

The Appearance of Righteousness?

READING

Genesis 38

Deuteronomy 25

Romans 6

Romans 2

Matthew 23

To my mind, the story of Yehudah (Judah) and Tamar is one of the strangest in the Old Testament.

It has two brothers who were so evil that Yahweh actually killed them.

A father who sidestepped the same law one of them was killed for breaking, and who slept with his prostitute daughter in law, threatened to burn her alive, and yet he lived.

And a double widow who deliberately, through deception, became pregnant as a prostitute, to her own father in law, and was not only declared righteous, but who became a great, great... great, grandmother to Yeshua, the saviour of mankind!

Hollywood, eat your heart out.

This story really highlights the difference between the appearance of righteousness, on the outside, as seen by others, and actual righteousness, on the inside, seen only by ourselves and Yahweh.

The first brother, Er, didn't even have the appearance of righteousness, he was so wicked that Yahweh intervened and killed him.

Of course Yahweh had killed many evil people in the flood. But it raises the question, how evil do you have to be for God to personally intervene and to specifically kill you himself?

His brother Onan had the appearance of righteousness. He married his brother's widow as he should have by their law. He slept with her to produce offspring, as he should have. But he withdrew at the last minute to make sure that no baby would result. Possibly even Tamar wasn't aware of that. Certainly from outside the marriage bed, everyone would have thought he was an honourable brother, doing what he could to honour his dead brother and to provide for his widow.

The father, Yehudah (Jacob), had the appearance of righteousness. He had no obligation to provide children to her himself, but his youngest son did. But he used the excuse of the son's very young age to play for time, all the while having no intention whatsoever of asking his third son to fulfil his obligation when he became old enough to do so. On the outside he appeared to be taking care of his sons' widow. On the inside he was plotting and scheming on how to do the very opposite of that. (As he had done his whole life).

The widow, Tamar, on the other hand, had the appearance of unrighteousness, but actually she was the only righteous one in the whole story. Obviously she fell for the wrong kind of guy in the beginning. But Yahweh didn't kill her, only her husband. Yahweh also didn't kill her when her second husband decided to break the law and the obligation he had to his brother, (and to Yahweh).

And he didn't even kill her when she became a prostitute and deceived her father in law into sleeping with her to finally fulfil the family obligation to provide heirs for her first husband.

It seems that God's plan right from the outset was for Tamar, the only one declared righteous in this whole story, to bear the descendant of Yehudah who was to become the ancestor of Yeshua (the saviour).

And in the movie version, it would seem that the forces of evil had gotten wind of the plan, and they were desperately doing all they could to derail God's plan any way they could. Possibly with the thought that if they can stop the line here, there would be no Yeshua and they would win the war, and control humanity forever.

Yehudah's firstborn marries the destined woman. The plan is unfolding...

But the forces of evil corrupt the husband in their attempt to thwart the plans of Yahweh.

And we discover that he becomes so evil that Yahweh intervenes directly and kills him himself. Destroying his own plan?

Perhaps evil has won after all?

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Now the Law, that a brother must have children with his brother's widow was not actually handed down by Yahweh for about 250 years after this. But it seems that they already knew that this was your obligation if your brother passed away leaving no children.

It still is a law for Jews, and for those Christians who claim that they keep the law. Although I think it went the way of not eating pork, and it's one of the laws that gets ignored by those self righteous people who want to earn their own salvation, but who actually want to pick and choose which laws they are keeping. (Although wouldn't that be up to the law maker? Just sayin'). You know there are no rules for Christians. (Unless they're self righteous).

Er's brother, Onan was reluctant, so he tried to fulfil his obligation in a superficial, legalistic way, by doing his duty and having sex with his brother's widow, but he secretly withdrew at the last minute so she wouldn't become pregnant. Nobody needed to know, they could all go on thinking he was a great guy.

How often do we do the same thing? How often do we just settle for the superficial appearance of righteousness, when we know in our hearts how evil we actually are?

The forces of evil tried to use a bit more subtlety and deception this time. But this evil was also terminated by death at the hands of Yahweh.

The Hollywood drama would have us wondering - is Yahweh trying to ruin his own plan? Or does he know that his plan will succeed no matter what and he doesn't want to use anyone as evil as this to bring it about?

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Yehudah knew that the obligation now passed to his youngest son, Shelah. But he had the convenient excuse that he was still too young. So he promised that Shelah would fulfil his obligation when he was old enough. He was just playing for time, and he was looking for a way out of this, in case his last son became 3 out of 3 to sleep with Tamar and then to be killed by Yahweh.

You can see his thinking. You might even agree with it. How horrible for a father to lose three of his sons like this.

But even when Shelah was grown, the obligation was not met.

So Tamar took matters into her own hands and deceived the recently widowed Yehudah into sleeping with her by pretending to be a prostitute. (That shouldn't have worked right? And that fact that it did says a lot about his righteousness too. Or his lack of it).

Even then he was so self-righteous that when he heard that she had become pregnant as a prostitute, he declared the death penalty on her. (Knowing that he also had committed the other half of the same crime himself! It's OK for him to visit a prostitute, but not OK for her to be one!).

How often do we do that? Point out the failings of others when our other three fingers are tucked under our hand pointing back at us because we do the same things!

So in the end he had to admit that he was a hypocrite, and that she was more righteous than him, (and his whole family), because she had done what was needed to fulfil the obligation to the law of Yahweh, when he and his sons had all refused.

In the end, Yahweh's plan **was** successful. (It was unusual, a bit "out there", but it was successful).

There is a lot for us in this story.

Who is righteous? Who is evil? Who is just like us?

Would we have done the same?

Next time you feel judgemental on someone else, be honest and ask yourself if you're actually the same.

If you are sure you're not. Ask Yahweh to show you if you are the same.

You know he will.