t live to see that inheritance, *his* children, yet unborn, have the legal right to it as well.

The problem was that Onan knew, being the second-born son, that he had no right to his brother’s inheritance. Whatever children he had by Tamar would inherit the property, not his own children by another wife. So he “spilled his seed on the ground” to avoid getting Tamar pregnant. And that, in the LORD’s eyes, was a violation of his brother’s rights and constituted a crime punishable by death. The Covenant is a force to be reckoned with!

**Tamar the widow** – At this point we have to consider the situation that Tamar was in. Keep in mind that this was no ordinary family; it was no ordinary inheritance that was at stake here. That’s why her history is part of the Genesis account.<sup>1</sup> Tamar was made part of the family by marriage; but because of her husband’s wickedness, and Onan’s obstinacy, she was being cut out of the Family. To a woman like her, her children were the only legal connection she had to any rights in the inheritance of the Family. Without those children she had no place in the Family, and no hope for a future.

What was more dangerous to her situation was the attitude that Judah was taking toward her. Although he told her to wait for his third son Shelah coming of age, Judah had no intention of letting his son marry Tamar, reasoning that “he may die too, just like his brothers.” So when Shelah finally come of age, Judah conveniently forgot his commitment he made to Tamar.

In other words, Tamar was at risk of being left out of the Family of Abraham, the heir of the Covenant promises. We aren’t told whether Tamar was told about the eternal implications of the Covenant; it would stretch credibility, however, to think that she didn’t know, since Judah was an heir of Jacob and the Promises were a constant discussion topic in the Family. And like other women marrying into the Family, worshiping Israel’s God and identifying with his cause reveals the presence of *faith* – which is the key that unlocks the world of God and motivates a true heir to seek and find the Covenant Promises.

**Judah and Tamar** – While Tamar was waiting for an event that wasn’t going to

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<sup>1</sup> Being a good storyteller, God doesn’t put anything in that doesn’t pertain directly to the central plot.

happen, many years passed and Judah's wife died. After his period of grief, while he was keeping his own business going, we read about this encounter between him and Tamar.

Here is where modern students find their moralistic sermon on Judah and Tamar: the sins and problems surrounding prostitution. Actually the story is much more complicated than just a simplistic moralism.

The sin was in Judah's mind and heart. Granted, going to a prostitute for one's needs was a poor substitute for the purity and faithfulness of marriage. Remember, however, he had just lost his wife; so at least it wasn't adultery. Finding solace in a prostitute, if not allowed, was at least understandable since, for a male, libido doesn't just turn off on its own. And there are always women who are ready to take advantage of men's needs to serve their own ends. Moralistically, prostitution doesn't give either party what they really need in the long run, only more problems.

**Tamar's strategy** – But Tamar's action was *not* sin. Let's unpack the situation.

*First*, even Tamar by this time was beginning to realize that Judah was deceiving her. She knew that waiting on him to keep his promise was a vain hope.

*Second*, if she was not given a husband by Judah, she was effectively out of the family and had no legal rights to any of the inheritance. Could she have left and found someone else to live with? Possibly, but the fact that she didn't shows that there's more going on in her mind than simply finding a secure home somewhere. The praise that she received later in the book of Ruth points strongly to the presence of faith driving her actions to remain part of the Covenant Family.

*Third*, the only way she would receive the inheritance rights that were hers legally by

marriage was through the line of Judah. Naturally speaking she would have received them through Judah's son and heir. But without him, the only option left for her was to *go back to Judah himself* and get a son by him.

So Tamar's solution was to play the prostitute, to cater to Judah's physical needs, to deceive Judah concerning her actions – and yet it was not prostitution but a legal strategy to get back her rights from the only man who could give them to her, who in fact owed it to her.

Different cultures have defined “incest,” or sex between family members, using various standards. Sex between biological relatives is almost always rejected on several grounds. Sex between in-laws is usually rejected for other good reasons – one of which is the fact that it introduces an unsolvable complexity between the relatives and their relationships. But in this instance, Tamar's act straightened out a wrong against her, and restored her legal place that she once had and for a time was at a real risk of losing because of Judah's crime against her.

**“More righteous than I”** – Tamar came close to losing her life over this incident, because even Judah knew that prostitution was a shame for a respectable woman (even if he did take advantage of the opportunity with “unrespectable” women himself!).

But the telling part of this story was when Judah realized it was Tamar whom he had made pregnant. Instead of faulting her, he realized she was exercising her rights as the wife of his firstborn. “She is more righteous than I” wasn't a statement about her so-called prostitution, but her claiming the Family inheritance that was hers legally. It was Judah who had committed a crime against her.

So the point of this story is not about prostitution. Only Judah had prostitution in

mind; but through the LORD's intervention he was not having sex with a "prostitute" but with a woman he had wronged and had legal obligations toward. Tamar, though seeming to be a prostitute, was taking the only legal avenue she had available to her to retain her rights. And the children she bore were not a product of prostitution but rather were Judah's legal heirs.

**Sons by Tamar** – Judah did not have sexual relations with her again, because she was not legally his wife. But she did become part of the Family again. Where Israel (and Judah) went, Tamar also went. Tamar's sons were Judah's sons and heirs to the Covenant.

What is interesting here is that, though Perez was not Judah's oldest son (Er and Onan were older, though dead, and Shelah was grown by now), he still had the inheritance rights because Judah, legally but unknowingly, was redeeming his oldest son's Er's family rights. Whatever son that Tamar would have, as long as he came from Judah's line, would be the rightful heir, even if he were the youngest in the family.

**The Point** – Now it's time to look at this story from a wider field of view, particularly using the insights that we get from the rest of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

*First*, Tamar was the first Gentile brought into the Family tree of Abraham that the Bible records for us. So far, the descendants of Abraham had been going back to Haran and the original family for their wives. Esau married Canaanite girls, but he angered his parents doing so; besides, he had already been cut out of the Family inheritance

himself. That makes Tamar a special character in the story.

*Second*, Tamar actually used the same strategy that Ruth used later: an outsider turns to the kinsman-redeemer to make her standing in the Family legal. Ruth went back to her (deceased) husband's family to restart her own family and become part of the Covenant people, sharing her husband's God. Tamar takes the very same approach for the same reasons.

*Third*, this is the way that the descendants of Abraham always looked at the situation concerning Tamar. We find written in the book of Ruth this blessing that the elders gave Boaz who was about to marry Ruth the Moabitess.

May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman. (Ruth 4:12)

Now if Tamar was guilty of playing the prostitute, why did the women of Judah bless Ruth with the hope of being like Tamar? On the contrary: the point (to Tamar as well as to Ruth) was to be part of the Covenant Family. So strongly did the Jews feel about the proper place of Tamar in their Family that when they gave the family tree of King David, Tamar's son always heads the list.

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron ... [*and the list goes on through six generations until ...*] and Jesse fathered David. (Ruth 4:18-22)

The parallels here are too obvious to ignore. Between these stories are three women who, though outsiders and by birth had no right to the Abrahamic Covenant, became part of the Family through their faith in Israel's God: Rahab (Boaz's mother); Ruth the Moabitess; and Tamar the

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<sup>2</sup> Which is, by the way, the only proper hermeneutic to follow. The reason modern scholars misinterpret this and many other stories in Genesis is that they look to each other's works for standards and answers when they should be using the Bible to interpret itself.

Canaanite. And instead of faulting Tamar, the Scripture praises her for taking the action she did to become part of the Family, exactly what the other two women did. As if to demonstrate how important the faith of these three Gentile women was, they are all included in the genealogy of Christ in the first chapter of Matthew (the others listed are all men).

*Fourth*, Tamar went after the Covenant Promises like Jacob did: she wrestled the powers-that-be and would not give up until she got them. Whatever it took, she wanted Israel's God in her life and in the lives of her children. For that fighting spirit (see Matthew 11:12) Jacob was rewarded, and for that Tamar earned a place among the heroes of the faith.

*Fifth*, it will be a recurring theme in Scripture for Canaanite women to leave their

families and their false gods to follow Israel's God. Along with the three already mentioned, the Gospels show us a Canaanite woman who refused to accept Jesus' own rejection of her, even accepting his contemptuous epithet of "dog". The point is that, with true faith, all the past drops away, the physical is no longer important, and a true child of Abraham is revealed who receives the entire Covenant inheritance. (Matthew 15:21-28)

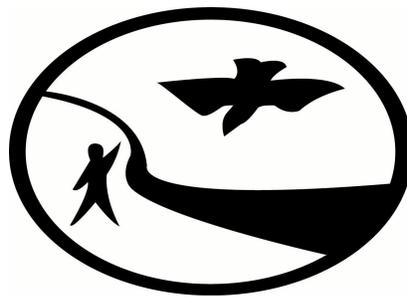
Thus we are introduced to another aspect of the Covenant: full rights are going to be given to all those (even Gentiles!) who come into the Family through their faith, even over the objections of the Jewish side of the Family.

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