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2008 • NUMBER 5

Tamar: Seductress or Survivor?

By Jim Myers

Comments & Notes

(1) Think about the comparisons between Yahweh and David in Psalms.

(2) Have you noticed how the Old Testament heroes have their good and bad sides?

(3) Always look for the consequences associated with the decision.

(4) The biblical text never states that Tamar was a Canaanite, but the majority of Jewish tradition indicates that she was.

(5) It is interesting that the implication that Judah's sexual needs were linked to the loss of his wife. Nothing is said about Tamar's needs as a result of the loss of her husbands.

We have been studying David, son of Jesse, King of Israel, at our Mabank group for the past two meetings, and there is no doubt that he is the star of the Jewish Bible. David not only reflects the heart of Yahweh, but his story and psalms are the heart and soul of the Hebrew Scriptures.

One of the first stories that we all probably learned in Sunday School was "David and Goliath." Since then we have seen everyone from football coaches to business consultants apply its core principles in many diverse fields. Even though David's courage is without question, the extent that he went to steal the wife of one of his trusted generals is inexcusable. The Hebrew Bible makes no attempt to cover its hero's character flaws. If there is one characteristic that comes through loud and clear in the Hebrew Bible, it is this, when it comes to its heroes the authors lay it all on the table. Readers learn about their good and their bad qualities. There are no perfect human beings.

David is no exception. Readers learn about both Goliath and Bathsheba. The lesson that comes through loud and clear is: There are consequences that result from the good and bad decisions that we make. Some of those consequences may reach far beyond the life of the person making the choices and have profound affects on future generations. David's choices clearly affected his descendants and his nation; but David's life was also affected by the choices made by his ancestors too.

David's genealogy not only included Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; but also Judah, Tamar, Boaz and Ruth. Tamar and Ruth create interesting challenges for future rabbis because of their Gentile blood. Tradition says Tamar was a Canaanite and the Tanakh clearly states that Ruth was a Moabite. How could two women in the hero of Torah's lineage be Gentiles? If that wasn't enough, one of his ancestors was conceived when the Canaanite had sexual intercourse with her father-in-law! *Soap operas don't have anything over many of the stories recorded in the Hebrew Bible.*

In this article we are going to take another look at the story of Tamar, and her roadside encounter with her father-in-law, Judah. The way the story is usually told is that Tamar dressed as a harlot to intentionally seduce the father-in-law of her two dead husbands. Her goal was to become pregnant by him and thus secure her future by becoming the mother of his future heir. Poor old Judah, having recently lost his wife, couldn't control his sexual desires and fell victim to the exotc woman sitting by the side of the road trying to lure him. Is that the story we find in the Hebrew Bible, or is that the spin that has been put on it by gnerations of male Bible teachers for the past 2500 years? Let's take another look at the story recorded in Genesis 38.

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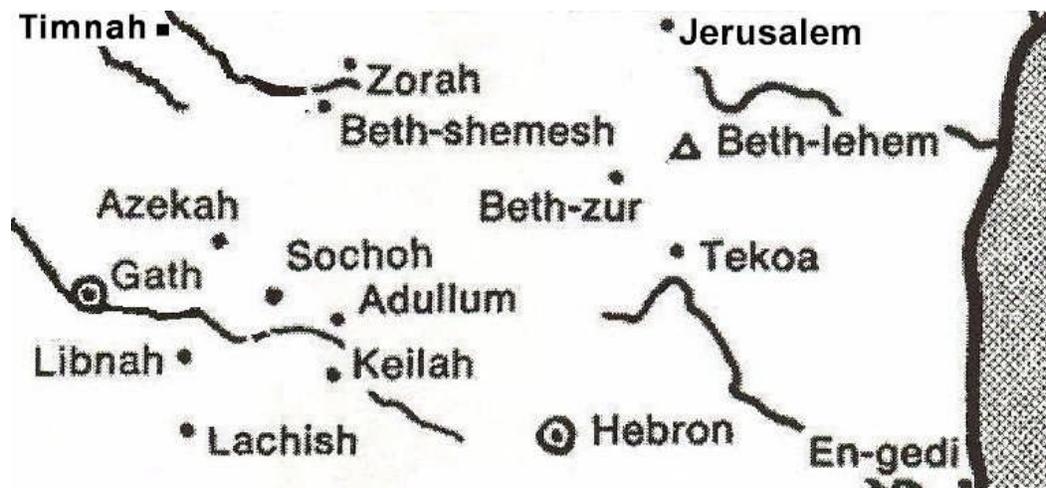
(6) Check the flow of the Joseph story from chapter 37 to chapter 39. Judah and Tamar's story seems to be a cut and paste afterthought of the editors.

However, before we read about Tamar and Judah, we should consider the context in which we find their story. It is obviously located between chapters 37 and 39, but when we read those chapters many questions are raised. The final verse in the previous chapter (37:36) reads: *“And the Midianites sold him (Joseph) into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, the captain of the guard.”* The first verse in next chapter (39:1) states: *“And Joseph was brought down to Egypt; and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him of the hand of the Ishmaelites, that had brought him down thither.”*

The continuity of the Joseph story is clearly seen by simply skipping chapter 38. The flow of the story from Chapters 37 to 39 is uninterrupted. But, since that is not the subject of this article, I will wait until a future article to discuss it. An important point that must be made, though, concerns the character of Judah. The textual evidence makes clear his participation in the scheme against his brother Joseph. Even though he may have saved Joseph's life by suggesting that he be sold into slavery, he did nothing further to rescue him or to inform his father. Judah is clearly no saint when the story of Tamar begins.

It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain man from **Adullam** whose name *was* Hirah. And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name *was* Shua, and he married her and went in to her. So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah... Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name *was* Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh killed him (38:1-7).

(7) Adullum, Sochoh, Azekah, Timnah, and most of the other towns are all Canaanite towns. Goliath was from Gath, which was on the border of the Philistine territory. Most of these villages were very small, some with much less than a hundred people.



(8) Judah's friendship with the man from Adullum seems very important to the author.

Judah traveled to see his friend Hirah in Adullum, a Canaanite city bordering Philistine territory. We do not know if finding a wife was on his agenda, but once he sees Shua, a Canaanite, his priorities changed. Once they married it was clear that she was divinely blessed because of her fertility. Readers learn that Shua gives Judah three sons during their marriage. However, most readers never really consider the amount of time that may pass in just a few verses. If you have three or more children, just take a moment to consider how many things can happen between the conception of the first to the birth of the third child. All of this happened in 7 verses.

(9) Think about the actual amount of time that passed in these few verses.

- (1) How long did it take for Judah to travel from his brothers to Adullam?
- (2) Once he arrived, how long did it take for him to become aware of Shua?
- (3) After Shua caught his eye, how long was it before the marriage was arranged?
- (4) How much longer was it before they married?
- (5) How long did it take for Shua to become pregnant with Er?
- (6) How many years passed before Er was old enough to marry?
- (7) At what point did Judah choose Tamar to be Er's wife?
- (8) How long were they married before Yahweh killed Er?

(10) What would have happened if Judah's father, Jacob, had been there to pick a wife for him? Had Judah's earlier decision to deceive his father now resulted in consequences that would affect his life and the lives of his descendants?

Clearly these were significant events in the lives of those involved. A lot of living took place between item number 1 and number 8. The author has provided us with a great deal of information, but there is also a lot that he doesn't reveal. For example, we know nothing about what Judah's brothers thought about his marriage to a Canaanite woman. We read that Judah picked Tamar to be Er's wife, but we do not know why he chose her. The author revealed that Er was wicked and that Yahweh killed him, but he doesn't say what Er did. It is also important to remember that Abraham and his family members were still the foreigners in this land. Moses hadn't been born yet. The fact that they had a divine promise that they would possess the land probably wouldn't have gone over to well among those who had been living there for centuries. Now let's return to the story of Tamar.

(11) Do you think Tamar knew what Onan was doing?

At this point in the story Tamar is a widow and Judah has no heir from his firstborn son (v. 8). In order to resolve this problem Judah orders Onan, Er's younger brother, to marry Tamar and produce the male heir. Readers now get an intimate glimpse into both Onan's head and his bed. We learn of Onan's inner most thoughts concerning the desired child in verse nine. He did not want to father a child that would not be his heir by law. Therefore, he devised a plan that would make it look as if he obeyed the wishes of his father, but without the desired results. The plan was simple. When he engaged in sexual intercourse with Tamar he would not complete the act "in her." At the last second he "spilled it on the ground." If his father had checked with Tamar, she could have verified that Onan had indeed engaged in sexual intercourse with her. The author doesn't let us know whether Tamar knew what he was doing, or if she thought she was the problem. In a family mothered by Shua, who appears to be very fertile, Tamar's inability to produce the heir could have been interpreted as a lack of divine blessing – *the familiar barren woman syndrome*.

(12) What do you think she felt like every time she faced Judah and Shua?

(13) There was no doubt where Yahweh stood. Judgment was swift and in this life in this story.

Onan may have also believed that there was no hurry for Tamar to become pregnant since his younger brother, Shelah, was not old enough yet to marry. It looked like he had a great plan, except for one detail, Yahweh knew what he had been doing – *or more importantly, not doing -- and killed him*. Many preachers have declared that it was what he did that cost him his life, but in rabbinic circles the majority would agree that it was what he didn't do that cost Onan his life.

Judah now had two dead sons, a young son, an unpregnant Tamar, and still no male heir. His young son was still too young to marry Tamar. However, based on the experiences of his two deceased sons with this Canaanite woman, he might have also been afraid to let his remaining son go near her. This appears to be the case and is supported by Judah's words in verse eleven:

(14) Judah's reason is clear.

Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house till my son Shelah is grown." For he said, "Lest he also die like his brothers."

(15) How do you think Judah interpreted the deaths of his sons?

The readers know that Yahweh killed Er and Onan, but we don't know if anyone else, including Judah or Tamar, knew it? As a twice-widowed young woman Tamar may have been more than ready to get back to her father's house and away from Judah, his family and a bunch of hurtful memories. How would you feel? What would it have been like for her to live in the same place with Shua and Shelah? What do you think her mother-in-law thought when she saw her?

Under such circumstances I believe that Tamar would have been very happy to return to her father's house and his protection. Interestingly, the author doesn't let readers in on the age of Shelah or how long Tamar will have to wait before he will be old enough to marry her, don't you think she had a good idea?

(16) Once again the man from Adullam appears.

In verse twelve we learn that "in the process of time" Shua died and Judah was comforted, which seems to imply that a period of mourning passed after her death. In this very difficult time we find that Judah's friend from Adullam is with him. The author seems very intent on making sure readers understand their relationship. They travel together to Timnah when the time comes to shear the sheep. Since readers are not told how much time has passed, but we find Tamar still waiting for Shelah.

(17) Notice that an unnamed source shows up and plays a major role in setting up the situation that will follow.

We are not even certain that Tamar is aware of the death of her mother-in-law, but we do discover that an "unnamed source" informs her that Judah is making the trip to Timnah (see map) in verse 13. The author makes a point of letting readers know that Tamar has kept her word to Judah, because she is still wearing her widow's garments (v. 14). The question is, did Judah keep his word to her? She must have felt that Shelah had reached the legal age to marry her, so, in order to find out, she removed her widow's garments and replaced them with a veil and a wrap. Clothed in her new outfit she found a place on the road to watch Judah and his people pass by.

(18) What would you have done?

The author gives us a hint at her motive when she sees for herself that Shelah was old enough but was not given to her (v. 14). Notice that when she sees Shelah, immediately Judah sees her. She doesn't make a move to entice him, he comes directly to her. This is the key moment in the story. Put yourself in Tamar's shoes at that moment. You have just discovered and beginning to process exactly what is going on. Your whole future seems to be crumbling before your eyes. While you are digesting the reality of the situation and realize that the totally unthinkable has occurred – your father-in-law walks straight to you and tells you that he wants to have sex with you! You also probably have one other thought – What happens if he discovers my identity! What would you have done?

If this had taken place in our modern world Tamar might have jumped up, thrown off the veil and confronted her father-in-law about his failure to keep his word. But she didn't live in a world with "women's rights." Such a choice would have proven to be deadly in her world. Later, in verse 24, we learn that Judah would have no problem ordering her death. I am sure that she was well aware of the potentially dangerous situation she had placed herself in.

- (19) Pay close attention to Judah's actions. The author makes it clear that Judah initiated everything because "he thought she was a harlot." It was Judah who propositioned her -- "Please let me come in to you" (v. 16) - she didn't proposition him. Judah didn't ask what the price would be, and neither did Tamar quote one. Her response was simply -- "What will you give me that you may come in to me?" Notice that she allows Judah to set the price, while repeating what he wants to do to her.
- (20) When goats show up watch out for significant events. Now the story gets more interesting. Judah tells Tamar he will exchange a young goat for sex, but he doesn't happen to have one with him at this time. *I don't think providing sex on credit would be a very profitable way for a roadside harlot to run her business, do you?* Judah's choice of the price is also interesting, because the last time a goat appeared in a story with Judah its blood was used to stain Joseph's coat so that he and his brothers could deceive their father.
- (21) What was Tamar supposed to do? Confess? Run? Participate and hope for the best? Tamar was trapped and there was no way for her to escape. She couldn't afford to offend Judah by refusing him and possibly have her identity discovered. On the other hand, what would happen if she became pregnant while still being an unmarried widow? What if he recognized her in the act? This may have been the moment that she devised the plan that would ultimately save her life. The success of her plan depended on her ability to prove that Judah was the one who initiated the sexual encounter. If nothing else, this would clearly put him in a compromising position if he decided to punish her.
- (22) This would be about like asking for a drivers license and a couple of credit cards today. Tamar asked for a very specific pledge that could only be traced back to him. In verse 18 she asked for -- "Your signet and cord, and your staff that *is* in your hand."
 The seal, cord, and staff are the insignia of a prominent man in Babylon as well as Canaan and Israel. "The signet ring or cylinder seal is used to sign contracts; the staff has markings carved on it which are particular to the owner." The seal was carried on a cord around the neck and used by rolling it over a soft clay document. The insignia are very valuable to their owner.
www.theropps.com/papers/Winter1997/Genesis38exegesis.htm
- (23) I will refrain from any comments -- but it does amaze me! The items Tamar requested would positively identify their owner as Judah. One would think that Judah would never leave such valuable items, but it appears that he was much more focused on woman's body immediately in front of him (v. 18). We are not told how they did it, but the thing that always amazes me is that somehow during this very "close encounter" he never recognized his daughter-in-law! Of course, this may run in the family because his father, Jacob, also had sex with a woman that he failed to recognize, Judah's mother Leah.
- (24) Obviously it will be about a month before Tamar knows and three months before Judah gets the message, but the readers know immediately. The author makes sure that readers understand that immediately after the act Tamar conceived. He leaves no doubt about the identity of the father of the child. Of course, it would take some time before Tamar would know that she was pregnant. After Judah leaves, Tamar dresses in her widow's garments again and returns home (v. 19). I am sure that she made sure Judah's pledge was hidden in a very safe place.
 Judah kept his word this time and sent his close friend from Adullam back to deliver the goat to her and retrieve his items. Hirah looked for the harlot, but couldn't find

her. So he started asking questions (v. 21), but the locals informed him that no harlot was known to occupy that location. Therefore, Hirah took the goat and returned to Judah with his report, but without his pledge.

(25) Here comes that “unnamed source” again. Things would have been a lot different with him, her or it around.

Three months pass and another “unnamed source” appears, but this time he informs Judah that Tamar has been working as a prostitute, and as a result thereof, she has become pregnant. Judah orders that Tamar be brought to him so he could have her burned! Why would Judah react so strongly? She didn’t live with his family and he clearly didn’t want her around. She had been away long enough to make it impossible for her to claim the child’s father was one of his dead sons.

Maybe his aggressive reaction was due to a mistaken assumption that she was a “barren” woman and could not conceive. Now he knew that the problem hadn’t been with her. The fact that she had not conceived in the two earlier marriages must have been due to problems with his sons. If he had sent Shelah when he had promised, Tamar might already be the mother of his heir instead of a pregnant accused harlot!

(26) Males were clearly held to different standards than females back then in that culture.

Judah demanded to know the name of the father of her child. She had to have been waiting for this moment. Now she would discover whether her life insurance plan would work. Rather than directly responding to his question and revealing the name, she places the burden squarely on his shoulders when she asked -- "Please determine whose these *are* -- the signet and cord, and staff" (v. 25).

(27) What do you think about Judah’s response?

We can only imagine the scene when Judah, and probably his close friend from Adullam, recognized what she held in her hand. Their roles were now reversed. He must have felt something like she did when he unexpectedly approached and propositioned her. He now finds himself in a life-changing position with no way to escape. Listen closely to his response – “He acknowledged *them* and said, ‘She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son.’ And he never knew her again” (v. 26). Also note that Yahweh didn’t kill him!

(28) Think about David’s relationships with his family, friends, subordinates, subjects, etc.

Clearly this would never have happened if he had kept his word and given her to Shelah when he was old enough to marry. In this one story about two of David’s ancestors we find divine wrath, evil sons, illicit sexual relations, relationships between Israelites and Canaanites, powerful sexual appetites, lies, deceit, etc. But, there would never have been a David without Judah and Tamar, and the choices they made. Their weaknesses and strengths, along with those of others in David’s family tree, will resurface in his life and influence the choices he will make.

(29) The words from Ruth 4:12 are used as a blessing over newly wed Jewish couples.

The blessing - "May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman" is found in Ruth 4:12. It seems like a strange blessing to give a new couple, considering Judah and Tamar were as far from the perfect couple as you could imagine. But, perhaps this was important to the author of Ruth, which bares a striking similarity to the Tamar’s story. Also, the story ends with "the generations of Perez" (Tamar’s child) and ending with David.

(30) So, was Tamar a seductress or survivor? What about Judah?

Was Tamar a seductress or a survivor? Did she plan to seduce Judah or was she forced to devise a plan that would ultimately save her life – and David’s! **BHC**

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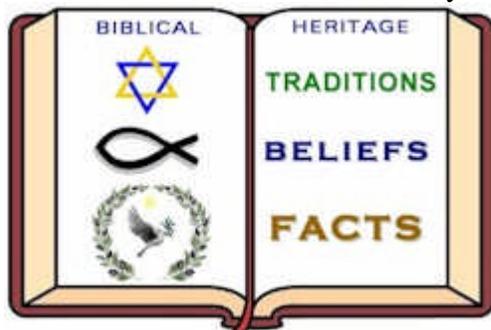
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