

## Genesis 38

This chapter is interesting in several ways. First, it completely interrupts the flow of the Joseph stories just as they were getting started, meaning the chapter has no connection to what happens before or after it. Second, it offers a complete reversal of the usual narrative scheme of men being the central actors while women wait off-stage. Finally, it gives us a rare glimpse of the women as righteous and the men as unrighteous.

The story opens with Judah, one of the sons of Jacob, marrying a Canaanite woman named Shua. Together they have three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah. When Er reached the age of marriage, Jacob selects Tamar to be his bride. After some time, Er dies. The reason given for his death is that he did what was “evil in the sight of the Lord.” Judah, then follows a tradition which will become known as Levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) in which a childless widow is given in marriage to the closest male kin in order that the deceased man have an heir. Thus, Tamar is given to Onan in marriage. Onan however, refuses to do his procreative duty because he does not want Er’s offspring sharing in the inheritance. The Genesis writer then tells us that Onan too dies because of his evil ways. This leaves Tamar still in need of a husband. Judah, now becomes worried. He is afraid that if he gives Tamar to Shelah, Shelah too will die. Fortunately, Shelah is too young to marry and Tamar is sent to live with her family until Shelah reaches the age of marriage. So far, so good.

The story takes a dramatic turn though when Tamar learns that Shelah has reached the age of marriage and that Judah has no intention of letting her marry his third son. If Tamar is going to bring forth an heir for her first husband and Shelah is not available, there is only one person who qualifies as Er’s closest kin, and that is her father-in-law Judah. Tamar learns that Judah, whose wife Shua has recently died, is going down to Timnah for sheep shearing. Tamar takes off her widow garb, puts on a veil and sits by the side of the road to Timnah as would a Canaanite Temple prostitute. Judah, propositions her. They strike a bargain over the price of sex. The price is a kid from Judah’s flocks. But since he had kid with him, he gives her his signet ring and staff as collateral. They then consummate the deal. When Judah later learns that Tamar is pregnant he demands that she be burned. When she is brought before him to be executed, she presents the ring and staff, which convicts Judah of 1) not having followed the law in giving her to Shelah as a husband and 2) of condemning Tamar of doing what was right, becoming pregnant by Er’s nearest male relative. The outcome is that Judah declares Tamar to be more righteous than himself, and Tamar gives birth to twins who are in both the lineage of King David and of Jesus.

**Reflection:** Generations of interpreters have struggled with what to do with this text. On the one hand you have Judah who violates the law by not giving Tamar to Shelah and by having sex with a “Temple Prostitute”. On the other hand, you have Tamar who dresses like a “Temple Prostitute” and sleeps with her father-in-law. As I said in a sermon in December 2018, I believe that there are two critical takeaways from this passage. The first is that God desires justice (Tamar having a child) and that God’s people are to be God’s coworkers in bringing that justice about (Tamar sleeping with Judah). The second is that we are to live in hope, as did Tamar, that Judah would “come in to her” and that she would become pregnant.

Questions:

1. Do you think that the ends can justify the means? Why or why not? Under what conditions?
2. Why do you think that Tamar is included in Jesus’ genealogy?
3. What does working for God’s justice look like to you?