

Who was Judah in the Bible?

Judah was the fourth son of Jacob with his wife Leah, and the head of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The other 11 tribes descended from Judah's brothers and half-brothers.

Judah's second-to-youngest brother, Joseph, was preferred by their father, and Judah and his brothers hated Joseph (Genesis 37:3-4). One day, the brothers threw Joseph in a cistern and conspired to kill him. The eldest sibling, Reuben, argued against this course of action, intending to rescue Joseph from the others (verses 21-22). But while the brothers ate lunch, and in Reuben's absence, a caravan approached, and Judah came up with a plan to sell Joseph to the caravan's merchants as a slave (verses 26-17). The brothers agreed, and Joseph was sold and taken to Egypt.

It is possible that Judah felt remorse or guilt for his actions, for "at that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah" (Genesis 38:1). There, Judah married a Canaanite woman who gave Judah three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. When Er grew up, Judah gave him a wife named Tamar. But Er was an evil man, so the Lord put him to death (verse 7). Following the custom of levirate marriage, Tamar was then given to Onan, who selfishly refused to give Tamar children (verse 9); he was also put to death by the Lord for his actions. Shelah was too young to take a wife, so Judah ordered Tamar to live as a widow in her father's house (verse 11).

After several years Judah's own wife died, and he grieved. When he recovered, he traveled to Timnah to oversee to the shearing of his sheep. Tamar, still a widow in spite of the fact that Shelah had grown up, heard that her father-in-law was coming, and she devised a plan. Tamar put on a veil and pretended to be a prostitute on the road to Timnah (Genesis 38:14). The veil hid her identity from Judah, and Judah slept with her.

Tamar became pregnant, which had been her goal all along. Three months later, when Judah found out that his supposedly chaste daughter-in-law was pregnant, he was filled with rage: “Bring her out and have her burned to death!” he demanded (verse 24). As she was being brought out for punishment as a harlot, Tamar produced evidence that her pregnancy was due to Judah’s own immorality. Judah saw his hypocrisy and repented, saying, “She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn’t give her to my son Shelah” (verse 26). Judah did not have sexual relations with Tamar after that. She later gave birth to twins, two boys named Perez and Zerah (verses 29-30).

Meanwhile, God was with Judah’s brother Joseph in Egypt, elevating Joseph to a place of power second only the Pharaoh himself (Genesis 41:39-40). Joseph had interpreted the king’s dream warning of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, and so Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of gathering grain to store for the lean years. Under Joseph’s supervision, a large amount of grain was set aside (verse 49). When the great famine came upon the land, it affected even Canaan. Judah and his brothers traveled from Canaan to Egypt to buy some of the surplus food. Joseph eventually revealed himself to his brothers, who were remorseful for what they had done to him (for more on this, see Genesis 42 - 45).

Soon, Joseph brought his entire family to the land of Egypt, where their descendants would live for several hundred years, according to God’s great plan for His people. This is where Jacob died, and before he passed, he called all his sons to bless them. In spite of all Judah’s faults, his blessing from Jacob was both rich and wonderful; in it, Jacob foretold that Judah’s house would be the greatest, and the scepter, or rule, would not depart from his descendants (see Genesis 49:8-12 for the full blessing). Jacob’s words held true, for, many years later, Judah’s line produced King David and his dynasty

and, eventually, through the line of Perez, came the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who is called “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Revelation 5:5).