

PARASHAH THIRTY-FIVE

Genesis 38:1–30; Isaiah 37:31–37; Matthew 1:1–17

Notes by Tim Hegg

The Unfolding Promise of Messiah

The first issue at hand is that of chronology. The section begins with the somewhat ambiguous phrase “And it came about at that time...” (וַיְהִי בְּעֵת הַהוּא). The same phrase in 21:22 is used to indicate time within the immediate narrative framework, and at the outset we might think the same here. Thus, we would begin by assuming that the events about to be unfolded in this story happened at the same time that Joseph was being transported to Egypt after being sold to the Midianites in the previous chapter.

But there are some chronological difficulties with this “first-impression” approach. In order to sketch out the chronology, let’s work backwards. **(1)** Joseph was 30 years old when he began to reign in his ruling position in Egypt, 41:46. **(2)** There were still 5 years of famine left when Jacob and his other sons made their descent to Egypt, 45:6, meaning the 7 years of plenty had past, plus 2 years of famine, making Joseph 39 years old. Since he was 17 years old when the events of chapter 38 took place (37:2), 22 years transpired between the time Joseph was sold, and the time Jacob and his other sons take up residence in Egypt. **(3)** According to 46:12, not only the sons of Judah (Shelah & Perez) but also the sons of Perez (Hezron & Hamul) were included in the group who went to Egypt. Twenty-two years seems a very short time for two generations to grow, marry and have children, especially when 38:11 makes it clear that there was some time space between the sons of Judah.

Thus, we should most probably conclude that the phrase “And it came about at that time...” is used as a very general time marker, meaning “during the era of the Joseph story.”

But the next obvious question that confronts us is “why does Moses break up the Joseph story by inserting the Judah-Tamar event at this point in the biblical narrative?” It seems as though the Joseph story is unnecessarily interrupted by the genealogical tracings of the Judah clan. But it is this apparent difficulty which ought to alert us to the purpose of the author. Moses is intent upon maintaining the primary focus of the story, which is to trace the line of the promised Messiah. The Joseph story is important, for it sets the stage for the redemption of Israel—the Pesach which would finalize in an eternal covenant between God and Israel at Sinai. Moreover, the Joseph narrative gives us a clear picture of how HaShem intends to provide a savior for His people. Yet, Joseph, while surely a foreshadowing of the Messiah, is not in the line of the Messiah. Moses, therefore, intent upon keeping this central theme before us, interrupts the Joseph story to include the line of Judah from which the Messiah will come. Joseph may offer a great midrash on Messiah, but the physical lineage of the Promised One comes from Judah. Thus, the divine statement in Gen 3:15—the promise of the “seed of the woman” Who would subdue and be victorious over the “seed of the serpent”—continues to be the primary focus for Moses as he writes the Torah narratives.

Furthermore, the story of Judah and Tamar parallels, to some extent, the Joseph story itself. Judah “goes down” (v. 1), visits a foreigner, marries a foreigner (though the Sages seek to explain “Canaanite” [כְּנַעֲנִי] as “merchant”) and has children by a foreigner. Items of clothing (widow’s garb, arm band, personal seal or ring) are used for identification. Additionally, an evil event (the deception of Tamar, and the lust and immorality of Judah) is sovereignly used of God to accom-

plish His own plan for bringing the promised seed.

The parallels to the Joseph story are obvious. Joseph also goes down to Egypt, is thrust into a foreign culture, marries a foreigner, and has children. One significant difference, of course, is that the events of Joseph's life are brought about by evil men and are not the result of Joseph's transgressions, as was the case for Judah. Yet, in both the stories of Joseph and Judah, God turns the evil events to accomplish His purpose for the good (cf. Gen 50:20).

The story of Judah and Tamar is far removed from our culture. We find ourselves transported to a time of early tribal life in ancient Israel. The clan is close, and acts of rebellion within the clan, especially acts which threaten the existence of the tribe, are punished severely. Onan's refusal to complete the duty of a brother-in-law toward his dead brother's wife attracts a death notice from God. Some Sages suggest he was practicing Canaanite fertility rituals (b. *Yevamot* 34b). The same Talmudic passage suggests that Er refused to consummate his marriage with Tamar because he did not want pregnancy to "spoil" her supreme beauty. Regardless of the particulars (which the text does not give, and which are therefore simply a matter of speculation), the one fact that is obvious is that there was a disregard for the importance of maintaining the lineage of Judah. In other words, there was little attention paid to the significance of the promises attached to the covenant. Already, at a very early stage in the history of God's people, they had forgotten that they were living under the bondage of Adam's sin, and that only the promised Redeemer could restore the Edenic fellowship that mankind once had with his Creator. If in the Genesis story we have been so taken up with the events that we've forgotten the central issue, this interruption gets our focus back on track.

It is this very thing that puts Tamar in a good light. Her actions are clearly wrong, in deceiving Judah and playing out the part of a temple (Canaanite) prostitute. She has stooped to a low place to accomplish her goals. And yet, while not in any way condoning her actions, from a strictly narrative perspective, her motivations seem to have some merit—she considers the maintenance of the line of Judah of highest importance. Somehow she knows that to have her family name forgotten is at the same time to see the promise of God fail. Once again, the faith of the women in our story stands out. Sarah shines forth as a woman who trusted God (cp. 1Pet 3:5,6); Hannah trusts in her redeemer, Ruth seeks for Israel's God, and the exodus itself is, in some measure, attributed to midwives who "feared God" and thus maintained the nation of Israel by keeping alive her male children. Thus, Tamar is declared "more righteous" (v. 26), and so she was. Judah's actions were selfish. He had forgotten that God was *magen Avraham* (Abraham's shield, cf. 15:1) and would be the same to him. But Tamar focused upon what was more important—she understood that the next generation was integral to "the promise" God had given to Chava (Gen 3:15).

Of course, Tamar's motivations may surely have been mixed. In the Ancient world, a woman without a husband or adult sons was at a great disadvantage economically. Her ability to maintain even a minimal living was greatly diminished. So there is little doubt that part of her motivation for deceiving Judah was self-preservation. But as far as Moses is concerned as he writes the story of Joseph, the maintenance of God's promise to bring a Redeemer is the primary issue, and we may presume that this also played into Tamar's extreme measures for obtaining children.

So the very placement of Gen 38 in what seems to interrupt the Joseph story is a kind of "wake up" call to us all. Even as we might have forgotten the very reason Moses is writing this story in the first place, that is, to detail the coming of the Promised One, so in our hurried lives, we may also forget that Yeshua is to be the center of our focus. And in the same way that Moses emphasizes how God is maintaining His promise from one generation to the next, so we too must seek God's

mercy and strength to bequeath to the next generation the sacred trust of the Gospel and the happy duty to sanctify God's Name in our world.

At the end of the story, we have the birth of twins (it reminds us of the Esau & Jacob story). And once again we have the younger forging to the front ahead of the older. Intertwined in a story which is given to remind us of the central importance of the promised seed, is the accompanying motif that the "older shall serve the younger." Thus we are reminded again that the Seed will come via God's sovereign and miraculous choice, and not by man's efforts. Neither man's sin (the refusal, in our story, of Judah's sons to fulfill their duty to Tamar) nor man's efforts (as we see in Rebecca's attempts to make Jacob the heir) will overturn or establish God's covenant. He has made it, and He will fulfill it.

How often do we forget that God is the one who will establish His promises, and that His plan is not ultimately dependent upon us? Some take this supreme and wonderful fact as a means to be lazy, but they do so without a wider understanding of how God intends to fulfill His purposes. For in the end, if we have honestly understood and believed that God is the one who will bring about His sovereign will in our lives, our love for Him is established and enlarged, and serving Him in obedience becomes not only the longing of our hearts, but also the characteristic of our lives. "We love him, *because* he first loved us." Nothing frees us more for obedience and service than the deep realization that God will complete His plan in us. "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the very day of Messiah" (Phil 1:6). This is our hope.

Another very important lesson which our text teaches is this: while God has the sovereign right and ability to turn evil for good, evil still negatively affects the sinner. Tamar did, in principle, what is so natural for us all to do: *she resorted to fleshly means to accomplish a spiritual end*. Now we may quickly say, "yes, but one way or the other, God's plan for Judah to be the conduit through which the Messiah would come has been established." Quite true. Yet consider the consequences *to the individual*. It is true that God will overturn evil events created by mankind in order to turn them to His righteous purposes (Balaam is a prime example), but the fact remains that the individual who engages in evil practices will inevitably suffer the consequences of those actions in one way or another. The issue, then, is *personal obedience to God*. We may grant that Tamar was helpless in and of herself to effect what she knew to be the righteous means of prolonging her family line. Yet we do not get the sense that she approached God with the same kind of fervency that Hannah did. Did Tamar simply accept the fleshly means of accomplishing a valid goal? It would seem so. She stooped to the ways of the pagans in attempting to gain what she felt was right. In the end, though the text does not tell us, we have to believe she suffered the consequences of her fleshly actions.

Judah teaches us the same lesson, only with even greater impact. Is this the patriarch whose clan would be highly favored with the birth of the Messiah? Is this the man who bears the name of the tribe which would eventually populate the region around the Holy City, Jerusalem? How base are his actions—how depraved his thinking!

Judah has just finished a yearly task of sheep shearing, one which was a difficult task indeed. The workers would live in the fields for the weeks that they sheered the sheep, and would work long, hard hours to accomplish the yearly task. Like the roundups of our own pioneer days, when the workers were finished they felt they deserved some "good times." We might imagine his motivations: "I've worked very hard, I've not had the normal comforts of home, my wife has recently died—I deserve a reward for all my labors—I deserve some R & R!" So he attempts to fulfill a valid longing (companionship, sexual fulfillment) through fleshly means. Here we may be remind-

ed of something important: the evil one loves to exploit physical exhaustion. Therefore, when we are physically exhausted we must be all the more intent on being spiritually alert and steadfast.

Tamar dresses like a temple prostitute of the Canaanite religion. It was a religious duty to engage in fertility rituals at the Canaanite temples for all the Canaanites, especially at sheering time, for they believed that fertility rituals secured future offspring for the flocks. Is it possible that Judah was toying with the idea that the pagan fertility rituals just might have had some effect in reality? Had the thought crossed his mind that engaging in the ritual might secure life and health for his third son, Shelah?—that just perhaps the pagan ritual might overcome the “jinx” that seemed to hover over his first two sons when they married Tamar? We really don’t know what was going on in Judah’s mind as he stooped to this debased act, but we do know that in any culture, the draw of syncretism is strong.

Whatever the case, this “one night stand” forever remains as a black mark in the spiritual resumé of Judah. In the “Hall of Faith” (Heb 11) Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are listed, but not Judah. Sure, the eternal plan of God in bringing the Messiah was advanced in spite of Judah’s failings, but he forfeits the divine commendation he might otherwise have been given had he acted in righteousness. How could he have known that he stood in the line of Messiah, and that therefore his life would be chronicled in the pages of Scripture? So let us live our lives unto righteousness, knowing only this: God has a plan for us, and in some yet unknown way, we too fit into His eternal, glorious scheme. Therefore let us live, as our own Messiah has taught us, to love God by doing what He commands. Only God knows how our daily, seemingly insignificant actions will be used in eternal ways. God’s plan for us is far greater than we know!

But we must approach His Torah for what it actually is—it is spiritual (Romans 7:14), meaning that its richness can only be understood and taken in as we are made alive by the Ruach to love it, and show our love to God by keeping it. Sowing acts of righteousness will eventually produce a great harvest, so every *mitzvah* is of great value, and is very important.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing the *mitzvot*, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do *mitzvot* to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Gal 6:7–10)

The *haftarah* chosen for our Torah section (Is 37:31–37) contains the promise of God via the prophet Isaiah regarding the “surviving remnant of the house of Judah,” which therefore contains a clear parallel to the theme of Genesis 38. During Isaiah’s life, Assyria was the dominating force in the Ancient Near East. He prophesied after the fall of Samaria (722 BCE) and the exile of the northern tribes. In our *haftarah* passage, Sennacherib, King of Assyria was laying siege to Jerusalem and it appeared that he and his forces would continue their string of devastating victories in his desire to subdue all of the surrounding nations. Yet in a clear demonstration of God’s faithfulness to His promises, the Angel of the Lord fights for Judah and slays 185,000 of the Assyrian forces. And this, in spite of Judah’s clear disobedience. Isaiah makes it clear that the destruction of the Assyrian forces was not a reward of Judah’s righteousness, but that He defended the city of Jerusalem “for My own sake and for the sake of My servant David” (v. 35). In the previous chapter (Is 36) we hear the words of Rabshakeh, the commander of the Assyrian army, words that defamed the very God of Israel:

Beware that Hezekiah does not mislead you, saying, “The LORD will deliver us.” Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered his land from the hand of the king of As-

syria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? And when have they delivered Samaria from my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their land from my hand, that the LORD would deliver Jerusalem from my hand? (Is 36:18–20)

It was this arrogant and blasphemous belittling of the God of Israel that raised the anger of the Almighty. How puny Rabshakeh appears in the course of human history! Strutting his arrogance in the face of Adonai, he found his entire troops the Angel of the LORD. Fighting against Adonai is always a losing proposition.

And so God demonstrated His faithfulness even to the wayward people of Judea. And He would do so time and again, as the inspired text tells us. Yet did this bring Judah to repentance? Did God's gracious and mighty faithfulness turn their hearts to forsake the pagan gods and trust only in Him? We know the end of this story. Eventually, Judah would also be overrun, this time by Babylon, the nation that would eventually subdue Assyria. And this is a very powerful lesson to us as well, for we dare not take for granted God's patience and forbearance. The demonstration of God's mercy to us should always lead us to a deeper commitment of faithfulness to Him.

The Apostolic portion (Matt 1:1–17) was chosen to parallel the theme of our Torah text, that is, the lineage of our Messiah through the clan of Judah and eventually the family of David.¹ Why do Matthew and Luke consider the genealogy of Yeshua so important? The answer to this question is apparent: they intend for us to know that Yeshua of Nazareth is, indeed, the fulfillment of the promise made first to Chava and faithfully announced by the prophets throughout the generations of Israel. Or to put it another way: the outworking of God's providence within the history of our world had as its primary focal point the appearance of the Messiah. If we can stand back and view all of earth's history from the broadest perspective, then we can surely see that all events have been orchestrated to focus on Him. This is Paul's point when he writes:

For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Messiah all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Messiah the first fruits, after that those who are Messiah's at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For HE HAS PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (1Cor 15:21–28)

¹ The genealogies of our Messiah presented in the Gospels contain certain issues and difficulties for the Bible interpreter. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see my *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 (2007), pp. 16ff.