

**SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY**  
**Week 11: Genesis 37 – Joseph Sold into Slavery**

**Outline of the Story of Joseph:**

Genesis 37:	Joseph is sold into Egypt		*Joseph has two dreams
Genesis 38	Judah and Tamar		
Genesis 39:1-19	Joseph and Potiphar	A	
Genesis 39:20-40	Joseph in Prison	B	*His fellow prisoners have two dreams
Genesis 41	Joseph in the Palace	C	*Pharaoh has two dreams
Genesis 42	First visit of Joseph's family to Egypt	A'	
Genesis 43-45	Second visit of Joseph's family to Egypt	B'	
Genesis 46-47	Third visit of Joseph's family to Egypt	C'	
Genesis 48-50	The last days and words of Jacob and Joseph		

*By the end of the book, we have to ask the question: But what about the land promised to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob? Why does Joseph and family return to Egypt after burying their father in Hebron, in the cave of the field at Machpelah? And why does Genesis end with Joseph being embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt?*

**The General Plot:** *As Joseph is Jacob's favorite son, born to his favorite wife, Rachel, Jacob makes a long robe with sleeves. He then receives strange dreams in which he is more important than his brothers. This leads to their envy and Joseph finds himself in ever-deeper trouble. They sell him into slavery and he is taken into Egypt where he is falsely accused of adultery and ends up in prison for life. Then, with divine help, the tide changes. He uses his gift to interpret dreams to help royal officials, then Pharaoh himself. He is made prime minister, and in the great famine that follows, his brothers come into his power. But instead of doing to them what they had done to him, he forgives them and brings his father down to Egypt to live in peace and prosperity. The drama ends with the family reunited. Through ups and downs, successes and failures, God has directed the course of events, overcoming all obstacles, so that God's promises will be fulfilled.*

**CHAPTER 37 – JOSEPH SOLD INTO SLAVERY**

This story plays up the theme of sibling rivalry that we have already witnessed throughout Genesis (Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and now Joseph and his eleven brothers). Once again, we have brothers at loggerheads from their earliest days. In time, these twelve brothers will become the twelve tribes of Israel and Joseph will play a vital role in his family's survival. The story of Joseph sets us up for the story of the Exodus by providing a plot line that gets the whole family into Egypt.

**Vs. 1-4** Joseph is 17 years old and he is serving as a helper to four of his brothers, the sons of his father's wife's servants, Bilhah and Zilpah. Because he is Jacob's favorite (and receives a special long robe with sleeves) his brothers hate him and treat him poorly.

**Vs. 5-11** Joseph has two dreams in which his brothers and then his father and mother bow down to him; a foreshadowing of what is to come. Again, the hatred of his brothers grows.

**Vs. 12-24** Jacob sends Joseph to check on the ten brothers and catches up with them at Dothan, which is fourteen miles north of Shechem on the main route used by merchants and herdsmen going north to the Jezreel Valley. The brothers, still angry over his dreams and favored status, plan to kill Joseph, but Reuben convinces them to throw him alive into a pit. The pit was probably a cistern that was hollowed out of the limestone bedrock and lined with plaster to store rain water that were used in the dry months to provide water for humans and animals. When they were empty, they sometimes served as temporary cells for prisoners (see Jeremiah 38:6).

**Vs. 25-35** They decide to sell Joseph to a band of Ishmaelite traders for twenty pieces of silver (twenty shekels; which is about two years of wages) and deceive their father, telling him that Joseph was killed and eaten by a wild animal, by dipping his robe in the blood of a goat.

**Jeremiah 38:6 (NRSV)**

*<sup>6</sup> So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.*

Notice who receives him and then who sells him in verse 36: *“Meanwhile, the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard.”* What’s the difference between or the relationship between the Ishmaelites and Midianites (see Judges 8:24).

## CHAPTER 38 – JUDAH AND TAMAR

It is strange the way that chapter 38 interrupts our story the way it does; almost like a commercial break from the Joseph story. Why does this story appear here? What is it doing? What is it trying to introduce?

Judah marries a Canaanite woman and has three sons by her. The first, Er, died after marrying Tamar (Hebrew meaning “date palm”). God kills him while Tamar is still childless because he is wicked. Judah tells his next oldest son, Onan, to do his duty as a brother-in-law and have sex with Tamar in order that she might bear children to continue Er’s line. (For details on ‘levirate marriage’ see Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Onan, however, doesn’t like the idea of producing offspring for his deceased brother, so each time he has intercourse with Tamar, he spills his semen on the ground. God is angered by this and kills Onan as well. Judah promises Tamar that he will give her his next son, Shelah, when he is old enough, but the boy grows up and Judah does not keep his promise, because he is afraid of losing another son.

### Deuteronomy 25:5–10 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, <sup>6</sup> and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. <sup>7</sup> But if the man has no desire to marry his brother’s widow, then his brother’s widow shall go up to the elders at the gate and say, “My husband’s brother refuses to perpetuate his brother’s name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband’s brother to me.” <sup>8</sup> Then the elders of his town shall summon him and speak to him. If he persists, saying, “I have no desire to marry her,” <sup>9</sup> then his brother’s wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull his sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and declare, “This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.” <sup>10</sup> Throughout Israel his family shall be known as “the house of him whose sandal was pulled off.”

Finally, Tamar takes matters into her own hands. She puts on a veil and sits by the roadside when Judah, whose wife has died, goes to shear his sheep. Judah mistakes her for a temple prostitute and ends up impregnating her himself. When he learns that she is pregnant, he initially decrees that she is to be burned for having played the whore (see Leviticus 21:9), but Tamar then produces Judah’ own signet, cord, and staff (which she had procured from him as a pledge of payment) and says, “It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.” With deception running in the family, Judah declares that she has acted more righteously than he, since he had failed to give her his son Shelah. Tamar subsequently bears twins, Perez and Zerah.

### Leviticus 21:9 (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup> When the daughter of a priest profanes herself through prostitution, she profanes her father; she shall be burned to death.

Perez was an ancestor of King David (see Ruth 4:12, 18-22 and 1 Chronicles 2:4). Both Tamar and Perez are also listed in the New Testament as ancestors of Jesus (Matthew 1:3).

### Ruth 4:12, 18-22 (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup> and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah... <sup>18</sup> Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, <sup>19</sup> Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, <sup>20</sup> Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, <sup>21</sup> Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, <sup>22</sup> Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

### 1 Chronicles 2:3–4 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> The sons of Judah: Er, Onan, and Shelah; these three the Canaanite woman Bath-shua bore to him. Now Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death. <sup>4</sup> His daughter-in-law Tamar also bore him Perez and Zerah. Judah had five sons in all.

### Matthew 1:1–3 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. <sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup> and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram,

There are several similarities between the story of Judah & Tamar and the story of David & Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11):

- Both Judah and David are shepherds.
- Both separate from their kinsmen to Adullam (Genesis 38:1; 1 Samuel 22:1).
- Judah has a friend Hirah and David has a friend Hiram.
- Judah's wife is referred to as the "daughter of Shua," which in Hebrew is bathshua—which is very suggestive of David's Bathsheba. In fact, 1 Chronicles, to make the connection clear, lists Bathshua as the name of Judah's wife (1 Chronicles 2:3) AND the name of David's wife (rather than Bathsheba, 1 Chronicles 3:5). See below.

**1 Chronicles 2:1–4 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> *These are the sons of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, <sup>2</sup> Dan, Joseph, Benjamin, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. <sup>3</sup> The sons of Judah: Er, Onan, and Shelah; these three the Canaanite woman **Bath-shua** bore to him. Now Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death. <sup>4</sup> His daughter-in-law Tamar also bore him Perez and Zerah. Judah had five sons in all.*

**1 Chronicles 3:1–5 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> *These are the sons of David who were born to him in Hebron: the firstborn Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelite; the second Daniel, by Abigail the Carmelite; <sup>2</sup> the third Absalom, son of Maacah, daughter of King Talmai of Geshur; the fourth Adonijah, son of Haggith; <sup>3</sup> the fifth Shephatiah, by Abital; the sixth Ithream, by his wife Eglah; <sup>4</sup> six were born to him in Hebron, where he reigned for seven years and six months. And he reigned thirty-three years in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> These were born to him in Jerusalem: Shimea, Shobab, Nathan, and **Solomon**, four by **Bath-shua**, daughter of Ammiel;*

**Matthew 1:1–7 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. <sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup> and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup> and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup> and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David. **And David** was the father of **Solomon** by **the wife of Uriah**...*

- Both stories involve a woman named Tamar. In David's case, Tamar is his daughter, not daughter-in-law (as with Judah). Moreover, David does not have sex with this Tamar, but rather she is raped by Amnon, Tamar's half-brother. However, the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is routinely understood as an implicit (and politically delicate) critique of David's rape of Bathsheba 2 chapters earlier—much like Genesis 38.
- Both David and Judah are publicly forced to admit their guilt (see Genesis 38:26 and 2 Samuel 12:13).

Is it mere coincidence that the Judah and Tamar story so closely resembles the story of David and Bathsheba? Or could it be that the ancient Israelites during the Monarchical period were shaping the story of Judah to address subtly and indirectly David's unjust treatment of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah? Not wanting to let him off the hook, could it be that they shaped this earlier story of Judah, someone from the past who is still honored, to provide David with cover?

**FOR NEXT WEEK:** Read Genesis 39-41