

Judah said to Tamar: Live as a Widow Until My Son Shelah Grows Up

38: 1-11

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 (**Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Ruth 4:5-6; Matthew 22:24**). 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 **Judah's** authority and legally engaged to **Shelah**.