PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Leaven

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Women and Ministry*

Article 5

1-1-1996

Judah's Teacher

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by Dean Smith

As a kid growing up in the city, I was always fascinated by the way flowers would grow in the most unlikely places. Walking along the sidewalk, I was surprised to see one poking through the cracks in the cement to find its "place in the sun." In the same way, I am intrigued by the stories of women in the Bible who broke through the seemingly impenetrable structures of their culture to assume responsibilities and face challenges usually reserved for men–stories with characters like Rebekah, Miriam, Naomi or Esther. One such story is about a woman named Tamar and the very unusual relationship she had with her father-in-law, the patriarch Judah, namesake of the tribe of Israel from which the Messiah would arise generations later. It is the story of a woman who acted resourcefully, even dangerously, to secure justice and her place in the history of God's people. And though her actions would be considered immoral, she is declared to be "more righteous" than the one who accused her. In the end she would become not only the mother of Judah's sons, but Judah's teacher as well. The story of Judah and Tamar is found in Genesis 38, one chapter into the Joseph story (Gen 37-50). In fact, many scholars have regarded this chapter as simply an interruption to the flow of the narrative (the product of sloppy editing) and most have been uncertain about its significance. Consider, for example, the assessment of such an imaginative and prophetic interpreter of the Bible as Walter Brueggemann:

> This peculiar chapter stands alone, without connection to its context. It is isolated in every way and is most enigmatic. It does not seem to belong with any of the identified sources of ancestral tradition. It is not evident that it provides any significant theological resource. It is difficult to know in what context it might be of value for theological exposition. For these reasons, our treatment of it may be brief.[1]

Is he right? Is this chapter, this story, disconnected from and disruptive to the entire Joseph narrative, or could it be the interpretive key? To answer that question we must go all the way back to the very beginning of this story.

The Larger Story

The story begins in Genesis, chapter 12, with the call of Abram to leave his present situation and journey on faith to a new land–a story that hinges upon an heir who will carry on the line of Abram and Sarai and the history of God's chosen people. In fact, the birth event, with all of its cultural rites and privileges, plays a very important part in the early family history of Israel. Beginning with the surprising and incredible birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, and continuing in the unusual story of Isaac's two very different twin boys, Esau and Jacob, the birth of children functions both to secure the future and to alter it. Remember, it is in the story of Esau and Jacob that the firmly established rules concerning the firstborn are completely subverted, not just by their mother, Rebekah, but by God. These rules are so firmly fixed that Esau is stunned when he discovers he has lost his favored status as the firstborn, even though earlier he had agreed to sell this precious birthright to Jacob for a meal. Apparently,

he never imagined that his position and future could be threatened by such a capricious act.

The story of that reversal must have been recalled many times by Jacob's older sons, especially as they watched the special attention received by their younger brother, Joseph. Perhaps the three oldest ones were particularly disturbed, since they had each managed to undermine their position in the family by incurring the wrath of their father through their irresponsible behavior. Reuben, the eldest, had slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine (Gen 35:22). The next two brothers in succession, Simeon and Levi, were responsible for avenging the rape of their sister, Dinah, but by so doing had brought shame upon their father (Gen 34:25-31). It is ironic, then, that the next brother in line was Judah, because it was he who concocted the plan to sell Joseph into slavery and deceive their father into believing that he was killed by a wild animal. In fact, the very way in which their deceit unfolds warrants special attention by the reader.

Something had changed in Judah as a result of this experience; something that not only altered his life, but the future of his entire family as well.

When the brothers returned home they never actually had to lie to their father about what had happened to Joseph. Instead, they deceived by appearances. They took Joseph's coat, dipped it in goat's blood, and presented it to their father with this insidious question–"Do you recognize this?" Of course he did, and he immediately assumed that Joseph had been devoured by a wild animal, exactly as they had expected. But what they had not expected was that their father would never get over the loss of his son. It was as if his dreams of the future had died with Joseph.

Judah and Tamar

Now, that is the background to the story of Judah and Tamar. In Genesis 38, we are told that Judah left his brothers and settled down near a man named Hirah, an Adullamite. There he married a Canaanite woman named Shuah who bore him three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. The eldest, Er, married a woman named Tamar, but before she could conceive he was struck down by God because of his wickedness. So, in keeping with the custom of that day (what would later become the basis of Levirate marriage) Judah gave his second son, Onan, to marry Tamar. However, Onan refused to have children with her because he knew they would not be regarded as his own but as the offspring of his deceased brother. Because he refused to honor his obligation, Onan was also killed by God. By this time Judah was understandably concerned for the life of his only remaining son, Shelah. So he commanded Tamar to return to her father's house, rather than stay under his protection, until Shelah was old enough to marry. By the customs of that day, this was an unusual and even humiliating command.

Tamar returned to her father's house and waited, hoping for the day when she would marry again and bear children who would join the ranks of the children of Israel. But as time passed it became clear that her dreams of the future were all but gone. Shelah would indeed have offspring, but not with her. Then one day came word that her mother-in-law, Judah's wife, had died, and Tamar decided to act. She waited until Judah was heading to Timnah for the annual shearing of the sheep with his old friend, Hirah. She removed her widow's garb and covered her face with a veil, the sign of a temple prostitute. Then she positioned herself at the entrance to Enaim on the same road to Timnah that Judah would be traveling, and waited.

She made no attempt to seduce Judah, but simply allowed her appearance to deceive. And Judah responded exactly as she expected, offering her a young goat if she would sleep with him. "Only if you give me a pledge until you send it," she replied. When he asked what that pledge might be,Tamar demanded his most identifiable and personal effects: his signet, the cord to which it was attached, and the staff in his hand.[2] Normally these items would only be in the possession of another if their owner was dead. But, like his uncle Esau, Judah quickly surrendered them, perhaps confident that once his desires were satisfied and his personal effects redeemed, life would continue unaltered by this encounter. But he was mistaken. Tamar would become pregnant with the children she had always wanted, but with the man she had never expected.

This seems even stranger as you think about it. Remember, this was a family with a history of

infertility. From Grandma Sarah to Rachel and Leah, the women of Judah's family had always had problems with conception. How odd that this single, illicit encounter would produce children–ironically, *twins*. It is especially puzzling when you consider that, when the women of Judah's family did conceive, it was generally believed to be God at work, opening their wombs (Gen 29:31; 30:22). Is it possible that God was at work here?

Tamar returned home dressed as a widow once again to resume her role as a bride-in-waiting. Meanwhile, Hirah went to Enaim with a young goat to redeem Judah's personal effects from the temple prostitute that worked there. But he could not find her. In fact, when he inquired of the townspeople they responded, "*No prostitute* has been here." (This statement is repeated later in Hirah's report to Judah, leaving the reader to wonder if it was meant to be more than just their perception.) Embarrassed and fearing public ridicule, Judah decided not to pursue it any further. He contented himself with the knowledge that he had made a good -faith effort to keep his part of the bargain with this woman. Ironically, he probably saw himself as an innocent victim.

Within a few months it was apparent to everyone that Tamar had not been faithful to her betrothal. When the news reached Judah, it must have been received as the perfect solution. Obviously, she was no longer worthy to become Shelah's wife, and he would be free to marry whomever he chose, especially since the penalty for such infidelity was death. Judah could pronounce his righteous judgement and be done with her. His veiled deception of her would remain a secret forever. "Bring her out and let her be burned," he declared. But on the way to her execution, Tamar produced the signet, cord and staff she had kept and sent them to Judah with the declaration that the owner of these was the one who made her pregnant. She followed this with a familiar question–"*Do you recognize these?*" Of course he did, and to his credit he acknowledged his duplicity–"She is more righteous than I since I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen 38:26). Her life was spared, and months later she delivered twin sons to Judah (the same number he had lost). Genesis 38 concludes with this birth and would appear to close the book on this story since we are told nothing more of Tamar's life after this point. But the story isn't over. Something had changed in Judah as a result of this experience; something that not only altered his life, but the future of his entire family as well.

Judah and Joseph

We pick up the story of Joseph again in chapter 39. Joseph is a slave manager in the home of Potiphar who entrusts him with the care of everything in his household except his wife. It is that exception that eventually leads to a false accusation of attempted rape and imprisonment. In prison Joseph once again rises to a position of leadership. There he interprets the dreams of two servants of Pharaoh, a cupbearer and a baker, exercising a talent which is later remembered by the cupbearer when the Pharaoh is troubled by dreams he cannot interpret. When Joseph is able to interpret those dreams and proposes a plan to use seven years of prosperity to prepare for seven years of famine, Pharaoh elevates him to a position of authority second only to his own. It appeared that his childhood dreams of power and authority were being fulfilled, but how would this affect his family back home? The answer would soon be apparent.

Back in Canaan the famine that affected Egypt had touched the family of Israel as well. Israel sent his sons to purchase food for the family in Egypt; however, he would not allow his youngest son, Benjamin, to accompany them. He had already lost one of the sons of his beloved wife, Rachel, and he was not about to lose the other. So the other sons journeyed to Egypt and eventually came face to face with their brother Joseph. Once again appearances prevented recognition and allowed Joseph the opportunity to exact some revenge on them. He questioned the motives of his brothers, accusing them of being spies. They were then arrested and imprisoned. Ironically, they interpreted their imprisonment not as the angry reaction of a tyrant, but as God's punishment for what they had done to Joseph. Three days later Joseph released them, gave them grain, and told them not to return again without their younger brother, Benjamin. When they arrived back in Canaan they informed their father of all that had transpired, perhaps still wondering what it all meant.

Some time later once again in need of food, Israel instructed his sons to return to Egypt to purchase supplies. His sons reminded him of what the Egyptian ruler had told them–that they were not to return without Benjamin. But Israel objected that he would never allow his youngest son to accompany them. At this point Judah intervened–Judah, the son who had masterminded the plot to dispose of his brother and deceive his father in order to maneuver himself into a favored position. The one who had been willing to do whatever was necessary to that position was about to risk it all (Gen 43:8-9). He promised his father that he would personally take responsibility for the safety of his brother. He would risk his future for the greater good of his family. And so his father relented and allowed Benjamin to go.

With Benjamin in their company, the brothers were received warmly by Joseph (still unrecognizable). He prepared a feast for them, lavishing

particular attention upon Benjamin. Later, he gave them all the food and supplies they could carry and arranged for their money to be returned in their sacks. Joseph gave particular instructions for Benjamin's sack: in addition to the money, Joseph's silver cup was to be placed in his sack. Then when the brothers had started for home, Joseph instructed his men to overtake the brothers and search for his silver cup. They found the cup, exactly as Joseph had planned, in Benjamin's sack. Immediately the brothers were seized and brought back to Joseph's palace, where they fell before him pleading for Benjamin's life. But Joseph would have none of it; he would take Benjamin as his slave and let the others go free. The situation had reached a crisis, and all the brothers knew it. It was at this point that Judah stepped forward one last time.

Let us remember that this is the brother whose voice Joseph had heard, years before, encouraging his brothers to sell him as a slave. Now he offers himself as a slave. This was the brother who had been willing to trade the life of his brother and the happiness of his father to secure his own future. Now he is forfeiting his own future for the greater good of his family. His speech is recorded in Genesis 44. It is one of the most poignant speeches in all of the Bible, capturing the very essence of the gospel: the willingness to risk one's life, and even lose it, for others. It is also the climax of the Joseph narrative, for as Judah's appeal concludes and chapter 45 opens, Joseph finally breaks down and reveals himself to his brothers, thus bringing about the final reconciliation.

One of the most important elements of a story is its climax–the moment when the story breaks open to reveal its meaning for the reader. The climax is often precipitated by a person in the story who has changed in some way and who, in turn, prompts the final outcome. In this case one is tempted to identify that "change agent" as Joseph. After all, it is his faithfulness in the midst of a multitude of temptations and trials that secures the future and prosperity of his family and the nation. While there is no doubt that Joseph is the most obvious hero in this story, it is actually Judah who brings it to its glorious conclusion. For it is Judah who prompts both the sorrow and the joy of his father. It is Judah who is responsible for selling his brother and, in the end, redeeming him. And this is because he himself has been transformed from a selfish, deceitful man to one who knows the importance of loyalty and justice. One can just hear the words of the prophet Micah–"And what does the Lord require of you? To do justly and to love faithfulness, walking humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8).

The Significance of Tamar

Now if, indeed, Judah is the instrument of change in this important story, then it must follow that Tamar is not an incidental character–she is Judah's teacher. Tamar's importance is reinforced by the way she is remembered throughout the rest of scripture. In the story of Ruth, also an outsider who entered the lineage of Abraham in a most unusual way, Tamar is offered as a role model for Ruth by the women of the village. And as that story concludes we discover that Boaz, Ruth's husband, is a descendant of Tamar and the great-grandfather of David. But more marvelous still is the discovery one makes in the geneaology of the Messiah in Matthew 1. There only four women (five if you count Mary) are listed in the family tree. Surprisingly, we do not find the names of Sarah, or Rachel and Leah, but rather the names of four outsiders–*Tamar, Rahab* (the "prostitute" of Joshua 2), *Ruth,* and *the wife of Uriah* (Bathsheba). These are four women who, in the words of Ruth, decided that "your people shall be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). They are women who knew that being counted among the children of Israel, the children of God, was more important than anything else they could do or possess (Heb 11:25). They, like Tamar, believed that responding courageously to the dynamic will of God in their lives was far more important than complying with the conventions and customs of their day. And they served as teachers for all men and women of faith who dared to be equally courageous.

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Notes

[1] Walter Brueggemann, **Genesis, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Interpretation** (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 307-08.

[2] "Jewelry, Ancient Israelite," **The Anchor Bible Dictionary**, Volume 3, H-J, David Noel Freedman, Editor-in-Chief (New York, et al: Doubleday, 1992) 830.

Questions:

1. In what sense is Tamar "Judah's teacher?"

2. Can you add to the author's list of women teachers in the Bible?