



Genesis 38

CONFESSION ACCORDING TO GOD

Tamar didn't pose as a prostitute because she was looking for a new career. She wasn't doing this because, in her heart of hearts, she was a temptress. Nor were her actions payback for a father-in-law who lied to her. Family honor compelled Tamar to act, coupled with a determination to right a wrong, for her honor was at stake. Family duty to her dead husband was being ignored. She had only one objective in mind and was willing to risk her life to achieve it. ...Tamar presents Judah with irrefutable evidence that he is the man by whom she is pregnant. She shows him his seal and staff—the mirror that confronts Judah with his own reflection... Clearer translations render Judah's words as, "She is righteous, not I." ...This vindication of Tamar comes from the chastened lips of her dark and hardened father-in-law. It is one of the most powerful moments in all of Scripture—when the prodigal takes an honest look at himself and comes to his senses.

—Carolyn Custis James, *Vindicating the Vixens*

Genesis 38 seems like an interruption in the narrative but it is actually a key part of the story. Though sordid in its details, Genesis 38 shows us the key turning point in Judah's life and prepares us for his later transformation into the one through whom the Messiah will be born.

A The brother's envy and hatred toward Joseph (37:1-28)

B Jacob mourns the "death" of Joseph (37:29-36)

C Interlude: The birth of Judah's sons (38:1-30)

D Unexpected reversal: the righteous Joseph in prison (39:1-23)

E Joseph: the savior of Egypt (40:1-41:57)

F Journey of the brothers to Egypt (42:1-43:34)

G Joseph tests his brothers (44:1-34)

H Joseph reveals his identity (45:1-15)

G Joseph provides for his brothers (45:16-28)

F Journey of the family to Egypt (46:1-27)

E Joseph: the savior of Israel (46:28-47:21)

D Unexpected reversal: the younger blessed over older (48:1-22)

C Interlude: The blessing of Jacob's sons (49:1-28)

B Joseph mourns the death of Jacob (49:29-50:14)

A Joseph's forgiveness and grace toward his brothers (50:15-26)

THE SOBERING FAILURES OF JUDAH (38:1-23)

Despite the meaning of Judah's name (praise) and the glorious future in store for his seed, his beginning is marked by multiple failures.

- Judah fails as a _____ (37:26-28; 38:1).
- Judah fails as a _____ (37:31-36; 38:1).

Failure is not fatal but failure to change might be. —John Wooden

If Joseph steps onto the pages of sacred history as a bratty do-gooder, Judah enters as a slave trader who has turned his back on Abraham's God-given vision. He is callous toward his father and cynical about the covenant family.

—Bruce K. Waltke

Visited. Heb, *nata*, "to stretch out, extend, incline, bend toward, turn aside to, pitch (your tent with)."

Chezib. Heb., "false, lying, failing."

Joseph was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, Reuben was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, Jacob was engaged in his sackcloth and fasting, Judah was engaged in taking a woman for himself.

—Genesis Rabbah (~400)

Judah saw...took her. Though "take" is a perfectly proper term for marriage, the combination of "see" and "take" has in Genesis overtones of illicit taking (cf. 3:6, 6:2, 12:15, 34:2; cf. Judg. 14:1-2).

—Gordon Wenham

- Judah fails as a _____ (38:2-5).
- Judah fails as a _____ (38:6-10).

Levirate marriage (from Latin, *levir*, “husband’s brother”) was the common practice in the ancient Near East. The priority of the family and the practical need of a widow made the birth of an heir a moral and legal obligation. This practice is described in the Mosaic Law (Deut. 25:5-10; cf. Ruth 3:1-4:22).

- Judah fails as a _____ (38:11).
- Judah fails as a _____ (38:12-23)
 - He is a man of sudden _____.
 - He is a man of sexual _____.
 - He is a man of superficial _____.

THE SURPRISING VINDICATION OF TAMAR (38:24-30)

- Judah _____ in self-righteous indignation.
- Tamar _____ his own self-condemning sin.
- Judah _____ in self-humbling confession.

*He who covers his sins will not prosper,
But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.*
—Proverbs 28:13 (cf. James 5:16)

- Tamar is _____ with God’s blessing of twins and a name in the messianic line (cf. Ruth 4:12-22; Matt. 1:3).

The notion of “in-law” marriage is not unique to Hebrew custom but found in Hittite and Assyrian cultures. The Middle Assyrian Laws and Hittite Laws provided for a father-in-law marriage when a brother-in-law was unavailable.

—Kenneth A. Mathews

Onan’s attitude of gratification without responsibility has been repeated from generation to generation in immoral people.

—Allen Ross

Judah, with his dignity and status, is expected to care for a defenseless widow. He violates his daughter-in-law by shirking his responsibilities, denying her right to well-being..., and shifting her problems onto others.

—Bruce Waltke

His failure to recognize Tamar is a painful reminder of just how little she mattered to him.

—Carolyn Custis James

A signet, cord, and staff represent the emblems of the individual’s personal status—an ancient identity card.

—Zohar Amar

Judah is like a reputable gentleman who unwittingly loses his credit card in a brothel.

—Bruce Waltke

It is a common thing for men to be severe against those very sins in others which they allow in themselves...so condemning themselves.

—Matthew Henry

The confession of evil is the first beginning of good.

—Augustine

The ultimate test of our spirituality is the measure of our amazement at the grace of God.

—D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones