

Scandal and Hope Genesis 38:1-30

Iain Duguid

This disturbing passage moves beyond the ravages of sin to provide a picture of hope, transformation, and divine breakthrough for Judah and Tamar. It is the story of God triumphing over the evil in and among us.

#1: Sinful Corruption (38:1-11) *Judah's Sins (1-5)*

38 It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ²There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, ³and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. ⁴She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. ⁵Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.

Judah's Sons' Sins (6-11)

⁶And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. ⁸Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." ⁹But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. ¹¹Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house.

#2: Desperate Measures (38:12-19)

¹²In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," ¹⁴she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. ¹⁵When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" ¹⁷He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" ¹⁸He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

#3: Redeeming Grace (38:20-30) *Judah's Confession and the Hope of Change (20-26)*

²⁰When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. ²¹And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at

the roadside?” And they said, “No cult prostitute has been here.” ²² So he returned to Judah and said, “I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, ‘No cult prostitute has been here.’” ²³ And Judah replied, “Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her.”

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, “Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality.” And Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” ²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant.” And she said, “Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.” ²⁶ Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not know her again.

Kent Hughes

People do change. And this was the first hint of a change taking place in Judah as he publicly admitted his moral failure. Judah’s admission to Tamar suggests that he had learned something. In fact, Judah would develop remarkably during the years leading up to chapter 44, where Judah would act as a righteous man before Joseph, pleading for the welfare of Benjamin and offering his life as a pledge to save his little half brother. For Judah the effects of his deep sin, plus the example of others, plus the hidden hand of God had been at work, so that at the end of his father Jacob’s life, Jacob would confirm Judah as the scepter-bearing tribe through which would come the one to whom “shall be the obedience of the peoples” (49:10b). What surprises spring from changing grace! By God’s grace Judah had become the man.

The Line of Blessing and the Coming of Christ (27-30)

²⁷ When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸ And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, “This one came out first.” ²⁹ But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore his name was called Perez. ³⁰ Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

Matthew 1:2-3

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram,

Ruth 4:18-22

18 Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, 19 Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, 20 Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, 21 Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, 22 Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

Iain Duguid

Tamar had faced a hopeless future at the bottom of society – a childless, abused, discarded widow. However, through God’s intervention, she became the mother of the Messiah.

Victor Hamilton

Each of these four women had a highly irregular and potentially scandalous marital union. Nevertheless, these unions were, by God’s providence, links in the chain to the Messiah. Accordingly, each of them prepares the way for Mary, whose marital situation is also peculiar, given the fact that she is pregnant but has not yet had sexual relations with her betrothed husband Joseph. Thus the inclusion of the likes of Tamar in this family tree on one hand foreshadows the circumstances of the birth of Christ, and on the other hand blunts any attack on Mary. God had worked his will in the midst of whispers of scandal.

Revelation 5

⁵And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."