

Genesis 38 Judah and Tamar

Read 38:1-11

Notice that Judah had left his brothers and married a Canaanite. This would not have been Jacob's wish. Genesis 24:2-7 & 28:1-3. Notice the result in the nature of his sons. Whatever the nature of Er's wickedness, he was in the company of the race of men before the flood and of the valley of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Because Er had no children with Tamar when he died, there was no family line which the inheritance and the blessing of the covenant could continue.

Abraham was the father of Isaac
Isaac the father of Jacob
Jacob the father of Judah

Judah the father of Er & Onan
The Lord put Er & Onan to death: "wicked"

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah
Through Tamar, the wife of his son Er

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 explains the law requiring a family member to marry a widow. Its design was to continue the line of the firstborn, and to enable the widow's son to inherit her late husband's estate and thereby provide for the widow. If not for this custom, a widow would have to choose between returning to her father's house as a permanent and childless widow, or prostitution, or beggary.

V. 9 - Onan knew that the child he would provide to his brother's widow would be deemed the child of his deceased brother Er, and Onan would have no claim to inheritance. God killed Onan because he refused to fulfill his obligation to his brother and Tamar. The story, however, has also been used to teach the sin of self-gratification without responsibility, and is the source of the term "the sin of Onan".

v. 11 Judah sent her away to return to live in her father's house. In doing so, he violated the law, which required him to allow her to conceive a child who would be accounted the son of her late husband. That would permit the line of the firstborn to continue and allow her to remain a part of her husband's family. By withholding Shelah, he also placed his family line in jeopardy, because he could never openly allow Shelah to marry another.

Read 38:12-26

Prostitutes were common in pagan cultures like Canaan. Some were common prostitutes, and wore veils because if caught, they would be punished. Others were respected, public, cultic prostitutes who served Canaanite goddesses and were used to for religious sexual acts thought to promote fertility in crops and flocks. The word used in verse 15 is that of a common prostitute, or whore. The word used in verse 21-22 is that of a religious prostitute.

Vs 24 Notice Judah's hypocrisy. He is prepared to put Tamar to death because her actions were those of a woman who had endangered the purity of the lineage. Yet it was Judah who had denied her that very right of producing a legal heir.

Vs 26 - Judah recognized that Tamar's only motive (which would have been reasonable of most women) was to have children who might be heirs of the promise made to Abraham. Judah's failure to give her his youngest son was against the law, a breach of his promise to her, and an injury done to Tamar.

Read 38: 27-30

God blesses Tamar with twin sons. Perez means "to break through." Zerah means bright, as in the bright red thread.

The birth must have been a vivid reminder to Judah of Joseph's dream, that the older sons would bow to the younger, and his own reaction. He had betrayed Joseph and his father Jacob's trust, and deceived his father into believing Joseph had been killed. Then he betrayed and deceived Tamar. Her trickery was his punishment, and yet his redemption, for through her desperate and dangerous ploy, she saved Judah's family line.

Why is this account in the Bible?

Tamar was a Canaanite woman whose action produced an heir of Judah, Perez, who would be the ancestor of Jesus. Similarly, the entire book of Ruth tells the account of a foreign woman who married an Israelite of the tribe of Judah, who died and left her childless. Ruth invoked the same law as Tamar, the Levirate custom, by marrying Boaz, a relative of her late husband. Boaz himself was descended from Perez. From the union of Boaz and Ruth, came another ancestor of David and of Jesus. Matt. 1:1-6. Jesus was "the Lion of the Tribe of Judah" Rev. 5:5