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Judah said to Tamar: Live as a Widow Until My Son Shelah Grows Up 38: 1-11

Judah said to Tamar: Live as a widow until my son Shelah grows up DIG: What were the implications of Judah marrying a Canaanite woman? What is the duty of Judah's sons, and even Judah himself to Tamar (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)? Contrast Tamar's motives with the motives of Onan and Judah in avoiding this duty.

REFLECT: Why is it important for you to be equally yoked (Second Corinthians 6:14-18)? What is different about Judah's rebellion and yours? Judah was the Seed son, through which the Messiah would come. How do you feel about his actions, knowing that Christ would be his descendent? What does that say about human nature? About you?

At the time that Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, Judah left his brothers. It seems that **Judah** was so disturbed by the actions of **his brothers** and **his father** that **he** wanted to separate **himself** from **them**. But **he** only went as far as **Adullam**, eight miles to the northwest, and stayed **with a man named Hirah (38:1)**. In due time **he** went looking for **a wife** as **he** started to make new friends there. Making friends with the **Canaanites**, however, would come at a high price.

There Judah met the attractive young daughter of a Canaanite man name Shua, which in Hebrew is Bath-**Shua (First Chronicles 2:3 KJV)**. **He married her and lay with her (38:2)**. There is no suggestion that **he** consulted with **his father** or **the father** of the bride. **He** merely jumped in with both feet **and married her**. However, being the ancestor of **the Messiah**, **he** should have been much more cautious in selecting **his future wife**. **Shua's daughter**, although physically attractive, was a true **Canaanite**, not only in **her** race but also in **her** culture and outlook. As a result, **she** was evidently unwilling to be converted to the worship of the **God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**. The evidence of this is that **ADONAI** rejected all three of **her sons** from being the seed of **the Messiah**. At least **two** of **them** were disgracefully wicked in the sight of **the LORD** and it is

likely that **they** reflected **their mother's** character and teaching.⁵⁸⁰

*Judah was unequally yoked with this **Canaanite woman**. What seemed like a good idea at the time would end up causing havoc in **his** life and the life of **his** family. Would that hinder **God** in carrying out **His** plan to bless the world through **Abraham** and his seed? No, but believers today think that they can marry someone who is not a believer and the person will change once they tie the knot. As a matter of fact, I can guarantee that they will change. Once you say, "I do," they will get much worse!*

Evidently **they** had three **sons** in fairly rapid succession. Soon **she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er. Judah** named **his** first **son** this because **Er** in Hebrew means *watcher*. **She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan**. This time the **son** is named by Bath-Shua. **She** named **him Onan**, which means *strength*. **She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. She** named **her** third **son Shelah**, which may mean *one who is drawn out of the womb*. By the time **Shelah** was born, the family had moved to **Kezib**, which was evidently a small town near **Adullam (38:3-5)**. **Kezib is a word derived from the word Kazab that means to lie or to be deceived. The rabbis teach that in that regard it may foreshadow what soon happens: Judah promised Shelah, who was born in Kezib, to Tamar, but he does not give him to her. He simply deceives her.** With the naming of **her** last two children, **her** dominance of the family seems to be increasing at this point.

As was the custom of the day, once **Er** grew into manhood **Judah** selected **a wife for his firstborn**. The bridegroom did not choose his own bride. So by this time **Judah** had probably realized that **his** choice of **a wife** was not the best and **he** resolved not to let **Er** err in the choosing of **his** mate. **Judah** knew **the LORD's** covenant would flow through **Jacob's** family so it was important that **his son** have the right kind of **wife**. Sadly, because of the worldly spiritual influence of **Er's** mother, **he** realized that it was all the more important that **his wife** be a good influence on **his son** and grandchildren.

Judah felt free to choose **his** own **wife**, but didn't give **Er** the same courtesy. **He** finally found a suitable **wife** for **his son** and **her name was Tamar** meaning *palm tree (38:6)*. It is used in the Bible as a symbol of a graceful person (**Song of Songs 7:7-8**). **She** was also **a Canaanite**, but **she** would become the mother of the messianic line from **Judah (Matthew 1:3)**, so we must assume that in the sovereign will of **God**, **He** participated in this choice. As a result, **Tamar** must have

been the most suitable woman for this purpose in **her** generation, regardless of the fact that **she** was not Jewish. **Judah** made the arrangements and **his son Er** was **married to the Canaanite** maiden **Tamar**.

The story of **Tamar** starts here, with **her** marriage to **Judah's** eldest **son**. If **they** followed the normal marriage customs, **Tamar's father** and **father-in-law** made the arrangements, most likely based on the political and financial advantages it would bring to **them**. But however well the marriage may have worked out for the two families, it was a complete disaster for **Tamar**.

Many couples can reflect on their struggles during their first year of marriage. **But Tamar's** marriage was a nightmare by anyone's standard. **Her** new husband quickly shattered any girlhood hopes **she** may have had for **her** future life. Scripture tells us that **Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in ADONAI's sight**. It seems that the rebellion of **his Canaanite mother** against the things of **the LORD** had infected the **son**. **Tamar** was not the kind of **wife he** wanted at all. No doubt **Judah** had explained the importance of a godly **wife**, but **Er** wanted nothing to do with the **God of Abraham**. **He** fully intended to follow the **Canaanite** religion of **his mother**. Therefore, **ADONAI put him to death (38:7)**. Like many of the other firstborn in the Bible (Cain, Ishmael, Esau and Reuben), **Er** is set aside by **God**. Not since the days of Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah had **Elohim** taken the life of one who displeased **Him**, and there it was groups who were annihilated. **Er** is the first individual person in Scripture that **the LORD** puts to death.⁵⁸¹

The ancient world had an emergency plan to save a childless dead man from extinction. **Then Judah said to Onan, "Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother" (38:8)**. This was in accordance with the Code of Hammurabi. **Tamar** had the right to have a child by the nearest of kin to **her** dead **husband**. If a man died childless, the nearest of kin had the obligation to produce a **son** to carry on **his** family line. This was a *levirate marriage*, which comes from the Latin word *levir* that means *the husband's nearest of kin*. Later, this was incorporated into the Torah to preserve the dead man's name and family (see the commentary on **Ruth, to see link click Ba - Bo'az Obtains the Right of Redemption**). Finally, it was for the protection of the widow so that **she** should not have to sell herself for debts or have to marry outside the clan.⁵⁸²

The son born from this union inherited the name and estate of the deceased. Any living **brother** who refused this **duty** fell under deep disgrace. The solution was

complicated, for it obligated both the widow and the living **brother** to make costly sacrifices for the man who had died. **His widow** couldn't just move on and start a new life. **She** was honor bound to preserve **her** husband's name. But **Onan** faced a moral dilemma as simple math can reveal.

Tamar's case concerned three brothers, **Judah's** three sons: **Er, Onan,** and **Shelah**. According to the Code of Hammurabi, **Judah** would divide **his** estate into four equal parts. **Tamar's** husband **Er**, as the eldest **son**, would inherit **a double portion**. Two of the four slices of the family pie, or in this case, half of **Judah's** estate would go to **him**. **His** two younger **brothers** would each receive a single slice, or **one-fourth**.

When **Er** died childless, the math changed for **his** two surviving **brothers**. Now the same piece of pie was divided three ways, with **Onan** (then in the place of **Judah's** first born), getting **two-thirds** instead of **his** original **one-fourth** portion – more than even **Er** would have inherited even had **he** lived. And **Onan** was no dummy, **he** could add.

Family duty to produce an heir for **his** dead **brother** threatened to ruin everything for **Onan**, who was then positioned to enjoy the financial benefits of being the first born. Talk about a conflict of interest! If **Tamar** became pregnant with a **son**, **Onan** would forfeit **his** place as the eldest **son**. **Tamar's son** would become **Judah's** new number-one **son** in place of **Er**, and **Onan** would slide back to **his** former second-son position, while watching **his** inheritance shrink back to the measly **one-fourth** **he** had before.

The stakes were high. There was the possibility that **Onan** might never father a second **son** to perpetuate **his** own name. The situation required extraordinary sacrifice that we can hardly appreciate today. **ADONAI**, however, commonly calls **His** people to make sacrifices for one another. That's what being a believer of **Jesus** means.

This family duty to produce an heir to preserve Er's name is essential to understanding Tamar's motive. If we don't understand this, her motive sinks to desperation for a child or, even worse, determining to get even with her father-in-law for deceiving her. It makes her actions sound a bit cold-blooded and vindictive, not to mention immoral. Her next actions will fall far outside the scope of respectability.

Tamar was willing to fulfill this obligation on **her** part, **but** could not because of the unwillingness of **Onan**. It seems that **he** was just as wicked as **his brother**. **He**, like **Er**, was also in rebellion against **God**. **He knew that the offspring would not be his**, but would be the legal child of **his** dead **brother**. Outwardly, **he** obeyed **his father**. But secretly **whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he** regularly **spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother**. This was the birthright issue. **He** was trying to get rid of the competition. **What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so God put him to death also (38:9-10)**. Ironically, **Onan** lost **his** life by trying to save it.



Suddenly, **Judah** was down to one living **son**, with a growing suspicion that **Tamar** was the problem – a black widow of sorts. **He** had another **son** who was much younger named **Shelah**. The appropriate thing to do was to have **him** marry **Tamar** and produce children for **his** dead **brother**. But **Judah** stalled by sending **Tamar** back to **her father's house** until **his** younger **son** was fully grown. So **Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up."** By making this statement **Judah** promised **his son Shelah** to **her** in marriage, *and technically they were engaged*. **Tamar** understood this and **Judah** certainly understood this, as we shall see.

When he told her to remain a widow until his youngest son grew up, it was nothing more than an excuse to put her off for the time being. **He** had no intention of having **Shelah** marry **Tamar**. **Women whose husbands continued to die were many times suspected of witchcraft.**⁵⁸³ For a fleeting moment we are given an insight into what **Judah** thought. **He** said to himself: **Tamar** is really bad luck; maybe **my** youngest **son** will **die too, just like his brothers**. So **Judah** sent **Tamar** away **to live in her father's house**. **She** complied and went quietly, but expected **Judah** to fulfill **his** promise to **her (38:11)**. But **she** remained under



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Judah's authority and legally engaged to **Shelah**.