

General Comments on Genesis 38

Israel be Warned

Taken from a high level with Judah as a type for the men of Israel, this chapter is a compliment to ch. 34 in that it serves as a warning to not intermingle with Canaanites.

Judah moves away from his family and takes a Canaanite wife, unlike what Abraham counselled. His sons are evil and God kills them, presumably because they are raised with sinful Canaanite traditions. Judah reneges on a deal with his daughter-in-law Tamar to fulfil the levir's duty. He solicits what he believes is a Canaanite cult prostitute. When he finds out his daughter-in-law, whom he has sent back to her father's house, is pregnant he hypocritically condemns her, only to find out he is guilty of far more.

Thus, the chapter is a morality play indicating Israelites consorting with Gentiles leads to trouble. Judah's exposure to Canaanite culture degrades his character. But, in the end when faced with his flaws, he confesses his sin and repents, which is what Israel in general should also do.

Note the interplay between Judah and Hirah. Judah kept company with this "Adulamite", obviously not an Israelite. In all three references to Hirah (v. 1, 12, 20) he is labeled "Adulamite". Why so emphatic? To make it clear he is not Israelite. Hirah is involved with Judah's harlotry with Tamar, going to redeem the pledge, to spare Judah the potential public shame. Mirah must at least tacitly approve this kind of behavior, and he may well encourage it.

Also, each time Hirah is referenced the text is dealing with Canaanite women. Hirah is presented as Judah's connection to local women. Hirah is persuading Judah to act like a Canaanite, Judah is not persuading Hirah to act like an Israelite and worship the Lord. The men of Israel should not keep company with Gentile men, as they are a conduit to Gentile women.

Parallel Accounts of the Chastening of Pivotal Characters

However, there is more at work here when a closer examination of Judah is made. When taken superficially, this chapter seems out of place in the Joseph story of ch. 37-48. Careful reading shows it does fit well within the larger Joseph narrative. It is a parallel account of Judah's life among the

Canaanites while Joseph is among the Egyptians. It is relatively short compared to the Joseph account, but, given the length of time involved with sons being born and married, it covers the same time span.

Both Joseph and Judah are separated from their families, one by force, one by choice. Both face very unpleasant difficulties, but in the long run their tribulations change them for the better. At a pivotal point in the future (ch. 44), both sons come together again as better men for their tribulations and help the other. In the end they reconcile and help save their father's entire extended family.

The text is intending to show how Joseph going into slavery affected more people in the family than just Joseph. At the end of ch. 37, Jacob refuses to be consoled, and clearly suffers emotionally. The clear message to the other sons and daughters is once again none of them will ever measure up. Having Joseph out of the way doesn't create opportunity for them in Jacob's eyes, it only emotionally impoverishes him so none of the sons or daughters matter, except maybe Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin.

The text does not tell us why Judah leaves. Is he motivated by guilt over what happened with Joseph? Does he believe Joseph is dead, and he is to blame? Is he sick of his father's continued rejection? Is he tired of dealing with his brothers infighting? Is he seduced by the Canaanite way of life? We are left guessing. But, it is clear all of these are possibilities, as the text does not rule out any of them.

Judah leaves his Hebrew family and takes up with the local Canaanites. He marries a Canaanite woman, and they have three sons. His oldest son marries, but he is evil and struck down by the Lord. Judah tries to do the right thing and have his second son perform the levir's duty, but that son is also evil, so he is struck down as well. Judah's wife dies, leaving him widowed and without opportunity for more sons. Judah has to mourn the death of his two sons and wife, leaving him fearing for his final son, so he ignores the levir's duty when it comes to Tamar, fearing his last son will die like the previous two.

Note through the chapter, there is nothing to suggest Judah seeks or receives inspiration or providential guidance, only the Lord cursing his evil sons. Tamar's actions preserve the lineage of Judah through questionable means, but end up being a good thing in the end. The moral? Good things can come of bad, but all unnecessarily suffer in the process. In the case of Judah, this suffering leads to a change of heart shortly before being reunited with his brother Joseph in Egypt.

Simplifying this line of thought, the message is adversity can lead to chastening and the strengthening of character. Both Joseph and Judah are chastened and they choose to repent. Joseph was forcefully removed from his family, taken into slavery and then chose to remain true to his religious beliefs despite opportunity and pressure to abandon it. Judah willingly left his family, willingly fell in among foreigners, abandoned his religion, but later returned to his family. Both cases have parallels, but with sharp contrasts, and both are brought together and reunited when the changes they have experienced individually are manifested in family reconciliation. The Lord uses adversity to chasten people of their weaknesses.

Literary Composition

The presentation of Tamar's twins (cf. 38:27-30) is meant to invoke the account of Rebecca's twins (cf. 25:22-26). In both cases, the woman is working out God's will in opposition to the father's indifference. The men of Israel as supposed to be godly men, but sometimes aren't. When they aren't, it falls on the women to work out God's will. The text presents these events as causing conflict inside of the woman herself and between the sons, typified in the text by the conflict between the twin sons at birth in both cases. The message is ungodly fathers lead to unhappy wives and conflict in their sons.

Judah's examination (38:25-26) of the seal and staff is rhetorically connected to Jacob's examination (37:32-33) with the use of the [identical term in Hebrew](#) (the use of this word comes at pivotal points of deception and conflict in Genesis, cf. 27:23, 31:32, 42:7-8). Both men are confronted with physical evidence of deception. In the first case, the deception is part of Judah's plan against his father and brother, and in the second case it is ironically against Judah himself, he being duped by Tamar into doing the "right thing" because of his own unwillingness to observe the levir's duty. The entire implication of the text is that Judah is faulting Tamar, the wife whom he arranged for (cf. v. 6), and willing to have her executed for adultery, when it is his own fault his sons were evil and then he withheld his youngest son from her out of fear of him dying like the first two sons. It is not Tamar who killed his sons, the Lord killed them because they were evil. But, Judah was effectively punishing her by sending her back to her father's house and not giving Shelah to her. This places her in precarious position, but Judah only cares for

himself. The text places all of the fault at Judah's feet. To make matters worse for Judah, albeit much later in history, an explicit rhetorical connection of Tamar to Ruth is made explicit in Ruth 4:12 where Tamar is praised for preserving Judah's lineage. Tamar is the heroine here.

There is also a sharp contrast drawn between Judah's sexual morality and Joseph's. Where the widowed Judah is willing to solicit a local cult prostitute, getting himself into trouble, Joseph flees his master's wife (39:7-20), also gets himself into trouble. In Judah's case, the trouble is to his self-confessed condemnation, where in Joseph's case, the trouble is initially difficult, but the Lord protects him and turns it to his favor.

At the end of this chapter, we see Judah's confession of his wickedness (cf. v. 26), suggesting his character has changed. We see how much Judah has changed in ch. 44. The implication is the pain of loss Judah suffers in this chapter affects his concern for his father Jacob when we see the outpouring of pathos in ch. 44. Judah can empathize with Jacob, as he too has lost two sons. Judah's repentance is real, the tribulations he has experienced are entirely his own doing, but they have changed him, and he has learned from it. In the end, his contrition and concern for his father is real, and his confession of such causes the cynical Joseph to change as well. Judah's contrition is pivotal to the change in Joseph's heart. Thus, both Judah and Joseph are inextricably linked in the reconciliation and reunification of Jacob's family.

Comments on Genesis 38

¹And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ²And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah; and he took her, and went in unto her.

³And she conceived, and bare a son; and he called his name Er.

⁴And she conceived again, and bare a son; and she called his name Onan. ⁵And she yet again conceived, and bare a son; and called his name Shelah: and he was at Chezib, when she bare him.

v1-5 Judah leaves home and takes up with a local (v. 1), and marries a local woman (v. 2), who bears three sons (v. 3-5).

v1 "And it came to pass at that time", the text suggests Judah's departure is a result of the events detailed at the end of the

preceding chapter. To get away from the difficult circumstances at home, Judah left.

"went down from his brethren", in 37:30, after he discovers Joseph is missing, Reuben tears his clothing and exclaims "whither shall I go" (KJV), or "where am I to go?" (NAS). Reuben was the oldest brother, and therefore the one most responsible for his younger brothers. He is saying, "How can I go home to face father when my younger brother Joseph is missing?" The text is suggesting the sense of anguish and guilt Reuben felt is also impressed upon Judah, who tried to spare Joseph from death, but suggested they sell him into slavery instead (cf. 37:25-26). The result is he leaves his brothers and falls in among locals. Everett Fox says in his Five Books of Moses, "More than geography seems to be meant. Yehuda begins to change as a person here, in preparation for Chap. 44. Note that the place Adullam assonates with Arabic ('adula) "to turn aside."

"turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah", this Canaanite is present through the story from beginning to end, suggesting they were in business together or were close associates (per v. 12-13 fellow shepherds?). That Judah would be so close to a Gentile suggests he himself was little different from a Gentile.

v2 "and he took her", meaning he married her. The JPS translates this "married her" and Fox translates this "took her (as his wife)". That the woman goes unnamed in the text indicates she plays no pivotal role in the theology of the text. The author does not want to distract the reader from Tamar. Her father is named to make it clear he was Canaanite and show Judah's actions were deliberate, in that he negotiated marriage with a Canaanite's father, observing the local customs. This wasn't some happenstance, Judah is deliberately not taking a Semitic wife.

v3-5 The text provides no meaning for the son's names, and there is no clear meaning associated with them. Traditional meanings (taken from Jacob Neusner's translation of the Genesis Rabbah, volume 3, parashiyot 38:4, pages 208-209) for Er is "He was so-called because he was emptied out from the world [the name Er and the verb for 'emptied out' share the same consonants]." For Onan, "For he brought sorrow on himself [and the word for 'sorrow' shares the same consonants as the name 'Onan']."

I take the absence of meanings given to the son's names to be the author's comment on them being meaningless, as they both appear to be Canaanite names and they died by being cursed by God. They literally have no legacy, so their names are meaningless. The opposite case is with Tamar's sons by Judah, who's names are given meaning at the end of the chapter.

v5 "Chezib", Alter points out in his comments that all place names in this chapter later fall into the lands of Judah after the wandering in the wilderness, and are therefore preserved to connect their hereditary father and ancestral lands with their current abode.

⁶ And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name was Tamar. ⁷ And Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him. ⁸ And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother. ⁹ And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother. ¹⁰ And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also. ¹¹ Then said Judah to Tamar his daughter in law, Remain a widow at thy father's house, till Shelah my son be grown: for he said, Lest peradventure he die also, as his brethren did. And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house.

v6-11 As his sons mature, Judah arranges marriage for his oldest son (v. 6), but he is evil and the Lord kills him (v. 7). Judah tells his second son to perform the levir's duty (v. 8), but Onan is also evil (v, 9) and is also killed by the Lord (v. 10). Judah fears for his youngest son's life, so he sends Tamar back to her father's house on a false promise that she will marry him when he is old enough (v. 10-11).

The reader's natural reaction is to wonder what Er did that was so bad the Lord killed him. But, that is the wrong approach. The implicit message here is Judah's sons are so bad the Lord kills them because they are so evil. Judah is not raising his sons correctly, they are entirely corrupt in the worst Canaanite traditions, suggesting Judah has effectively abandoned the religion of his fathers, not teaching it to his sons. This is the real issue. The Lord has made promises to Abraham that He will keep, and when there are lines that are too corrupt, they cannot be allowed to persist and propagate their evil. Whatever evil they committed, it is clear there was no filial love, or even respect, between the brothers, given Onan's behavior.

v9 "he spilled it on the ground", Onan was practicing *coitus interruptus*. He wanted the benefits of the levir's duty, but not the ensuing responsibility of raising the children.

v11 Judah sending Tamar back to her father's house is him trying to get rid of her and his obligations to her. If she is not present, she is less likely to make a claim on Shelah. He has no intention of keeping his obligations, hence his hasty lethal judgement against her given the opportunity later in the chapter.

¹² And in process of time the daughter of Shuah Judah's wife died; and Judah was comforted, and went up unto his sheepshearers to Timnath, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³ And it was told Tamar, saying, Behold thy father in law goeth up to Timnath to shear his sheep. ¹⁴ And she put her widow's garments off from her, and covered her with a vail, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place, which is by the way to Timnath; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given unto him to wife. ¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought her to be an harlot; because she had covered her face. ¹⁶ And he turned unto her by the way, and said, Go to, I pray thee, let me come in unto thee; (for he knew not that she was his daughter in law.) And she said, what wilt thou give me, that thou mayest come in unto me? ¹⁷ And he said, I will send thee a kid from the flock. And she said, wilt thou give me a pledge, till thou send it? ¹⁸ And he said, what pledge shall I give thee? And she said, Thy signet, and thy bracelets, and thy staff that is in thine hand. And he gave it her, and came in unto her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹ And she arose, and went away, and laid by her vail from her, and put on the garments of her widowhood.

v12-19 Judah's wife dies, he briefly mourns her, and returns to work with his friend Hirah (v. 12). Tamar hears news of Judah's business travels (v. 13), and takes matters into her own hands, as Judah has not kept his promise to give her Shelah as husband (v. 14). Judah sees but does not recognize her and assumes she is a local cult prostitute (v. 15), and approaches her to solicit her services (v. 16). They negotiate price, secure the contract, and proceed (v. 17-18). After this, Tamar returns home and puts on her widow's clothes again (v. 19).

v12 In contrast to his father Jacob, who demonstrated profound grief and refused to be consoled at the apparent death of Joseph (cf. 37:33-35), Judah apparently betrays no emotion over the deaths of his sons and recovers relatively quickly at the death of his wife.

v14 That Tamar would know Judah would fall for this ruse tells the reader his character was such that she knew it beforehand based on her relationship with him. Did he solicit cult prostitutes before his wife died? Did he have a wandering eye? The reader is left nonplussed, but the implications are clear. She knew this means of deception would be effective when deployed against Judah, so she engages him in this manner.

"she put her widow's garments off from her", Tamar mourns her position as widow for a long period of time, where Judah mourns the loss of his wife a short period of time. And, as soon as the deception is over, she returns to her widow's clothes (cf. v. 19).

v16 The language employed here is completely transactional. There is no question Judah is fully cognizant he is soliciting a prostitute as they negotiate the terms of service. Judah's wife recently died, he finished his mourning for her, and he quickly turns to whoring at the first opportunity. Judah's corruption is complete.

v17 "a kid from the flock", with Tamar posing as a cult prostitute, this offer of payment fits, as the kid would go to the local cult for sacrifice. Robert Alter in Five Books of Moses notes the rhetorical connection between the kid here and the kid slaughtered to put blood on Joseph's coat of many colors to deceive Jacob, and of Tamar's use of a garment to deceive Judah.

v18 Tamar is wisely protecting herself in this risky act, by procuring unequivocal evidence of paternity. The signet, bracelets and staff are obvious personal devices that would be publicly known. The signet and bracelets are typically translated to "seal and cord" in modern translations and have reference to device worn around the neck that was pressed into clay to identify contractual endorsement.

²⁰ And Judah sent the kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand: but he found her not. ²¹ Then he asked the men of that place, saying, where is the harlot, that was openly by the way side? And they said, There was no harlot in this place. ²² And he returned to Judah, and said, I cannot find her; and also the men of the place said, that there was no harlot in this place. ²³ And Judah said, Let her take it to her, lest we be shamed: behold, I sent this kid, and thou hast not found her.

v20-23 Judah attempts to make good on the pledge made to the cult prostitute by sending Hirah (v. 20), who asks the town locals about the woman, and the locals tell them no prostitutes are ever in that town (v. 21), signaling danger to Judah. Hirah returns to Judah and warns him there is no cult-prostitute in that town (v. 22). Judah doesn't want to deal with it, so, rather than be humiliated, he ignores the situation (v. 23).

Hirah senses things are amiss and tries to warn Judah, but Judah doesn't want to deal with it. If there were a local cult prostitute, it would mean she is connected to a local worship site, and would have been known to the locals to some degree. One would also assume the locals would solicit her services as well. The fact that none of the locals are aware of this woman is clearly a concern for Hirah.

v20 "the woman", neither Judah nor Hirah know she is Tamar, Judah made no effort to determine her name as their interaction was transactional, and hence she is identified ambiguously by the author. Small details like this reveal a skillful author with deliberate intent.

v21 "harlot", the Hebrew term [qedeshah](#) is specific to ritual cult prostitutes, different from that used for common whores as in v. 24, which is [zana](#). Fox translates this to "holy-prostitute" and comments, "Or, 'cult-prostitute,' one attached to a shrine in Canaan. Sex in the ancient world was often linked to religion (as part of fertility rites), although the Hebrews sought to sever the tie." Judah knew she was a cult prostitute and sends Hirah to pay the fee and collect the pledge by explicitly identifying her as such to him. Judah was not only willing to solicit a prostitute, he didn't care she was seemingly connected to an idolatrous cult. Judah commits both sexual and spiritual infidelity in one act. The irony being he is inadvertently perpetuating the Lord's covenant with Abraham while being perfectly willing to commit terrible sin.

v23 Judah is more concerned about being publicly outsmarted and shamed by a local cult prostitute than his relationship with God. That the seeming prostitute has his seal is a risky situation for Judah, as she could potentially forge his mark and attempt extortion or blackmail. Judah risks this by ignoring the situation. That Judah would give up something so valuable in exchange for a prostitute's services show he was not thinking clearly. In a modern context, this would be like Judah saying he had no cash, so he hands over his wallet with his driver's

license, credit cards and everything else, saying he will return later with cash to exchange. But, when he sends a friend with the cash, the prostitute and the wallet are missing.

²⁴ And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying, Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she is with child by whoredom. And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt. ²⁵ When she was brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these are, am I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff. ²⁶ And Judah acknowledged them, and said, She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more.

v24-26 Three months pass and Judah is informed his daughter-in-law is pregnant, and he immediately condemns her to death by fire (v. 24). As she is taken for execution, she summons her father-in-law and produces evidence of paternity (v. 25). Judah recognizes the evidence as proof of his paternity, and confesses his guilt and therefore her innocence (v. 26).

v24 "Bring her forth, and let her be burnt", Judah makes no effort to verify or investigate the claim, he immediately passes the most harsh judgement possible. This suggests Judah has found a convenient way of permanently disposing of his daughter-in-law problem, so he is not interested in due process. The verdict is brutal and swift, with no recourse, indicating Tamar's wisdom in protecting herself (cf. v. 18) and the depth of her insight into Judah's character.

v25 "Discern, I pray thee", the Hebrew here is identical to that of 37:32-33 where Jacob is asked to examine or inspect Joseph's bloody cloak. The KJV inconsistently translates the terms.

v26 "he knew her again no more", Judah is ashamed of himself and doesn't resort to taking his daughter-in-law as wife or concubine. If he were unrepentant, he could use this as an excuse to continue to copulate with her. The author is letting the reader know Judah's confession in v. 26 is authentic and he abstains, where previously he showed no restraint.

²⁷ And it came to pass in the time of her travail, that, behold, twins were in her womb. ²⁸ And it came to pass, when she travailed, that the one put out his hand: and the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying, This came out first. ²⁹ And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold, his brother came out: and she said, How hast thou broken forth? this breach be upon thee: therefore his name was called

Pharez. ³⁰ And afterward came out his brother, that had the scarlet thread upon his hand: and his name was called Zarah.

v27-30 When Tamar gives birth, she has twins (v. 27). The birth of sons isn't entirely sequential, with one son putting his arm out first, but then withdrawing, and then the other son being entirely born first, the first son second. The sons are then named according to how the second son is in fact firstborn, and therefore causes a "breach", or he breaks through ahead of the other son, and the first son who is second born is called "red", suggesting he is made angry at being second to his brother.

v29-30 Where Judah's names of the sons by the Canaanite wife are left without meaning given and she is left nameless, here, the names of Judah's sons by Tamar are given meaning. Tamar's sons are important, as their lineage is preserved.

v30 "scarlet thread...Zarah", with the name hinting at red, the intent is to draw a rhetorical connection to Esau/Edom. Primogeniture is once again upset, suggesting it really is of no consequence.

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