

Study 11: Joseph, Part 2 Genesis 37-38

Before we resume our examination of Genesis, I wanted to touch briefly again on the notion of a “double fulfillment” of prophecy. To quote the eminent Bible scholar, Milton Terry, author of *Biblical Hermeneutics*: “...the moment we admit the principle that portions of Scripture contain an occult or double sense, we introduce an element of uncertainty in the Sacred Volume, and unsettle all scientific interpretation” (p. 383 of the 1883 edition). In other words, if the notion of a “double fulfillment” of prophecy is true, there is nothing to prevent us from applying this supposed principle to *every* prophetic passage in Scripture, including those of Messianic import. For example, some claim that a passage such as Joel 2:10 was *sort of* fulfilled in Acts 2:16 ff., but that there is a more “complete” fulfillment of it to come. If this interpretive methodology is valid, what is there to prevent us from applying it to the prophecies predicting the (first) coming of the Christ? We may say, with equal “validity” that Jesus *sort of* fulfilled these prophecies in His life, death, and resurrection, but that we should expect *another* Christ to come in the future to fulfill these prophecies in a “fuller” or more “complete” sense. This is no different from the claim of some that the prophecies of Jesus regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and His second coming were *sort of* fulfilled in the 1st century (in AD 70), but that a “more complete” fulfillment awaits us in the future. If prophetic passages such as these may be applied to *multiple events*, there is no reason to suppose that those concerning the Messiah will not be more “fully fulfilled” in the future, too. The *univocal nature of language* demands that Scripture can have only *one* meaning in a given context. A prophecy cannot be *kind of* fulfilled. This is like saying a woman is *kind of* pregnant! Either she is, or she isn’t! There isn’t any *kind of*. As the ancient sage Yoda said, “There is no *try*. There is only *do*.” The Bible speaks with *one voice*, and is *clear* (“perspicuity of Scripture”). Whereas there may be many *applications* (e.g., of a principle), there is only one *fulfillment*.

Overview of chapters:

Gen 37: 29 When Reuben returned to the cistern (“waterless pit” [Zech 9:11] = Sheol / death) and saw that Joseph was not there, he tore his clothes. 30 He went back to his brothers and said, “The boy isn’t there! Where can I turn now?”

31 Then they got Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood.

[Note the use of this to cover over or *atone for* their sin. Compare **Gen 49:11**: ...he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.

Isa 63:1-6: Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forward in the greatness of his strength?

“It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save.”

2 Why are your garments red, like those of one treading the winepress?

3 “I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing.

4 It was for me the day of vengeance; the year for me to redeem had come.

5 I looked, but there was no one to help, I was appalled that no one gave support; so my own arm achieved salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me.

6 I trampled the nations in my anger; in my wrath I made them drunk and poured their blood on the ground.”

Rev 19:13: He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.]

32 They took the ornate robe back to their father and said, “We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.”

33 He recognized it and said, “It is my son’s robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces.”

34 Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. “No,” he said, “I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.” So his father wept for him.

36 Meanwhile, the Midianites sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard [literally “chief of the slaughterers”].

Gen 38: [The biblical text at this point seems to take a detour, and begins telling us about Judah. Remember that it was Judah who suggested the sale, rather than the murder, of Joseph (Gen 37:26-27). Like Reuben, he, too, was trying to spare Joseph’s life. Now, after Joseph has been sold into Egyptian bondage, Judah separates himself from his family. It’s as if he’s saying, “If this is what a family is supposed to be like, I want no part of it!” He shows this by moving away, and marrying a Canaanite woman (as Esau did), which further separates him from his family, and the covenant. His wife bears him 3 children: Er (whom Judah names), Onan (whom his wife names), and Shelah (whom his wife also names, and for whose birth, Judah is not even present. He is in Kesiv, which means *deceit* and *disappointment*. This is also the meaning of the name *Shelah*). Judah, acting as a good father, gets a woman named Tamar to be the wife of his firstborn son, Er. When Er is stricken by God for his wickedness and dies without having had any children, Judah tells his son, Onan, to raise up children for his dead brother (This is called *levirate marriage*, and was seen as a kind of *redemption* of the one who died childless). When Onan, who wanted to raise children in his *own* name, “spills his seed” instead of allowing it to impregnate Tamar, God strikes him, too, and he dies. [There is a theme here of the **abdication of fraternal responsibility**, which began with the betrayal of Joseph, and continues here with the refusal of Onan to raise up children in his brother’s name]. So, Judah promises Tamar that once Shelah is old enough, he will be given to her as a husband. However, Judah is lying. He has no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar, fearing that he, too, will be struck dead, and leaving Judah without progeny to carry on his name. Of course, by keeping Shelah at home and unmarried, the results would be the same! (Notice that Scripture never mentions Shelah marrying or having children). Verse 12 says, “After a long time Judah’s wife, the daughter of Shua, died.” When Tamar realizes that Judah is not going to fulfill his obligation to her, she disguises herself as a prostitute and puts herself in the path of Judah, who is traveling to shear his sheep. There is a comparison here between Tamar and Rebecca (covers herself with a veil, is able to see [Enaim = eyes], seeking the blessing by becoming part of the covenant family). Judah negotiates to pay her a goat for her sexual services, and she demands a pledge be given her until the goat is delivered. She asks for, and is given, Judah’s staff and signet (a seal used for documents). It’s interesting that a goat was used in chapter 37 to deceive Jacob, and now a goat is being used to deceive Judah. Judah, it seems, needs to have his eyes opened to see his responsibility to *redeem* his sons. Tamar is used to do this, and when she is found to be pregnant, and she reveals the pledge given to her, showing that Judah is the father, Judah acknowledges his error, and Tamar’s righteousness in the matter. This lesson will be applied later, when Jacob is asked to send *his* youngest son, Benjamin, to redeem his brothers, and Judah volunteers to be surety for Benjamin (**Gen 43:8-9**). Twins are born to Tamar: Perez (*breaking out*) and Zerah (*scarlet* or *brightness*). These twins become ancestors of Jesus (**Matt 1:2**), and are marked out as significant by one of them having a “scarlet thread” tied around his wrist at birth. We will see the reappearance of *scarlet* as a color representing *redemption* (salvation) throughout Scripture. The narrative now returns to Joseph].