

November 14, 2021

“www.ancestry.com or ‘Who’s Who in Jesus’ Family Tree?’”

Part Two: Tamar’s Trickery

A Sermon Based on Genesis 38:24-30

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin



*Tamar, Daughter-in-law of Judah, Marc Chagall 1960*

**Genesis 38:24-30 (NRSV)** ~ <sup>24</sup> About three months later Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar (Ta-Mar) has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.” And Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” <sup>25</sup> As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.” And she said, “Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.” <sup>26</sup> Then Judah acknowledged them and said, “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah (Shee-luh).” And he did not lie with her again. <sup>27</sup> When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. <sup>28</sup> While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, “This one came out first.” <sup>29</sup> But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore he was named Perez (Pee-riz). <sup>30</sup> Afterward his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah (Zihr-uh).

**First Christian Church**

**111 North Fifth St.**

**Murray, KY 42071**

One of the peculiar things about being from the United States is that, unless you are a full-blooded indigenous native American, your DNA comes from another part of the world. As a melting pot nation, so many of us have a rich and diverse heritage with ancestors from many regions. With the growing number of inter-racial, inter-faith, inter-cultural, and international marriages, our family trees are becoming even more colorful and interesting as different bloodlines of the globe merge and mingle. Many, like my family, have been interested in discovering more about our ancestors. Since we have wanted our daughter and eventually our grandchildren to know where they came from, we have done testing both through [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) and [www.23andme.com](http://www.23andme.com), which use a simple saliva test to trace your ancestry back tens of thousands of years.

I discovered that I am 2.8 % Neanderthal (much higher than most people). I learned that I am part of the H3a haplogroup, which arose during the Ice Age in northern Iberia, and after Europe's climate started to warm about 11,000 years ago, my courageous and hardy ancestors (remember the high percentage of Neanderthal in us!) were involved in the difficult resettlement of northern Europe as we moved up the Atlantic seaboard to present-day France and then settled in the British Isles as part of the early Celtic peoples. As part of the T1 haplogroup, Russ can trace his lineage back over 20,000 years to Siberia. He learned that he is over 50% Ashkenazi Jew and many other interesting things about his family tree. All this being said so that you know what the title of my sermon series refers to when I say [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) or 'Who's Who in Jesus' Family Tree?' It's about genetics and family trees.

James Merritt in his inspirational sermon "Broken Pieces," has said that "whether you are rich or poor, black or white, Jew or Gentile, male or female, American or foreign born, or even adopted, there is one thing every single person on this earth has - we all have family trees, genealogies, ancestors and, if we live long enough and are lucky enough, we may have descendants. But family trees represent more than babies and bloodlines. They represent a mosaic. Remember the definition of mosaic?

*mosaic (mo-za'ik) n. 1. A picture or decoration made up of diverse, multi-colored small pieces. In reality, that is what a family tree is - a picture of a family made up of many individual pieces called "ancestors" and "descendants."*

Every birth that takes place on planet earth is another piece in the incredible mosaic that God is putting together as a part of God's plan for you and the world.

Do you know what a family tree really tells us? No one is an accident! Everyone is important!”<sup>1</sup> Our Christian teaching is that we are not the result of human chance, but divine choice. God has providentially chosen our identity to fit us into the exact place we are to take in God’s magnificent mosaic!

So now to shift gears for a moment. Recently, I sat down one morning with the plan of reading through the Gospel of Matthew from beginning to end. You know I can get so focused on reading individual pieces of scripture that I can sometimes miss the forest for the trees, losing sight of the overarching narrative. But my plan was almost immediately thwarted because I found myself stuck in the first seventeen verses of Matthew, which recounts the genealogy beginning with Abraham (the senior patriarch and spiritual father of half the world, including Jews, Muslims, and Christians) to Jesus. Kind of like reading Jesus’ [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) results.

In it, we find a list of 41 names that are hard to pronounce and seldom read. While recognizing some of the great patriarchs of our faith like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Kings David and Solomon, most of the names in the list are people we have never heard of. Closer examination of this list actually shocks us. God indeed fulfilled God’s promise of a Messiah through the bloodline of Abraham but not through the kinds of people one would expect. You would think the lineage of Jesus would be filled with the names of the rich and famous. Yet some have said that it reads more “like a police line-up and the inmates at the county jail.” And then there are the surprising names of women! Since children were seen as being the product and property of men, it was highly unusual for women ever to be listed in ancient Near Eastern genealogies. Women just were not important. Do you remember in the story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, the Gospels wrote that there were 5,000 men “not counting women and children” (Matt 14:21). Women and children simply didn’t count. In fact, did you know that every morning a Jewish male was instructed to wake up and thank God that he had not made him a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. But Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus includes five women. Five! This blows my mind! Simply amazing!

Once we get over the shock that five women are mentioned in Jesus’ family tree, we are further surprised to see that these five women aren’t those we think might be mentioned. How about the great Matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, who are the wives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? No they aren’t mentioned. Listen to the women who are: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. What do we know about these women?

---

<sup>1</sup> James Merritt, “Broken Pieces,” [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com)

Tamar dressed up as a prostitute and engaged in a deceptive incestuous act in order to get pregnant by her father-in-law, Judah. Rahab was a prostitute who hid spies in her home. Ruth, whom we talked about in part one of this sermon series, was a despised Moabite foreigner. Bathsheba was raped by King David. Mary's pregnancy was suspected of having been the result of pre-marital sex and, had Joseph not intervened on her behalf after having been visited by an angel in a dream, she likely would have been stoned to death. These women are not ones we normally would think of as worthy of being in Jesus' family lineage by either ancient or contemporary standards. It makes for quite a surprising stroll as we look at the headstones in Jesus' family cemetery!

To make matters worse, especially for a faith tradition that expected absolute purity of blood line and believed it was a sin worthy of severe punishment to marry outside one's Jewish race, at least three of the five women listed from whom Jesus was directly descended were not even Jews. Tamar was Arab. Rahab was Palestinian. Ruth was Jordanian. While Bathsheba may have been an Israelite, she was closely associated with the Hittites because of Uriah, her Hittite husband.

Now Matthew could simply have done what Luke did when Luke (3:23-38) simply excluded any women from his genealogy (surprising since Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, includes women, their experiences, and their perspectives). But perhaps Matthew included their names because, as a despised tax collector, he wanted to show that outsiders could be included as part of God's redemptive plan. Jesus' family tree showed the radical grace of God that could even include a person like him. Matthew understood that in God's family neither gender or nationality or class or even religion mattered any more. Everyone belongs in God's great mosaic!

Today in this second part of this sermon series, we will look at the first women mentioned in Jesus' family tree. I know, if you read her story in Genesis 38 you are likely blushing. Matthew says that: "***Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar...***" (Matthew 1:3). Tamar, the first scandalous great, great, great grandmother of Jesus! It's shocking to find that Tamar is listed in Jesus' family tree in the Bible. Now I don't know about you, but I've never heard a sermon about Tamar. Most preachers wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole. It's one of those stories that would definitely be excluded from school curriculum materials. Actually, I've seldom heard anyone even mention her name and, when they do, people turn away nervously or quickly change the subject. We tone it down or we gloss over the x-rated parts.

Her story would certainly provide a selling plot for a suspenseful Hollywood thriller! After all it's got all the ingredients: power, seduction, sex, intrigue, conspiracy, deception, suspense, violence. It's an R-rated story but, for those of you who haven't heard it, here it is in summary form:

We start with a man named Judah. Let me give you his basic [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com) and how he fits into God's mosaic.

About 2000 years before Jesus was born, God revealed God's self to a man named Abraham, with whom he entered into a covenant relationship with the promise to make from him a great nation. The problem was that his wife was barren. Yet, miraculously, the elderly Abraham and his 90-year-old wife Sarah, after years of waiting, finally had a son named Isaac, who could carry on the family name and blood line.

Isaac has a son named Jacob. Even though Jacob had serious character flaws and moral failings (including stealing his brother Esau's birthright and inheritance), God furthered God's plan through him, eventually even changing his name to Israel.

Around the year 1900 BCE, Jacob, who has two wives and two handmaids, has 12 sons (and I might add that he also had a daughter named Dinah, whose story I would also like to share someday). The names of the 12 sons are the names later given to the 12 tribes of Israel, which make up the nation of Israel. The fourth of the 12 sons is named Judah. His mother is Leah. We don't focus much on Judah because he is completely overshadowed in both Jewish and Christian tradition by his younger brother Joseph. You remember Joseph of the coat of many colors who was the favored child of his father Jacob? The Joseph who bragged about this to his siblings, who became so jealous and fed up with him that they initially considered killing him by throwing him in a cistern? Judah enters into the picture by coming up with an alternative plan: hey, why kill our little brother when we could make some money off of him? See that traveling Midianite caravan there on its way to Egypt? Let's sell Joseph to them! (Genesis 37:26-27) And that's what they did: they sold their brother Joseph for twenty shekels of silver, who then took him to Egypt where they sold him to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials. The brothers, to cover their tracks, took the blood of a goat they had slaughtered, dipped Joseph's coat in it, and then took it back to his father Jacob who was inconsolable, believing that his favorite son Joseph was dead.

But then something happens that we don't usually notice. The story of Joseph, which takes up much of the rest of the book of Genesis, is temporarily suspended. Even though, as Christians, we are expecting Joseph to show up in Jesus' family tree, it is his treacherous older brother Judah who appears instead. Between chapters 37 and 39 of Genesis we are taken on a little, usually overlooked but fascinating detour. Chapter 38 of Genesis tells the story of this fourth son of Jacob, Judah, and his daughter-in-law Tamar. While Joseph was forced off into another land as he was sold into slavery, Judah willingly chooses (who knows, perhaps because of the guilt and remorse of what he had done to his brother, which was causing his father so much grief) to leave his family and faith tradition and morals to seek his fortune among the Canaanites in the town of Adullam.

We recall that the Canaanites were the sworn enemies of the Jews and intermarriage between them was forbidden. Nonetheless Judah married a Canaanite woman named Bath-Shuah. They had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. In the ancient Near East, wives were usually chosen for husbands by the parents. Thus, Judah chose a Canaanite girl, by the name of Tamar, to be Er's wife. Poor Tamar. The scripture says that Er ***“was wicked in the Lord's sight so the Lord put him to death”*** (Genesis 38:7). We don't know what evil acts he committed, but he must have been pretty bad for God to do away with him! This means that now Tamar was left in the extremely precarious situation as a young widow without any sons to carry on her husband's name, and to protect and support her.

Judaism, however, had a built-in life insurance policy or social security plan to take care of such childless widows through an institution called “Levirate Marriage.” We actually heard about this in part one of this sermon series in which Boaz married Ruth. In Levirate marriage the nearest living male relative is required to marry the widow. This usually was the oldest brother of the deceased. In such marriages, a son born of this union would not only carry on the family name of the dead man but this son also would inherit the property of the deceased. It was under this system of Levirate marriage that Judah then married Tamar off to his second son Onan.

Onan, though, was a narcissistic, selfish, greedy, and conniving man. He knew that if he and Tamar did not produce a son, then his older brother's inheritance would instead go directly to him. Onan wanted that inheritance for himself and so he practiced a form of birth control that prevented Tamar from getting pregnant (later known as ‘onanism’—oh-nuhn-ism). (You can read about it in Genesis 38 yourself since I'm not sure that this is supposed to be a sex ed class!) Basically, all the pleasure but none of the responsibility!

This was not pleasing in the Lord's sight, so Onan also is put to death by the Lord.

Judah must have been very worried by this time. Not only was his third son Shelah too young yet to be married but he is scared about what might happen to him should he marry Tamar. What if God puts him to death too! So he sends Tamar back to live in her father's house where she is unable to marry anyone else since she is betrothed to Shelah. The scriptures say that ***“Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, ‘Remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up’—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father’s house”*** (Gen 38:11). But Judah had no intention of bringing Tamar and Shelah together. He basically washes his hands of the situation.

Years pass by... Tamar is getting older and growing more desperate. She cannot get on with her life since she is legally betrothed to Shelah. Should she marry someone else she would be accused of committing adultery, which might lead her to being stoned to death. Desperation sets in. Likely depression, despair, and despondency. Anger and rage too. She may well be filled with feelings of wanting revenge.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Judah has forgotten about Tamar. Eventually, Judah's wife Bath-Shuah dies and, after waiting the mandatory period of mourning, he travels on the road to the town of Timnah in the hill country of Judah to shear his sheep. His reputation preceded him in more than one way though.

Not only did Tamar learn that he was going to be traveling but she also knew of his encounters with the temple prostitutes who waited on that road. So, knowing that she fully deserved that her first husband's inheritance should support her, she decided to take matters into her own hands and devised a plan. She took off her usual widow's clothing and covered herself with a veil so that Judah would not recognize her. She stood and waited at the place on the road where the temple prostitutes normally looked for prospects. And then, lo and behold, there walked Judah! The scriptures say that Judah ***“went over 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?’”*** (Genesis 38:16). Judah promised to give Tamar a young goat from his flock if she would have sex with him. Since he did not have the goat with him, Tamar told him that he would need to give her a pledge consisting of his signet and cord, and the staff that he was carrying.

Judah must really have wanted to be with her to give her these items since they basically amounted to what today might be our driver's license with our photo on it, a social security card, and a credit card. Judah actually trusted her with these valuable items! After their act was consummated, down the road Judah continued. When he was out of sight, Tamar put back on her widow's garments and returned to her father's house. She soon learned that she was carrying her father-in-law Judah's child (actually twins).

Judah, either too lazy or too embarrassed to get back the items he had left with the supposed prostitute he had been with, sends his friend with a young goat to exchange for his signet, cord, and staff. But, strangely, no one seems to know who or where this temple prostitute is! Three months go by. Gossip starts circulating about Tamar. Someone comes to Judah and says: ***“Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.” And Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.”*** (Genesis 38:24)

As Tamar was being brought out to be burned at the stake, she managed to have a message sent to her father-in-law Judah, along with the pledges she had received from him. The note said: ***“It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.” And she said, “Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.”*** (Gen 38:25)

Judah, immediately recognizing these items as his and understanding fully that he was complicit, was shaken to the core and jolted into an awareness of both his sin and her righteousness. He confessed his sins in relation to Tamar and said: ***“She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.’ And he did not lie with her again.”*** (Gen 38:26).

Tamar ended up giving birth to twin sons. In an interesting providential twist, the baby boy, Zerah, who was to come out first ended up going back into the womb and the boy who was to be born second, Perez, came out first instead. And it was this Perez—born to a father who was disobedient to God and a victimized mother forced in her desperation to engage in a deceptive, incestuous relationship—who was to become part of Jesus' family tree.

So what do we think of Tamar? Would her name go down in history books as the woman who had engaged in deception, prostitution, bribery, and incest as she tricked her father-in-law into impregnating her with twins? Would she henceforth be remembered as the evil woman in an x-rated story in the Bible? Is this how God would have her be known? And is there any vindication for Judah?



As James Merritt asks: “Could God find a way to use Tamar, a wounded and broken woman, the victim of the unjust and cruel circumstances into which she was born, as a piece in the beautiful mosaic being created?”<sup>2</sup>

Well, let’s turn to the Bible to answer that question, for we do hear about Tamar again twice in the scriptures. First, let’s flash forward about 700 years<sup>3</sup> and stand with the townspeople and elders at the gates of Bethlehem, when they issue a blessing to a couple named Boaz and Ruth, who are to be married, with these words: **“May you produce children in Ephrathah (Ef-ruh-thuh) and bestow a name in Bethlehem; <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 (Pee-riz), whom Tamar (Ta-Mar) bore to Judah.” ... <sup>18</sup>Now these are the descendants of Perez (Pee-riz): Perez (Pee-riz) became the father of Hezron, <sup>19</sup>Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab (Uh-min-uh-dib), <sup>20</sup>Amminadab (Uh-min-uh-dib) of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, <sup>21</sup>Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, <sup>22</sup>Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.** (Ruth 4:11-12, 18-22)

David! Because of Tamar the world would be introduced first to the young boy, celebrated for his slingshot slaying of the giant Goliath, who went on to become the great King David! Tamar is exalted as being the great grandmother of King David!

But that’s not all! Listen to this as we flash forward another thousand and some years to the first lines of the book of Matthew:

***This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:  
Abraham was the father of Isaac,  
Isaac the father of Jacob,  
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,  
Judah the father of Perez (Pee-riz) and Zerah (Zihr-uh), whose mother was Tamar ...***  
(Matt 1:1-3)

Wow! Tamar is the scandalous great great great grandmother of Jesus too!

How does it make you feel to know that Jesus’ family tree is made up of people who were Gentiles, unwed mothers, foreigners, adulteresses, prostitutes, liars, and schemers? It is more like looking at a Hall of Shame than a Hall of Fame, isn’t it? How could Jesus be related to them? How could the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God, and the Savior of the world come from this line of ancestors?

---

<sup>2</sup> “Broken Pieces,” in [www.sermons.com](http://www.sermons.com)

<sup>3</sup> Ruth was likely written during the time of the judges between 1380-1050 BCE.

Well, I don't know about you, but I have to confess that Jesus' family tree gives me hope! After all, I am far from perfect. There are lots of skeletons in the closet of my family tree as I'm sure there are in yours. But you know what? This story shows us that it doesn't matter what your family tree is like! It doesn't matter what you might find out if you look into ancestry.com or 23andme. God can take your mistakes and those of your ancestors, your shortcomings and sins, your brokenness and woundedness and actually create good out of it. God plans to use you and your family tree in God's beautiful mosaic!

So, in closing, with the apostle Paul, let us confidently proclaim with Ruth and Boaz, and Tamar and Judah of old: ***“We are God’s masterpiece. God has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things God planned for us so long ago.”*** (Eph. 2:10)

Is that not something to celebrate?

Let us pray ...

**Judah and Tamar**

**38** It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. <sup>2</sup> There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. <sup>3</sup> She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. <sup>4</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. <sup>5</sup> Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She<sup>[a]</sup> was in Chezib when she bore him. <sup>6</sup> Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. <sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother." <sup>9</sup> But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. **10** What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. <sup>11</sup> Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

<sup>12</sup> In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over,<sup>[b]</sup> he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup> When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," <sup>14</sup> she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. <sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup> He went over 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?" <sup>17</sup> He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it." <sup>18</sup> He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. <sup>19</sup> Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

<sup>20</sup> When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. <sup>21</sup> He asked the townspeople, “Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?” But they said, “No prostitute has been here.” <sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah, and said, “I have not found her; moreover the townspeople said, ‘No prostitute has been here.’” <sup>23</sup> Judah replied, “Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her.”

<sup>24</sup> About three months later Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.” And Judah said, “Bring her out, and let her be burned.” <sup>25</sup> As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, “It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.” And she said, “Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.” <sup>26</sup> Then Judah acknowledged them and said, “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not lie with her again.

<sup>27</sup> When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. <sup>28</sup> While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, “This one came out first.” <sup>29</sup> But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” Therefore he was named Perez.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>30</sup> Afterward his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.<sup>[d]</sup>

## Footnotes

- a. Genesis 38:5 Gk: Heb *He*
- b. Genesis 38:12 Heb *when Judah was comforted*
- c. Genesis 38:29 That is *A breach*
- d. Genesis 38:30 That is *Brightness*; perhaps alluding to the crimson thread