Judah and Tamar

As we previously discussed, chapter 37 of Genesis marks the beginning of a lengthy study of the trials and triumphs of Joseph who in many ways was a type of Christ. Chapter 38 interrupts the story of Joseph to once again give an account of sinful behavior of one of Joseph’s brothers. The chapter begins with Judah leaving his family to stay with a Canaanite named Hirah. Matthew Henry speculated that Judah was a teenager when these events occurred, however there is nothing in the Bible to support or dispute that. If Henry was correct, this account would precede chapter 37 which is not problematic since the Bible is not always in chronological order. Despite the shortcomings of his family, his brothers and father would have provided a much better environment for Judah than a native of Canaan. Judah met a Canaanite woman whom he married and they had 3 sons. Judah got a wife named Tamar for his eldest son Er but God put Er to death before he fathered any children. It was customary for the next son in line to marry his brother’s widow so that she could have children (see Deut. 25:5). Judah’s son Onan was content to marry Tamar but would not impregnate her because he thought that any son from their marriage would be considered a son of Er. God punished the second son by death just as he had the oldest. Judah’s 3rd son Shelah was not of age to marry Tamar so Judah told Tamar to live in his house until Shelah was old enough to marry her although he had no intention of fulfilling that promise. After Judah’s wife died, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and enticed Judah. He agreed to pay her with a goat from his herd and gave her his seal and staff to hold as collateral until he provided the goat. When he was unable to find Tamar to deliver the goat, he decided not to pursue recovering his seal and staff and probably forgot about the incident. When Judah discovered Tamar was pregnant, he ordered that she be burned to death. After she provided the staff and seal identifying the father, Judah acknowledged that she was more righteous than he was since he withheld his last son from her. The chapter ends with Tamar giving birth to twin sons that were named Perez and Zerah.

Judah was guilty of multiple sins in this matter. Instead of staying with his family, he left to associate with the people of Canaan who were wicked. Unlike his grandfather Isaac and father Jacob, he chose a wife from the people of Canaan rather than returning to his ancestral home to find a wife from among his people. He dealt with Tamar dishonestly by promising her that she would marry his youngest son Shelah then reneging on that promise. After seeing his first 2 sons die after marrying her, he thought Tamar was the problem refusing to acknowledge his son’s sins. Finally, he hypocritically engaged in relations with a woman whom he thought to be a prostitute then sentenced his daughter in law to death for prostitution. While this story may seem out of place, we need to remember that Jesus was descended through the line of Judah. The chapter does not provide any information about Judah’s 3rd son Shelah. After the death of his first 2 sons, if Shelah failed to father any sons, Judah’s line would end. The lineage of Jesus provided in detail in chapter 1 of Matthew and chapter 3 of Luke shows that Jesus was descended from Perez so it may be that Shelah had no sons. It is interesting to note that Tamar is one of only 5 women who are mentioned in Matthew’s lineage.

Bob Deffinbaugh had another interesting idea about the significance of this chapter. While the land in Canaan was rich and abundant, the people who inhabited the land had a long history of sinful activity. The region was named after Canaan, the son who was cursed by Noah. Sodom and Gomorrah were cities in Canaan that God destroyed and when the Israelites went into Canaan, God repeatedly told them not to intermarry with Canaanites. After Judah’s experience with the Canaanite people, it may be that God needed to get Jacob and his family out of Canaan by sending them to Egypt. Deffinbaugh wrote “Historically, this chapter had much to teach the ancient Israelites. To begin with, this event underscores the necessity of a sojourn in Egypt. Spiritual purity was essential for the purposes of God to be realized. Judah, the son through whom the Messiah would be born (Genesis 49:8-12), was so carnal that he was willing to marry a Canaanite woman, to have a heathen for his closest companion, and to enter into an illicit relationship with a cult prostitute. Something drastic had to be done, and the exile in Egypt was God’s remedy. There, living among a people who detested Hebrew shepherds (43:32; 46:34), even if the Hebrews were willing to inter-mingle and intermarry with these people, the Egyptians would not even consider such a thing. Racial bigotry, if not religious piety, would keep the people of God a separate people. While the sojourn in Egypt was in many respects a bitter experience, it was a gracious act on the part of God.”

This chapter also reminds us that God will accomplish his purposes despite our disobedience in following his plans. When Judah’s sons failed to produce an heir, God made certain that Judah’s line would continue.