

Judah Recognized His Seal and Staff and said: She is More Righteous Than I

38: 12-26

DIG: In Chapter 35, Jacob seemed to be taking spiritual leadership in his family. Judging by Chapters 37 and 38, what effect did this have on his sons? How did Tamar reflect God's image? How was Judah's situation similar to King David's? How did her bold actions change Judah's life?

REFLECT: What often happens when we, like Judah, choose to spend our time with ungodly people? How do you respond when you are caught in a sin? Have you ever been "set straight" or rescued by someone you thought was "less righteous" than you?

After Tamar left, the family faced more adversity. After a long time Judah's wife Bath-Shua died. She still must have been a relatively young woman, because Judah could hardly have been more than forty. As a result it seems possible that her death may also have been in judgment from ADONAI, reflecting her own responsibility in the training of Er and Onan and their resulting attitudes of bitter rebellion against God.⁵⁸⁴ After a suitable time of mourning, Judah went up to the foothills of Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep. Sheep-shearing was a festive time once-a-year (First Samuel 25:4, 11, 36), when sexual temptation would be heightened by the Canaanite worship, which encouraged ritual sex as a form of fertility magic (Hosea 4:13-14).⁵⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Judah decided to go to Timnah and his Canaanite friend Hirah went with him (38:12).

Tamar saw that she had not been given to Shelah as a wife after he had grown into manhood. The deaths of Er and Onan were not her fault, yet she was being treated as if she had something to do with it. Furthermore, it was obvious that Judah had no intention of honoring his commitment to her regarding Shelah. So she concluded that if she were ever going to become a mother in Judah's family she would have to take matters into her own hands. Whether Judah told Tamar that the Messiah would come through her we do not know. But such an opportunity presented itself when she learned that Judah was coming to visit his sheep shearers in Timnah (38:13-14).

Tamar had waited patiently. A long time had passed. Even though Shelah had grown into manhood, Judah showed no sign of keeping his promise. But Tamar had not forgotten. She knew her duty, but Judah blocked her path. The disgrace of her childlessness would be significantly worse if her husband's name was cut off. She had no legal recourse. No one spoke in her defense. Tamar was in an impossible predicament and she had run out of options.

Once convinced of **Judah's** intention to do nothing to remedy **her** plight, a marked change came over **her**. Up to that point **she** had accepted a passive role. **She** was always the object of the action: **Judah** *got her* for Er, *gave her* to Onan, and *sent her* home to wait for **Shelah**. But **when she was told that her father-in-law**, just recovering from being widowed **himself**, was **on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep**, **she** saw a window of opportunity that **she** could not pass by.

With a renewed sense of purpose, **she took off her widow's clothes** along with **her** passivity, **covered herself with a veil** (as a woman on her wedding night) to **disguise herself**. This was the mark of a temple prostitute. They were used in the Near East during planting or other important seasons such as **sheep-shearing**. Women who were devoted to the mother goddess Ishtar or Anat would reside at or near temples and would dress in a **veil**, as the symbolic bride of the god Baal or El. In this way, it was supposed that they gave honor to the gods and reenacted the divine marriage in an attempt to ensure fertility and prosperity for their fields and herds.⁵⁸⁶ Ironically, half way between **Adullam** and **Timnah** was the town of **Enaim**, and the home of **Tamar**. **She** knew that **Judah** would be more sexually vulnerable now that **he** was a widower.⁵⁸⁷ If **she** was going to act, the time had come.

Then Tamar placed herself in Judah's path. She sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. It was no accident that the town of **Enaim** means *eyes*, and **when Judah saw her, he thought she was a temple prostitute, for she had covered her face (38:15)**. Now **Judah**, who had deceived Jacob when Joseph was sold, was himself deceived by **his Canaanite daughter-in-law**.

In her book *Lost Women of the Bible*, Carolyn James comments that, "it's worth noting, at this point, that investigators of ancient history have uncovered ancient Hittite and Assyrian laws that regulated the *levirate* duty. These documents not only placed responsibility on the brother of the deceased but, interestingly enough, they also supported marriage of the **father-in-law** to **his son's widow** if no brother fulfilled this duty. Although biblical regulations later prohibit this, it seems plausible, especially in light of **Tamar's** conduct, that in **Judah's** day the **father-in-law** was responsible if **his son** failed to fulfill his duty. According to such laws, and also the biblical view of **Tamar**, conception by a **father-in-law** was a legitimate means of saving a family member from being cut off. Furthermore, now that **Judah** was a **widow**, no wrong would be done against **his wife**."

Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, Judah went over to her by the roadside (38:16a). The whole episode gives terrible insight into **his** character. What in heaven's name made **Tamar** think such a scheme would work? Evidently **Tamar** knew **Judah** well enough to know that it would succeed. **She** wasn't bringing **Judah** down. **He** was down already. **He** saw what **he** thought was a prostitute, approached **her**, and the bargaining began.

Skipping the small talk **he** got straight to the point: **Come now, let me sleep with you.** **She** asked: **And what will you give me to sleep with you?** **Judah** said: **I promise I will send you a young goat from my flock (38:16b-17a).** **Judah** was clearly acting on impulse because **he** didn't even have the **goat he** promised in payment for **her** services. **He** would send it later. But **Tamar** negotiated like a hardheaded businesswoman, and replied: **Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it (38:17b)?**

He asked: **What pledge should I give you?** Then **she** shrewdly set the terms **herself.** **Give me your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand, she** answered. The seal was attached to a **cord** that hung around **his** neck. **He** used it to emboss **his** insignia on legal documents. **She** wanted both **the seal** and **the cord.** **The staff** symbolized **his** authority and was distinctively carved to indicate it belonged to **Judah.** By surrendering these items, **Judah** demonstrated how intent, and reckless, **he** was in getting what **he** wanted. In modern terms, **she** had the equivalent of **his** credit card and driver's license. So even without DNA testing, **Tamar** could prove the identity of **the father** of **her** unborn child.

So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him (38:18). What are we to make of this? This was how the Canaanites lived! It must be recognized that the biblical record does not condemn or criticize **Tamar.** Indeed **her** decision and **her** actions at this point did accomplish exactly what **she** intended, for **she** became **the mother** of the ancestor of King David and, eventually, the Messiah Himself. **ADONAI** is not bound by human strategies and one could conclude that **He** placed **His** approval on **Tamar's** actions in this case, at least if we are to judge by the result that **God** allowed to be achieved by it.⁵⁸⁸ **After he left, she** certainly did not want to continue to dress like a **prostitute, so she took off her veil, put on her widow's clothes again and went home to her father's house (38:19).**

Meanwhile Judah went back home and picked out a **young goat** from **his** flock. **He** asked his Canaanite friend **Hirah** to take it to **the prostitute in order to get his pledge back from the woman.** **Judah** was probably somewhat ashamed of what **he** had done and didn't want to see **her** again or have anyone see **him** talking to **her.** So **he** sent **Hirah** who didn't care. **But** no matter how hard **Hirah** searched, **he did not find her (38:20).** **He** asked the **men** who lived there: **Where is the temple prostitute (Deuteronomy 23:17; Hosea 4:14) who was beside the road at Enaim? They** said: **There hasn't been any temple prostitute here (38:21),** which was the truth because **she** only pretended to be one. Puzzled, **Hirah** returned to **Judah** with the **young goat, but without his pledge.**

So Hirah went back to **Judah** and said: **I didn't find her. Besides, the men who lived there said there hasn't been any temple prostitute there (38:22).** Then **Judah** said: **Let her keep what she has, or I will become a laughing stock because a temple prostitute**

has outwitted me. I want to wash my hands of the whole thing. **After all, I did try and keep my word and send her this young goat, but you didn't find her (38:23).** What else could **he** do? **He** had tried and that was enough. **Judah** thought that would be the end of the whole sleazy affair. As far as the tokens were concerned, **she** could keep them if **she** wished, though it was difficult to see how they could be of any use to **her**. Little did **he** know.

About three months later Judah got some shocking news. Someone came to **him** and said: **Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant. He** was furious in his righteous anger. In his mind, not only were his two sons dead because of **her**, but now **she** had disgraced his family. How ungrateful **she** was! **He** was so kind to **her**, and now this! **He** would be happy for any excuse to get rid of **her** and end this unfortunate episode of his life. Even though **she** was living back in **her father's** house, **she** was still under **Judah's** authority. The penalty for adultery, even in an ungodly society like that of Canaan, was **death**, as may be seen in the Code of Hammurabi.⁵⁸⁹ **Judah**, as judge and jury, assumed **her** to be guilty without even hearing a word from **her**.

Judah demanded: **Bring her out and have her burned to death (38:24).** Being the patriarch of the clan, **Judah** was within his rights to order **her** to be **burned to death** because technically, **she** committed adultery as a result of **her** supposed engagement to **Shelah**. Later, in the Torah, the penalty for adultery was stoning, not burning (**Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:21**). **Tamar** did not immediately defend herself. But **as she was being brought out of her father's house and back to Adullam to face Judah, she made her defense. She sent a message, the seal and its cord, and the staff, to her father-in-law. Her message said: I am pregnant by the man who owns these. And then she added: See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these belong to (38:25).** One can only imagine the thoughts that crossed **Judah's** mind at that time. But **Tamar** probably knew enough about **Judah** to know that once **he** knew the truth, **he** would treat **her** fairly.

Judah instantly recognized them and the heart of the problem. **He** had committed adultery with his son's engaged wife! But to his credit, **he** immediately repented and confessed: **She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah (38:26a).** This was a watershed moment for **Judah**, the moment of clarity when the fog lifts and the prodigal son sees the light. The Bible doesn't carelessly throw around a word like **righteous**. **Job 1:8** tells us that **he** was **blameless and upright** (Hebrew: *tam*); **Noah was a righteous (tam) man (6:9); Jacob was a righteous (tam) man (25:27),** the TANAKH tells us that **ADONAI is righteous in all His ways (Psalm 145:17).** **God** sets the standard for what is **righteous**, and no person at that time, especially someone from **Judah's** background, would ever thoughtlessly apply **righteous** to a Canaanite woman like **Tamar**. It was as if **Judah** was saying, "**Tamar** has done the right thing. **She** has done what pleases **God**, and **I** have not."

Many years later **Judah's** descendant, King David, would face a similar situation. He would commit adultery with Bath-Sheba, whose husband would be from one of the Canaanite tribes. When Nathan the prophet confronted him, David said immediately: **I have sinned against the LORD (Second Samuel 12:13)**. Once David recognized his sin, he tried to make things right, and so did **Judah**. **He did not sleep with her again**, nor could **she** be given to **Shelah**, but **he** would at least acknowledge **her son** as his heir (**38:26b**). Through the omnipotence, or the authority and influence of **God**, the *levirate marriage* had been fulfilled. In this way, the line of the Messiah through **Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah** and **Perez** was kept in tact (see my commentary on [The Life of Christ Ai - The Genealogies of Joseph and Mary](#)).

In the final analysis, **Tamar** carried out a stunning rescue of **Judah's** two dead sons with **her** twins, **Perez** and **Zerah**. **She** saved both **Er** and **Onan** from extinction, despite **their** wickedness. But **Tamar** also rescued **Judah**. **His** collision with **her** stopped **his** steep spiritual decline. Driven by rejection and jealous anger over **his father's** preference for Rachael over **his** mother Leah, and for favoring Rachel's **sons**, Joseph and Benjamin, over **Judah** and **his** brothers, **Judah** led the conspiracy against Joseph and instigated selling him as a slave. With Joseph seemingly out of the picture, their elderly father Jacob doted protectively on Joseph's younger brother Benjamin. Hurt and fed up, **Judah** left and migrated to Canaanite territory. **He** lived among the Canaanites, had Canaanite friends, made alliances with Canaanites, married a Canaanite, and ultimately started acting like one. Instead of walking with **ADONAI**, **he** walked away. **He** seemed indifferent to **his** wicked **sons** and even blocked **Tamar's** path to obedience. In short, **Judah** was lost. But **he** met **his** match in **Tamar**.

The LORD is in the business of changing lives and **Judah** is a prime example. **His** turning point came when **he** collided with **Tamar**. The evidence of **Judah's** change came later when Benjamin's life was threatened, then **the man** once ruled by jealousy and resentment volunteered to become a slave in the place of **his** younger brother (**44:1-34**). This was not merely one **man** offering to become a slave for **his** beloved brother. This was the *rejected son* offering **himself** in place of **his father's pet**. Clearly, **Judah** had become a **righteous man**.

But **Tamar** would not live to see the fulfillment of **her** efforts. As the descendants of **Abraham** flooded into the Promised Land, the blood line of **her** eldest **son Perez** became the golden cord that connected **ADONAI's** promise of a **Redeemer** in the garden of Eden with the birth of the Anointed One in **Beit-Lechem (Micah 5:2)** thousands of years later. **Tamar** didn't corrupt the line of the Messiah. **She** rescued it!