

GENESIS

Lesson 35 - Chapters 38 and 39

Last time we began to study Genesis chapter 38, which is a story about the 4th son of Jacob (alternately called Israel); and that 4th son is Judah. It is from the tribe of Judah that we have the Jews. So, since it's been awhile that we've been together, let's re-read chapter 38.

RE-READ GENESIS CHAPTER 38 all

What we have here is a story of blood lines and genealogy; but it is also a story that relates cultural information from that era, as well as historical data that we'll find linked in later times to cities and places and people. Almost all the names of places that we find here....Adullam, Chezib, Timnah, and Enam....will appear later in the Bible as being located within the tribal territory of Judah. So, while this section of Israelite history seems a little disconnected from the direction the Torah is taking (making Joseph's life the central theme for the remainder of Genesis), in fact it is there to show Judah's rise to prominence, and make connections even in the life of the future King David

Let me remind you that at the time of this story Israel is still several centuries away from possessing the Land of Canaan, and from dividing Canaan up into 12 districts, one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. The time frame of this story is somewhere between the day that Joseph was sold to the slave traders, and Jacob deciding to move his entire family to Egypt to survive the famine.

What we see in this narrative is that Judah had children with a Canaanite woman: a most definite no-no to God. We aren't told the name of these women, only that her father's name was Shua. Without doubt, we see that Judah had made a conscious decision to part ways with his family for a time, and this is reflected in the first words of this chapter, when it says that '.... Judah left his brothers....' He knew full well that marriage to Canaanite women was not to be contemplated among Israelites; and as we all know, when we want to do something that we know is both wrong and unacceptable to our families, we separate ourselves from them so that we don't have to face them; this is what Judah did.

This unnamed woman produced 3 sons for Judah, but none of these **should** have been suitable to carry on the line of the covenant promise, because they all were of Canaanite blood. But, without doubt, this never even occurred to Judah. Nor, apparently, did it matter to him that his uncle Esau had been passed over for the firstborn blessing, partially because HE married Canaanite women. And, here was Judah, doing the same thing. How often we tend to do what Judah did; we claim faith in God, but then separate that faith from the everyday matters of our lives. And, what troubles and sorrows that mindset and behavior inevitably brings to us...just as it was about to for Judah.

Yet, as was going to happen on a regular basis, foreign women were brought in to Israel, assimilated, and they were considered Israelites in time. This principle of being adopted into Israel, or grafted into Israel, or whatever term one might like to use, was one of the earliest principles set down by Yehoveh. At the end of this chapter, we'll talk a little more about his matter of Canaanite women and Israel.

As the 3 sons of Judah matured, the firstborn son, 'Er was given a wife selected by Judah: this wife's name was Tamar (Tamar means "palm tree"). But, we are told that God killed 'Er because he was evil. So, Tamar was now a widow. What is key here is that Tamar was a childless widow; or more correctly, a son-less widow (she may well have produced some girl babies before her husband's death). Onan, the second son of Judah was then instructed to go and take his brother's widow, Tamar, as his wife. This was simply a custom of that day...and, generally speaking, this was NOT optional.....it was the law that the brother do this. The idea was that, just as female could be a substitute "wife", a concubine, a baby producer, (like we saw with Hagar, and then with Bilah and Zilpah) for a woman who was unable to bear children to her husband, so could a substitute husband impregnate a woman who's husband had died, and left her without a son. This tradition was based on the substitute husband usually being a family member, normally a brother, of the deceased man. The Traditional name for this law among Hebrews is the Levirate Marriage. Now, it might appear from its name that this is taken from the Hebrew tribal name, Levi..... but it is not. The actual Hebrew word for this ordinance is **yibbum**. Our modern translation of "Levirate" is taken from the Latin word "levir", which is the designation for a husband's brother. So, Levi and Levirate are just similarly spelled and pronounced words that are in no way related.

The Levirate marriage was not at all unique to Israel; it existed in other cultures as well. This is attested to with well-preserved Hittite documents, and even documents from the Middle Assyrian age. This Levirate law can be found in Deuteronomy 25.

NAS Deuteronomy 25:5 "When brothers live together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a strange man. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her to himself as wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. 6 "And it shall be that the first-born whom she bears shall assume the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out from Israel. 7 "But if the man does not desire to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to establish a name for his brother in Israel; he is not willing to perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' 8 "Then the elders of his city shall summon him and speak to him. And if he persists and says, 'I do not desire to take her,' 9 then his brother's wife shall come to him in the sight of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face; and she shall declare, 'Thus it is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' 10 "And in Israel his name shall be called, 'The house of him whose sandal is removed.'

This sandal flinging is a rebuff, and it indicates the poor character of someone who refuses to do his family duty. It is a public humiliation.

But, in verse 9, we're told that Onan, the brother of the deceased Er, refused to impregnate Tamar, and then God killed him, because he, too, was evil in God's eyes. Why did Onan refuse to do this? Well, it says that it was because the son produced would not have been his. Let me dissect that a bit: the brother who died (Er) was the firstborn. Onan was the 2nd born; but as the eldest surviving brother, he was now the firstborn. But...if he produced a child in the name of his deceased brother, that child would have been entitled to part of Judah's estate. In other words, Onan would have received less if his deceased elder brother's family line had continued. Now, it's not that it was uncommon for family maneuvering to gain the most power and wealth when the father died; but to intentionally deny this widow a son did two things: it meant that her deceased husband's family line would end (a disaster to the ancient mind), and she would have no son to care for her as she grew older. This was tantamount to living in extreme poverty.

So, for Onan to knowingly do all this made him selfish and callous in a very high degree. And, Yehoveh took his life as a consequence.

Well, now, by tradition, it would have been the Levirate duty of Judah's 3rd son, Shelah, to marry the twice-widowed Tamar; but it was judged that he was too young to marry, so Judah sent Tamar to go home and live with her own father until Shelah was old enough to marry her. But, as the words "for he thought" (referring to Judah) indicate, Judah had absolutely no intention of allowing his last son to Tamar.

Time passed. Judah's wife (the mother of his 3 sons) died, and the 3rd son Shelah matured and apparently was old enough to be married, but Judah did not allow it. He had seen the result of his other 2 sons marrying Tamar: they died. I think its safe to say that Judah didn't know why they died. WE are told it was because they were evil; but I see no indication that Judah knew this. We have to understand that Judah was currently living a life utterly oblivious to God and His laws and commands. To Judah, Tamar was really bad luck. And, he wasn't going to chance losing his last son, his last heir, by letting him marry this woman who seemed to bring God's wrath upon her husbands.

After the formal period of mourning of his wife (probably 30 days), Judah goes to a place called Timnah to supervise and participate in the sheep-shearing season. Tamar found out about this and "took off her widow's garb". We know from other Biblical accounts that women were required to wear special clothing when their husbands died. Typically, it was only during the 30-day mourning period that they wore the widow's garb. But, possibly because Tamar had been denied her right to have a child from her deceased husband's brother, she continued to live in a state of mourning.

Judah was doing a terrible and shameful thing by not allowing Shelah to marry Tamar; Tamar was greatly disgraced by this. So, she developed a plan: she would find a way to sleep with her father-in-law, Judah, and directly from his seed perform the all-important task of carrying on the blood lines of her dead husband's family. Understanding that Judah would never do this knowingly, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute, and sets herself at a place called 'Einayim. This must have been a well-known spot for prostitutes to find clients, for 'Einayim means, "eyes that look". In other words, it was a place where men looked for this kind of

women. But, even more, notice that she was thought to be a “temple prostitute”. That is, the Canaanites had adopted prostitution as a “worship” practice (symbolizing fertility), and it was connected with the pagan temple to Baal. This was a duty, and in many ways an honor, for these woman to be prostitutes for Baal; and it was considered a legitimate practice by both customer and client, so Judah.... so far off the reservation in his current state of mind..... thought nothing of it. Most of the mystery Babylon based religions adopted “sacred sex” as part of their religious practices, and there is a movement within the fringes of the new Spiritualist and New Age movements around the world, and in this nation, to bring the practice back. Their stated goal is to combine the erotic with the sacred...another fundamental of the Mystery Babylon religions. This is just a case in point of how easily we can adopt traditions within the Church that are not really in line with God’s word or will, usually taken from something out of the pagan world’s customs, and make them as though they’re a “good thing”. And, while we can attach sincerity to some of these long-held and comfortable traditions, often, as with Judah here, these things are an abomination to God.

Tamar’s plan works; she tricks Judah into thinking she’s just a temple prostitute, he purchases her favors, and she becomes pregnant. Three months later, when it is clear to all that Tamar is with child, someone tells Judah about it, and in order to save the family honor, Judah orders her burned to death for adultery; after all, she was unmarried and pregnant and that was proof enough of her offense. The notion in that era was that Tamar was bringing dishonor to Judah and his household.

However, Judah finds out that he is the father, and realizes that by withholding his last son, Shelah, from Tamar; he has caused her to take this drastic action. He now declares that it is he that has done wrong, not Tamar, and so he repents and she is spared. Even more, Judah says that Tamar was righteous in what she did. This is another of those statements in the Bible that while factually true and accurate, the person making the statement is just plain wrong. Tamar was NOT righteous in what she did, anymore than Judah was righteous in what he eventually did. God simply used them despite their sin and rebellion, to achieve His divine purposes.

Tamar goes on to have twin boys: Perez and Zerach. To Judah, his “wrong” had been to cause shame upon Tamar by not giving his son Shelah as a husband to her; that is, the breaking of a tradition. But, the wrong that was actually being righted was of a spiritual nature; because Judah intended to carry on his family line via his Canaanite wife, which produced Canaanite children, and God would have none of it. Judah was utterly oblivious to his sin before God, because, to him, everything turned out OK in the end...so he thought.

Now, the ancient Rabbis give us a helpful piece of information that is not contained in this story: Tamar is a Semite, a descendant of Shem, the sanctified line of good. That is, she is not a Canaanite, a descendant of Ham, the accursed line of evil. Up to now, Judah had produced his 3 sons by a Canaanite woman. And, what happened to these 3 sons of a Canaanite mother? Well, 2 of them died. The 3rd one that should have impregnated Tamar, and would have produced the line that carried on the line of Judah, never got the opportunity to do that, because Judah refused to let it happen for all the wrong reasons. The result is that Judah himself, unwittingly made Tamar pregnant. The result is that despite Judah’s intention that the line of covenant promise (which he apparently cared little about) would have been polluted by

Canaanite blood, it wound up that Judah impregnated a Semite woman, Tamar, and from that came the Semite sons that would carry on the line of promise.

We have seen in previous chapters to what length God went so as not to allow Canaanite blood to be mixed with Israelite blood...particularly when it would affect the line of covenant promise. Yehoveh even did it when the covenant line was **not** directly affected.... as when the planned marriage between Jacob's daughter Dinah and the King of Shechem's son was averted when all the males of Shechem were killed by Simeon and Levi.

But, since Judah is the father of Tamar's children, and since Tamar is a Semite, the children from their union would be acceptable to God; so we see that the particular line of covenant promise, that began with Abraham, which went on to Isaac, then to Jacob, and now to Judah...the purity of the line that would eventually produce the Messiah is preserved by Tamar's rather bold and unsavory act. And, as we look in other chapters of the Bible where we see the lengthy genealogy of Jesus, we get confirmation of this; because we see that Perez, the firstborn of Tamar's twin sons, is a direct ancestor of Yeshua; Perez, son of Judah by Tamar, his widowed daughter-in-law, is the one who carries forth the line of promise for the tribe of Judah...with NO Canaanite blood in him.

Further, we see God's Governing Dynamic of Sanctification at work: Perez is divided, separated, and elected away from all the other children of Judah, to be the conduit to continue on with the all-important line of the covenant promise first given to Abraham. But, we also see the Governing Dynamic of Divine Providence playing out as Judah and Tamar each attempt to satisfy some cultural traditions, and their own selfish lusts and ambitions. Neither had the intent to obey God, nor did either realize they would produce the next generation of the line of covenant promise: Perez. There could not be a better example and demonstration of Divine Providence that this story.

So, there's more significance to this chapter than meets the eye. But, let's now move on to Genesis 39.

GENESIS CHAPTER 39

The Torah resumes the tale of Joseph in chapter 39; his time in Canaan is over, and his life in Egypt begins when he is but a teenager, and will not end until his death.

READ GEN 39 all

This chapter begins with Joseph, down in Egypt, and Potiphar purchasing him as a house servant. The first verse says something that seems so obvious to us, that our eye almost skips over it, or we pay it no heed, but it's this: "...Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh's and captain of the guard, AN EGYPTIAN.....". Here we are, in Egypt, and we have to be told that Potiphar is an Egyptian? What else would we have expected than for the 2nd in command over all of Egypt, but that he would have been an Egyptian? Yet, Moses, who wrote this down, made a point of it.

The answer lies in the fact that at one time, long before Israel became a sovereign nation, Egypt was conquered; and it found itself under the control of non-Egyptians. The thing is, it was only in later times that Egypt sought a position as a world power. Up to Joseph's time, Egypt had been a very highly developed civilization that had contact with the outer world, had sent emissaries and even developed trade with the outer world; but, the goal seems to have been only to make Egypt, within its own borders, a great nation; historically, up to the time of Joseph, there appears to have been no aggressive imperialistic designs.

However, as is the case since there has been nations, that goal turned out NOT to be a two-way street. They soon found out that simply being a peace-loving nation, trying to get along with its neighbors, did not immunize them from conflict or aggression.

Egypt was attacked, and routed, by Bedouins.....Semites.... who had come from the area of Arabia and Syria! The war was not a result of any dispute between Egypt and these Semites, but simply because these Bedouins wanted what Egypt had. And, these Semite rulers controlled Egypt for around 2 centuries; that's right, Semites, sons of Shem, cousins of Israel, sat as Pharaoh on the throne of Egypt.....not Egyptians. The Egyptians called these foreign rulers of Egypt the Hyksos. Hyk means "king" and "sos" means shepherd...so these foreigners were known as the "Shepherd Kings". And, we don't know a lot about them, nor are we able to precisely place them in time, because the records from the Hyksos period are scant. This might seem strange in itself, for the Egyptians were tremendous writers of history, and great record keepers. But, on the other hand, as was typical of most ancient nations, the Egyptians did not record defeats and times of subjugation. What we know of this time generally comes from records from private Egyptian citizens who lived through that era.

But, even with some inherent historical inconsistencies and contradictory scientific findings, scholars generally agree that during the time of Joseph, and for perhaps 100 years or a little more after Joseph's death, it was the Semite Shepherd Kings that ruled Egypt. So, with Bedouins, Semites, in control at the time Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt, it explains why Moses thought it important to mention that Potiphar was NOT a Bedouin, he was an Egyptian. And, it also explains how, as we will soon discover, the Pharaoh seemed to have little trouble giving Joseph, a foreigner, a Hebrew, an Israelite, such an incredible amount of authority over Egyptians; for the best current evidence is that the Pharaoh was NOT an Egyptian; both he and Joseph were Semites. Now, with that as a background, let's continue.

Joseph is a very good-looking young man, and Potiphar's wife is quite taken with him. He also, in some way, which we're not told, became prosperous; so apparently he was able to do more than simply serve Potiphar. All we know is that God was with Joseph and he did well for himself and for Potiphar. We're going to find this statement that God was with Joseph 4 times in this chapter; and obviously it is to make the point that even though Joseph was abandoned by his family, and placed into a strange land with strange gods, the God of Israel was still with him.....protecting, controlling, and guiding events. Bad circumstances don't mean God has turned His back on you. Even the fact that the Semite Hyksos were in power was Divine Providence.....though, of course, Joseph was oblivious to it all.

Well, Potiphar's wife was infatuated with Joseph and constantly after him. He refuses all of her

advances. It happens again; and again and again. One day, Mrs. Potiphar tires of being rebuffed by a purchased house servant, and grabs Joseph. He runs for his life, but in the doing, she grabs a piece of his garment. Then she decides to take revenge for being scorned: she claims that Joseph tried to rape her, tells her husband, and Joseph is thrown into prison. Notice also that she declares in V14 that this Hebrew was brought in by her husband to make fools of her household. This is another indication of the hatred the Egyptians had for any Semite, and this due to their current condition of being subjugated by Semite people...even though this particular group of Semites were not Hebrews.

And, within no time, Joseph is made a supervisor over all the prisoners. By the way: although the concept of prison is one that has always been part of our society, it was not part of every society in Joseph's day. Prison didn't exist among most of the Canaanite societies, and it didn't exist among the Hebrews. God protected Joseph even though he was locked up. Interestingly, we're going to find out in the next chapter, Joseph was not kept with the other prisoners. He was being kept in the home of the prison captain, though it was a dungeon or basement of some kind, and not the normal household living space. But, just as important was that without his knowing it; Joseph was proving his trustworthiness to the very man who had locked him up, and undoubtedly all who came into contact with him. This was about to serve him well, as God was about to do something astonishing. God's Governing Dynamic #2, Divine Providence, is a central theme of Joseph's life.

Next week, we'll begin chapter 40.