

GENESIS 38

Verses 1–30: Judah and Tamar

Immediately following Joseph’s being sold into Egypt, the narrative goes into a digression about Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. At first glance, this story seems to be totally disconnected from the Joseph story since Joseph himself plays no role in it. Yet as many scholars have pointed out, several “motifs and images do intersect with the surrounding chapters of the Joseph story.” For example, goats play a role in both stories (Genesis 37:31; 38:17, 20); clothing is used in both as a means of deception and recognition (37:31–33; 38:13–17, 26), and women seducing men into sexual relationships occurs in both stories (38:14–18; 39:7–18).¹

On one level, the placement of this story right before that of Joseph being seduced by Potiphar’s wife serves to contrast Joseph’s upstanding moral character with the seedier behavior of Judah. Yet Judah’s character is ultimately more nuanced than it may first appear. This story proves to be the turning point that transformed Judah from the man who callously sold his brother Joseph into slavery for profit (37:26–27) to the man who made an impassioned plea to spare his brother Benjamin from suffering the same fate—even volunteering to become a slave in his place (44:18–34).²

Central to the story is the law of the levirate marriage, which “stated that a widow of childbearing age was entitled to bear children through a male in-law acting as proxy for her dead husband.”³ The resulting male

¹ Dennis T. Olson, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gavanta and David Peterson (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 28.

² Camilla Fronk Olson, “The Matriarchs: Administrators of God’s Covenantal Blessings,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2021), 412.

³ Olson, “Matriarchs,” 413.

offspring would be considered that of the deceased husband, thus ensuring him heirs and the widow, sons to take care of her in her old age.⁴ Such laws are known from a variety of ancient Near Eastern cultures and would later be codified in Israelite law (see Deuteronomy 25:5–10).⁵ Typically, the proxy was a brother of the dead husband, but Assyrian laws from approximately 1400 BC suggest that when there was not a brother of proper age, the father was expected to fulfill the role of proxy for his son.⁶

Thus, when Er died, his childless widow, Tamar, was given to his brother Onan for the purpose of raising up seed to Er (Genesis 38:6–8). But Onan did not fulfill his obligation and then died himself (verses 9–10). At the time, Judah’s third son, Shelah, was evidently not yet of age (verse 11). Instead of stepping up to fulfill the levirate obligations himself, Judah sent Tamar back to her father’s house (verse 11).

As time passed and Shelah came of age, Tamar was not given to him as a wife (verse 14), and thus she took matters into her own hands: She disguised herself, careful to cover her face, and positioned herself “in an open place” along the side of the road (“by the way”) where she would be seen by Judah (verse 14). Judah mistook her for a harlot and slept with her, leaving identifying personal objects—his signet seal, bracelets, and staff—as collateral until he could send her the promised payment, “a kid from the flock” (verses 15–19).⁷ When Judah’s emissary was sent with the kid, Tamar was nowhere to be found (verses 20–23).

Three months later when Tamar was found to be pregnant, Judah sentenced her to be burned—that is, until she produced the evidence that it was Judah who impregnated her (verses 24–25). Confronted with this evidence, Judah in his shame confessed, “She hath been more righteous than I,” and absolved her of guilt (verse 26). Camille Fronk Olson explained, “Her extreme example humiliated him and helped to awaken him to repent.”⁸

While Tamar’s actions are not necessarily to be condoned, ultimately it is Judah, not Tamar, who acted unjustly. Despite her unconventional method, the Lord used Tamar’s actions to accomplish His own purposes: Tamar bore twins, and “they were sons of Judah who were chosen to prepare a royal lineage that began with King David and culminated with the Savior’s birth.”⁹

4 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 413.

5 Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 65.

6 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 413.

7 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 416.

8 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 417.

9 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 418.

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