

A Preview of Coming Attractions

¹ *Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.*

² *These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.*

⁵ *Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. ⁶ He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: ⁷ Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸ His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.*

⁹ *Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" ¹¹ And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind. – Genesis 37:1-11 ESV*

After providing a brief of Esau's life and lineage, Moses shifts the focus back to Jacob. But rather than provide a similar genealogical treatment of Jacob's life, Moses chose to narrow down his narrative to the life of one particular descendant of Jacob – his 11th son, Joseph. The story shifts from the clan of Esau living in the region of Edom to the family of Jacob living in Canaan, the land of promise. Jacob had returned to Hebron, where he was raising his 12 sons and one daughter. This was familiar territory to Jacob because it was at Hebron that his grandfather, Abraham, had settled after parting ways with Lot (Genesis 13:18). It was while he was living in Hebron that Abraham received a message from God.

"Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted! Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you." – Genesis 13:15-17 NLT

It was in Hebron that Abraham purchased land from the Hittites to serve as a burial place for his wife, Sarah. And years later, Abraham's sons Isaac and Ishmael would bury him alongside Sarah in the same cave on the very same land.

His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, near Mamre, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite. This was the field Abraham had purchased from the Hittites and where he had buried his wife Sarah. After Abraham's death, God blessed his son Isaac, who settled near Beer-lahai-roi in the Negev. – Genesis 25:9-11 NLT

When Isaac died at the ripe old age of 180, his sons, Esau and Jacob, buried him in Hebron as well.

So Jacob returned to his father, Isaac, in Mamre, which is near Kiriath-arba (now called Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had both lived as foreigners. Isaac lived for 180 years. Then he breathed his last and died at a ripe old age, joining his ancestors in death. And his sons, Esau and Jacob, buried him. – Genesis 35:27-29 NLT

The cave of Machpelah near Hebron had become the family burial plot, so it made sense for Jacob, the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, to settle his family in the same vicinity. Geographically, Hebron was located dead center in what would eventually become the nation of Israel. It was from that vantage point that God gave Abraham a panoramic view of the surrounding territory that would one day become the inheritance of his descendants.

“Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted! Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you.” – Genesis 13:14-17 NLT

And, years later, when Jacob was on his way from Hebron to Mesopotamia to escape the anger of his brother, God visited him in a dream and delivered virtually the same message He had given to Abraham.

“I am the Lord, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.” – Genesis 28:13-15 NLT

Jacob had returned to Hebron where he now ruled as the patriarch of the family. Yet Moses does not make Jacob the hero of his story. Instead, he turns the reader's attention to Joseph, one of the youngest of Jacob's 12 sons. But Joseph was somewhat unique in that he was the first son to be born to Rachel who, for years, had suffered from barrenness. And while Leah, her sister and the second wife of Jacob, had given him six sons, Rachel remained without a child. Until God had intervened.

Then God remembered Rachel's plight and answered her prayers by enabling her to have children. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. "God has removed my disgrace," she said. And she named him Joseph... – Genesis 30:22-24 NLT

And Moses indicates that Joseph enjoyed a certain degree of parental approval that his siblings found objectionable.

Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children because Joseph had been born to him in his old age. – Genesis 37:3 NLT

And to make matters worse, Jacob exhibited his favoritism for Joseph by giving him a fancy robe, which further incited his brothers against him. By the time Joseph was 17-years-old, he was the apple of his father's eyes and the bane of his brothers' existence. He was both loved and despised. And Joseph seemed to have enjoyed his favored status. He appears to have become his father's eyes and ears, watching his older siblings and ratting them out if they did anything wrong.

Joseph reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing. – Genesis 37:2 NLT

Not exactly the best way to win friends and influence enemies. So, between the blatant favoritism and the tattle-telling, Joseph developed a less-than-favorable relationship with his 10 older brothers.

...his brothers hated Joseph because their father loved him more than the rest of them. They couldn't say a kind word to him. – Genesis 37:4 NLT

And it wouldn't be long before their anger turned into action. They would soon learn that their brother was more than just an informant and a teacher's pet. He was an arrogant, boastful dreamer. This runt of the litter was having literal dreams of greatness filled with delusions of grandeur, and it infuriated them. It would be one thing to write this all off as the behavior of an innocent child, but Joseph was 17-years-old. He should have known better. But there seems to be a degree of pride in this young man. What else would explain his eagerness to tell his older brothers about his dreams? He must have known that his brothers disliked him, and surely he knew that the content of his dreams was not going to be received well.

...when he told his brothers about it, they hated him more than ever. – Genesis 37:5 NLT

And it's easy to understand why. His dream had used symbolic imagery of bundles of wheat displaying anthropomorphic characteristics. But his brothers had not missed the point. Their younger brother was clearly attempting to portray himself as their better, and they were furious.

“So you think you will be our king, do you? Do you actually think you will reign over us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dreams and the way he talked about them. – Genesis 37:8 NLT



Perhaps it was just a case of naiveté. Maybe Joseph didn't really know what he was doing and was sharing his dream with his brothers in the hopes that they might help him decipher its meaning. But that seems unlikely. As will become clear as the story unfolds, Joseph was far from an empty-headed dreamer. He was a very smart and resourceful young man. He had to be aware of his brothers' hatred for him. And, in seeing their response to his first dream, he would have known that their jealousy of him and hatred for him was at an all-time high. But

that didn't stop him from sharing the content of a second dream.

Joseph had another dream, and again he told his brothers about it. “Listen, I have had another dream,” he said. “The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed low before me!” – Genesis 37:9 NLT

Just reading that sentence makes me cringe in disbelief. What would possess Joseph to share this dream with his brothers? I think he knew exactly what it meant and he was eager to share it with his “eleven” brothers. And, not only that, he wanted his father and mother to hear the content of his dream as well.

It's important to note that these dreams were not like those his father had experienced. There were no sightings of angelic beings or words of instruction from God. It would have been obvious to Moses and his original audience that these dreams were divinely ordained. But there is no indication that Jacob or his sons received them this way. In fact, Jacob was very familiar with dreams as mediums through which God spoke, but he did not view Joseph's dream in that light.

...his father scolded him. “What kind of dream is that?” he asked. “Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow to the ground before you?” – Genesis 37:10 NLT

But we know the rest of the story. Joseph was being given a glimpse into the future fate of Israel. None of them understood the ramifications of Joseph's dream, but God was clearly conveying His plan to elevate Joseph to a place of prominence and primacy. This favorite son of Jacob would soon find himself basking in the favor of Pharaoh. What none of the characters in the story understood was that they were about to take an unexpected detour. Their journey to

possess the promised land was about to take them to a place they never could have imagined. And it was all part of God's preordained and perfectly formulated plan.

From Sonship to Slavery

¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." ¹⁴ So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. ¹⁵ And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶ "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷ And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

¹⁸ They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. ¹⁹ They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams." ²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." ²² And Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. ²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. ²⁴ And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

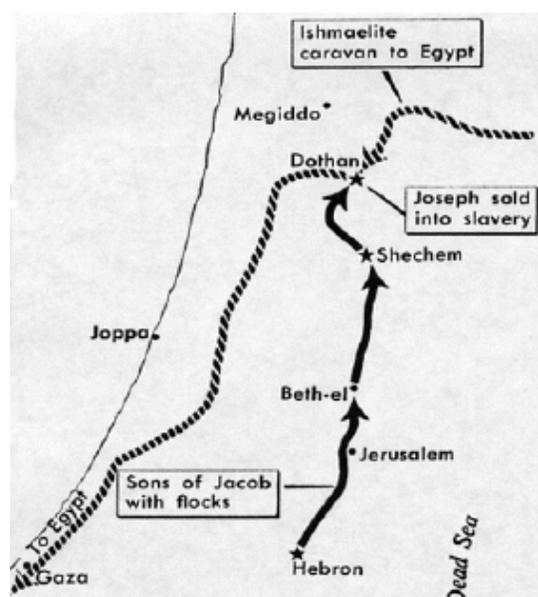
²⁵ Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. ²⁸ Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt.

²⁹ When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes ³⁰ and returned to his brothers and said, "The boy is gone, and I, where shall I go?" ³¹ Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. ³² And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not." ³³ And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." ³⁴ Then Jacob tore his garments and put sackcloth on his loins and mourned for his son many days. ³⁵ All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him. ³⁶ Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. – Genesis 37:12-36 ESV

Joseph and his father had a unique relationship. While Joseph enjoyed the privileged status of being his father's favorite son, he also appears to have served as Jacob's personal spy, keeping

tabs on the activities of his older brothers. Verse 2 reveals that “Joseph reported to his father some of the bad things his brothers were doing.” (Genesis 37:2 NLT). This doesn’t necessarily prove that Joseph was a snitch, but it does help to explain why his brothers hated him so much. They probably believed that Joseph’s royal treatment by their father was a form of compensation for his role as an informant. Joseph’s older brothers viewed him as spoiled, arrogant, and untrustworthy. He seemed to delight in telling them about his dreams, in which they were always cast as his groveling subjects. When he paraded around in the robe of many colors his father had given him, it only served to aggravate the seething envy of his brothers.

Sadly, Jacob appears to have been oblivious to the animosity he was stirring up in his own home. He doesn’t appear to recognize that his favored treatment of Joseph was driving a wedge between his 17-year-old son and his brothers that would soon reach a dangerous tipping point. Without realizing it, Jacob was fostering an atmosphere of distrust and dissension within his own home, and it was about to come back to haunt him.



Unwittingly, Jacob gave Joseph an assignment that would result in his disappearance and apparent death. He sent his young son to check up on his older brothers who were shepherding their flocks near Shechem, some 60 miles north of Hebron. Jacob owned land there, that he had bought from Hamor, the king of Shechem (Genesis 33:19). It was there that the son of Hamor had raped Jacob’s daughter Dinah and that her brothers, Simeon and Levi, had taken revenge by slaughtering all the males in Shechem. Now, years later, the sons of Jacob had returned to the scene of the crime, but rather than slaughtering and plundering, they were shepherding.

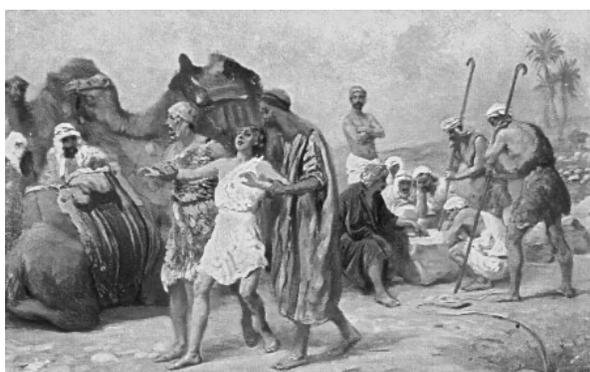
Eager to please his father, Joseph donned his multicolored robe and set off with the intention of returning with a full report of his brothers’ activities. But, unable to locate his brothers, Joseph sought the aid of a local resident and discovered his brothers had headed north to Dothan. Moses doesn’t reveal why the brothers left Shechem for Dothan, but the name “Dothan” means “two wells,” so it could be that they went there in search of water for their flocks. It just so happens that Dothan was located on a major trading route between Syria and Egypt. Perhaps the brothers intended to sell or trade some of their sheep or wool.

Moses indicates that the brothers saw Joseph coming from a distance. Most likely, due to his colorful coat. And, as soon as they saw him, their anger reached a fever pitch. No longer content to simply despise Jacob, they began to plot his death.

“Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” – Genesis 37:19-20 ESV



They may not have understood the meaning behind the dreams or known the source of their content, but they recognized an arrogant spoiled brat when they saw one. And they had had enough of Joseph. But Reuben, the eldest son of Jacob, intervened and pleaded with his brothers to spare Joseph’s life. He offered an alternative solution, suggesting that they throw Joseph in a nearby pit or cistern. Since the pit was located in the wilderness, far from prying eyes, the brothers assumed that Reuben was suggesting that they leave Joseph to die by natural causes. But his real intention was to come back later and rescue him. As the firstborn son, Reuben felt an obligation to protect his younger brother.



Having stripped Joseph of his colorful robe, they threw him into the empty cistern and sat down to enjoy a meal together. But their reverie was soon interrupted by a caravan of Ishmaelite traders. These men would have been close relatives of Reuben and his brothers because Ishmael had been the brother of their grandfather, Isaac. And, in verse 28, Moses indicates that there were also Midianites in the caravan. They were also close relatives of

Jacob’s sons because Midian had been a brother to Ishmael and Isaac, having been born to Abraham through his second wife, Keturah.

So, this entire transaction was a family affair. The brothers of Joseph sold him to the brothers of Isaac, their grandfather. And it was Judah, a younger brother of Reuben, who came up with the idea of profiting off their brother rather than simply letting him die.

“What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” – Genesis 37:27 ESV

Their dislike for Joseph was so great that they all agreed to sell him as a slave in exchange for twenty shekels of silver. They literally sold out their younger brother. Unaware that this transaction had taken place, Reuben returned to find Joseph gone and he immediately felt the

weight of his responsibility as the eldest son. What was he going to tell his father? How would Jacob ever get over the loss of his favorite son?

But his brothers had already come up with a plan. They took Joseph's infamous robe and covered it with animal blood, then they concocted a story that had Joseph being killed and consumed by a wild animal. These men made a mutual pact to hide their actions from their father and deceive him into believing that his favorite son was dead. And their plan worked. When they returned to Hebron and informed their father, he was deeply distraught.

Jacob tore his clothes and dressed himself in burlap. He mourned deeply for his son for a long time. His family all tried to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. – Genesis 37:34-35 NLT

But while Jacob mourned Joseph's death, his missing son was actually on his way to Egypt (Genesis 37:28). No longer wearing his signature robe or enjoying his father's favor, Joseph was transported to Egypt, where he was sold "to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. Potiphar was captain of the palace guard" (Genesis 37:36 NLT).

Hundreds of miles from where Jacob was living a nightmare, mourning the loss of his favorite son, God was paving the way for the fulfillment of Joseph's dreams. This entire scenario was part of God's sovereign plan for the people of Israel, and He had foreshadowed it in a message He had given Abraham hundreds of years earlier.

"You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. (As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction." – Genesis 15:13-16 NLT

God had a plan, and He was bringing it about through the actions of Jacob and his sons. These men were completely unaware that their decisions were being sovereignly orchestrated by God Almighty to bring about His divine will. Jacob's unwise favoring of his son had caused strife within his home, but God would use that animosity for good. Joseph would pridefully flaunt his status as the favored son and inflame the anger of his brothers. And those men would allow their jealousy and rage to treat their brother with contempt and disdain, selling him out for a few pieces of silver. But as bad as it all seemed, it was all the work of a loving, gracious, and all-knowing God, who was preparing to do something far greater than they could have ever imagined.

Meanwhile, back in Canaan

¹ It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. ² There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, ³ and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. ⁴ She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. ⁵ Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.

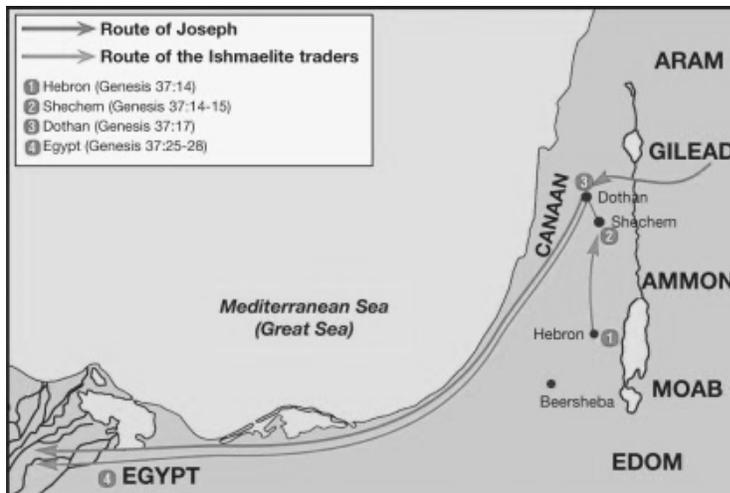
⁶ And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. ⁷ But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. ⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." ⁹ But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. ¹⁰ And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. ¹¹ Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house.

¹² In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³ And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," ¹⁴ she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. ¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶ He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" ¹⁷ He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" ¹⁸ He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹ Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. – Genesis 38:1-19 ESV

While Joseph was carted off to Egypt as a slave, his wicked brothers went on with their lives as if nothing had ever happened. It was Judah, one of Joseph's half-brothers, who had come up with the plan to cash in by selling Joseph as a slave rather than spilling innocent blood.

"What will we gain by killing our brother? We'd have to cover up the crime. Instead of hurting him, let's sell him to those Ishmaelite traders. After all, he is our brother—our own flesh and blood!" – Genesis 37:26 NLT

With their 20 pieces of silver in hand, the brothers had left Dothan and returned home to Hebron. Once there, they delivered the devastating news of Joseph's death with their father. Their carefully crafted lie devastated Jacob, but these men showed no remorse or regret. They had managed to eliminate their nemesis and were glad of it.



For Joseph's brothers, it was business as usual. They went on with their lives, seemingly giving no thought to the fate of their younger brother. While visiting with a friend from Adullam, Judah met a Canaanite woman named Shua whom he eventually married. There is no indication that he ever consulted Jacob about this marriage, and it is probably because he knew his father would disapprove. When Jacob had been a young man, his father Isaac had sent him to Mesopotamia to find a wife from among his own clan.

"You must not marry any of these Canaanite women. Instead, go at once to Paddan-aram, to the house of your grandfather Bethuel, and marry one of your uncle Laban's daughters. May God Almighty bless you and give you many children. And may your descendants multiply and become many nations! May God pass on to you and your descendants the blessings he promised to Abraham. May you own this land where you are now living as a foreigner, for God gave this land to Abraham." – Genesis 28:1-4 NLT

But Judah had decided to do things his own way. And his decision to marry a Canaanite woman seemed to bear fruit, in the form of three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. When Er became a man, Judah arranged for him to marry a woman named Tamar. But according to Moses, Er was a wicked man and God took his life. That left Tamar a widow. According to a common practice of the time, a brother of the deceased man was expected to marry his brother's widow so that she could bear a son and carry on her husband's name. This was referred to as levirate marriage. So, Judah approached Onan and convinced him to do the right thing.

"Go and marry Tamar, as our law requires of the brother of a man who has died. You must produce an heir for your brother." – Genesis 38:8 NLT

This practice would eventually become part of the Mosaic law for the people of Israel.

"If two brothers are living together on the same property and one of them dies without a son, his widow may not be married to anyone from outside the family. Instead, her husband's brother should marry her and have intercourse with her to fulfill the duties of a brother-in-law. The first son she bears to him will be considered the son of the dead brother, so that his name will not be forgotten in Israel." – Deuteronomy 25:5-6 NLT

But Onan was not interested in fathering a child that, technically, would not be his own. "So whenever he had intercourse with his brother's wife, he spilled the semen on the ground. This prevented her from having a child who would belong to his brother" (Genesis 38:9 NLT). He

purposefully refused to impregnate his brother's wife, denying him the right of an heir to carry on his name. And God found this to be a crime worthy of death.

But the Lord considered it evil for Onan to deny a child to his dead brother. So the Lord took Onan's life, too. – Genesis 38:10 NLT

This left Tamar a widow for the second time. And because Judah's third son was too young for marriage, he convinced Tamar to wait until Shelah grew up, promising her that he would fulfill the levirate commitment. But Judah failed to keep his word because he feared that, if Shelah married Tamar, he too might die. Perhaps Judah thought Tamar was cursed. He even refused to allow Tamar to live among his clan, choosing instead for her to return home to her parents where she was to stay until Shelah was of marrying age. But like the story of Joseph's "death" that Judah had told to Jacob, his words to Tamar were all a lie.

This left Tamar in a very difficult position. She had no husband, no rights, and, without a son, she had no hope for the future. As a woman living in that culture, she was completely dependent upon a husband or son to care for her needs. Now, she was forced to return to her parents' home, where she was forced to wait for Shelah to fulfill his commitment to her.

The years would pass by, and life would go on as usual. Shelah grew up and Tamar continued to wait. Eventually, Jacob's wife died, leaving him a widow as well. After mourning his wife's death, he joined his Adullamite friend again for the annual sheering of the sheep. Somehow, Tamar learned that her father-in-law was headed to Timnah, and she made arrangements to confront him there. She was well aware that Shelah was now a man, and that Judah was preventing him from marrying her.



Disguising herself with a veil, Tamar sat outside the gate of Timnah, waiting for the chance to confront her father-in-law. When Judah arrived and saw her, he mistook her for a prostitute and propositioned her. To make matters worse, Judah believed Tamar to be a cult prostitute (Genesis 38:21), a woman who offered sexual favors as part of the worship of Canaanite false gods. Judah was making poor choices that would come back to haunt him.

It seems unlikely that Tamar was purposefully portraying herself as a temple prostitute, but once Judah mistook her for one, she played along. She asked Judah what he was willing to pay to have sex with her, and he offered her the price of a young goat. But Tamar knew Judah well and demanded that he provide some form of proof of payment. So, at Tamar's request, Judah left behind his

identification seal, its cord, and his staff. Each of these things would have been unique to Judah and would have been of great value. She knew he would want them back and this would force him to keep his word.

That Judah would give up those particular items reveals much about his lack of discernment. He was letting his desires and passions control his decisions. And Moses indicates that not only did Judah have sex with Tamar, but he impregnated her. When they were done, she returned home to her father's house and Judah went on his way, completely oblivious as to the ramifications of his actions. The deceiver had been deceived. And the one who had refused to keep his promise would actually be the one through whom God would fulfill His promise to Abraham. Because the child within Tamar's womb would eventually be the one through whom the Messiah would come. In his gospel, Matthew records the genealogy of Jesus, and it prominently features the name of Tamar, the widowed wife of Er.

This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (whose mother was Tamar). – Matthew 1:1-3 NLT

God had allowed Joseph to be sold into slavery by his brothers. God had taken two of Tamar's husbands before she could bear them children. God had stood back and watched as Judah deceived Tamar by refusing to allow his third son to marry her. But all of it had been part of His divine plan. There were things happening behind the scenes that no one was aware of – but God. Joseph must have felt like a helpless victim as he made his way to Egypt. Judah must have believed himself to be, not only clever but a wise and caring father. And Tamar was a spurned woman in search of revenge and restitution for the injustices she had endured. But little did any of them know that God was orchestrating every facet of their lives – for their good and His glory.

The Unlikely Purpose of Perez

²⁰ When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. ²¹ And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." ²² So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" ²³ And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her."

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." ²⁵ As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." ²⁶ Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again.

²⁷ When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸ And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." ²⁹ But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore his name was called Perez.

³⁰ Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah. – Genesis 38:20-30 ESV

Reading through the book of Genesis reminds us that God's are incomparable and, at times, inconceivable. There are times when He accomplishes His divine will in the most extraordinary ways and through the most unlikely of people. Consider His choice of Abram and Sarah. Why would God set apart a man from the land of Chaldea, who had done nothing to deserve the right to be the father of a great nation? And why would God choose to make that great nation using a man who had a barren wife? Why did God choose Jacob over Esau, knowing that Esau was a natural-born con man who would go out of his way to defraud his own brother and deceive his elderly father?

In this chapter, we see additional evidence of God's sometimes strange and difficult-to-understand ways. And as we read this story, we must remember the words of the apostle Paul: "How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!" (Romans 11:33 NLT). And God Himself reminds us, "...my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine" (Isaiah 55:8 NLT).

Judah had refused to honor his commitment to allow his third-born son, Shelah, to father a son through Tamar, the widowed wife of his two older brothers. Er and Onan had both been wicked men whom God had punished by death. This had left Tamar not only a widow but childless. And Judah had agreed to honor the practice of levirate marriage by requiring his third son to marry Tamar and father a son who would carry on the family name. But when the time came, Judah changed his mind. But Tamar never forgot the vow he had made, and when the time was right,

she took matters into her own hands and attempted to right the wrong that had been done to her.

Through a rather remarkable set of circumstances, Judah had sexual relations with Tamar, believing her to be a cult prostitute. And he had agreed to compensate her for her services by giving her a goat. Since he didn't have the goat with him when the salacious act took place, he offered three items as collateral. Later on, he sent a friend to pay the "prostitute" and retrieve his personal effects, but the woman was nowhere to be found. Anxious to put this indiscretion behind him, Judah calls off the search for the woman and writes off his personal items as a loss.

But little did Judah know that his one-night fling would come back to haunt him. Three months later, he received word that Tamar had become pregnant, and he was furious. He saw this as an unacceptable act of immorality on her part and demanded that she be put to death. But in the heat of his righteous indignation, Jacob received a shocking message from his daughter-in-law that turned his anger into anxiety.

"The man who owns these things made me pregnant. Look closely. Whose seal and cord and walking stick are these?" – Genesis 38:25 NLT

There in his hands, Jacob held the proof of his own sin. He had impregnated his own daughter-in-law. This news must have been a shock to his system, tempting him to come up with some way to cover up his sin and save face among his people. But it appears that Judah owned up to his role in the affair and declared Tamar as the undeserving victim.

"She is more righteous than I am, because I didn't arrange for her to marry my son Shelah." – Genesis 38:26 NLT

Tamar went on to give birth to twin sons: Perez and Zerah. And the nature of their births was similar to that of Jacob and Esau. When Zerah attempted to exit the womb first, a midwife tied a scarlet thread to his wrist. But when the babies were finally born, it was Perez who came out first, much to the surprise of the midwife. To all those watching, Zerah should have been the firstborn. Since his hand had come out first, he must have been closest to the birth canal. But inside the womb, the two babies switched positions at the last second, and Perez came out first. He became the unexpected and unlikely firstborn. And it would be through this son that God would fulfill His commitment to Abraham.

*"I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**" – Genesis 12:2-3 ESV*

In his letter to the believers in Galatia, the apostle Paul unpacks this divine promise and clarifies the nature of its meaning.

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. – Galatians 3:7-9 ESV

According to Paul, when God made that promise to Abraham, He was predicting the coming of the Messiah. It would be through the offspring of Abraham that "the blessing" of the nations would come. And Paul reveals that this blessing would come in the form of Jesus the Messiah of Israel.

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. – Galatians 3:16 ESV

This amazing fact is in keeping with the way God continued to reiterate the promise to Abraham and his descendants.

*"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, **and kings shall come from you**. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." – Genesis 17:4-7 ESV*

Not only would Abraham be the father of a great nation, but from his offspring would come great kings, including King David. And the book of Ruth reveals that God would use an unlikely candidate named Perez as the conduit through whom the great King David would come.

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David. – Ruth 4:18-22 ESV

And if we fast-forward to the gospel of Matthew, we see that Jesus would come through the line of Perez as well. That is why He is referred to as the Son of David. Matthew opens up his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. – Matthew 1:2-6 ESV

And the very next line of the genealogy provides another reminder of God's unfathomable ways.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah... – Matthew 1:7 ESV

David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and then ordered the death of her husband so that he could take her as his wife. The child born to them as a result of their immoral act was taken by the Lord. But God replaced that child with Solomon, who would become the heir to David's throne. And it would be through the line of Solomon that Jesus came. Matthew ends the lineage with the words, "and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16 ESV). From Abraham to Judah to Perez to David to Joseph to Jesus.

And while Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, the throne of David rightfully belonged to Jesus as the king's legally justified descendant and heir. God had chosen to bring salvation to the world through the most unlikely of circumstances and by using the least likely people. Despite the immorality of Judah, the trickery of Jacob, the deceit of Tamar, and the other egregious acts of countless other individuals, God's divine will was being accomplished according to His perfect and righteous plan.