

## Genesis 38

In the last chapter, Judah suggested the brothers sell Joseph into slavery (37:26-27). Later, Judah will offer to stay in Egypt as a slave, in Benjamin's place, so his brother can return home to Jacob (44:18-34). Perhaps we see the change of Judah's heart in this chapter. Additionally, it will appear that Tamar is a Canaanite (although it is not explicitly said, as it is of Judah's wife; 38:2), so that we have someone from that background becoming a part of God's plan to save man, showing that God has always had a universal love (contrast 24:3; 27:46-28:1). The title for this section, recall, is "the genealogy of Jacob" (37:2). Thus, we have a story involving Judah who has a sexual relationship with his daughter-in-law, to have a son through whom the Messiah will come. Moses tells us these events happened "at that time" (38:1), which means they happen somewhat contemporary with Joseph being sold into slavery.

### TRANSLATION - 38:1-5:

**1** Now it happened at that time that Judah went down from with his brothers and he settled near an Adullamite man and his name [was] Chira. **2** Then Judah saw there the daughter of the man, a Canaanite, and his name [was] Shua and he took her and came to her. **3** Then she conceived and bore a son and he called his name Er. **4** Then she conceived again and gave birth to a son and she called his name Onan. **5** Then it happened again and she gave birth to a son and she called his name Shela and it was in Chezib when she gave birth to him.

### ARCHAEOLOGY:

This is the only text in Scripture which uses "Adullamite" (38:1, 12, 20). But the village is found in 1 Sam. 22:1; Micah 1:15. It seems to have been northwest of Hebron. Hebron is 3,040 feet above sea level, one of the highest points in southern Canaan. So, although Judah would be going north, he would still be going *down*.

Chezib, or "Akzib", is mentioned in Joshua 15:44; Micah 1:14. It appears to have been three miles west of Adullam. Timnah (vs 12) is about 4 miles northeast of Adullam.

### COMMENTS:

Judah finds a wife, marries her, and has three sons by her. In contrast to Isaac and Jacob, Judah takes a wife from the daughters of the Canaanites. That fact does not actually enter into the account but Tamar acts "more righteously" than Judah does (38:26). Each son will serve a brief role in the event.

### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - It is almost universally assumed that God did not want the patriarchs to marry Canaanites. Yet, there is no command or implication that God did not want the patriarchs to marry a Canaanite. Here, Judah marries a Canaanite. He has three sons.

*Contemporaries of Moses* - The Law would stipulate that a man should marry his brother's widow so that she would have children to provide for her (Deut. 25:5-10). Otherwise, such a marriage would be sinful (Lev. 18:16; 20:21). This responsibility was found in other ANE cultures so it is no surprise to see it here in Genesis, before the Law would be given. This action was to carry on the name of the deceased brother as well (Deut. 25:6).

*Later Hebrew writers* - The story of Ruth is based on the law of Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

### TRANSLATION - 38:6-11:

**6** Then Judah took a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name [was] Tamar. **7** Then it happened Er, the firstborn of Judah, [was] evil in the eyes of Jehovah and Jehovah killed him.

**8** So Judah said to Onan, "Come, to the wife of your brother and marry her and raise up seed for your brother." **9** But Onan knew that it was not his, the seed, that it would be if he

came to the wife of his brother, so he poured on the ground lest he give seed to his brother. **10** Now he was evil in the eyes of Jehovah what he did and He killed even him.

**11** So Judah said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law, "Dwell a widow, in the house of your father, until Shelah matures, my son, because lest he himself will die as his brothers." So Tamar went and dwelt in the house of her father.

#### WORDS:

The verb "to mature" (verse 11) is the verbal form of the adjective "large or great."

#### COMMENTS:

Tamar enters the account at this point, as a wife of Judah's firstborn, Er. We do not know anything about Er's evil behavior but it was wicked enough that Jehovah God struck him dead. Actually, "Er" is the reverse spelling in Hebrew of the word "evil". God has destroyed the whole world and He has destroyed whole cities. Er is the first individual God has killed. Judah then gave his second son, Onan, to Tamar as a husband, to raise up children through Tamar so that Tamar would have children to care for her through her life and into her later years.

Yet Onan knew the "seed" (children), would not be his own but Tamar's and he decided not to fulfill his obligation, in that culture, and take Tamar as his wife. So, he interrupted his sexual act to spill his sperm on the ground. The grammar suggests that this was a regular behavior of Onan with Tamar. God was not pleased with Onan's short-sighted selfishness, considering it "evil" and Jehovah God struck him dead as well.

Judah is now concerned about his third, and last (only) son, Shelah. He promises to give Shelah to Tamar as a husband, when he matures. Yet it appears from verse 11 that Judah is delaying the decision, for some unknown reason. As the account continues, it appears that Judah had no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - God has wanted the patriarchs to be fruitful and multiply (15:5; 17:6, 20; 22:17; 26:4; 28:3; 32:13; 35:11). We do not know Er's error but Onan apparently was not taking seriously God's command for them to have children. God has not directly killed an individual, although He has threatened (20:3).

*NT writers* - The Sadducees present Jesus with a question that was intended to illustrate the ludicrous idea of a resurrection and life after death. Their scenario is very much like this specific situation but made more ludicrous (Matt. 22:24; Mark 12:21; Luke 20:28).

#### TRANSLATION - 38:12-19:

**12** Many days were multiplied and the daughter of Shua died, the wife of Judah and Judah was comforted and he went up to the shearers of his sheep and Hirah, his friend, the Adullamite, toward Timnah.

**13** So it was announced to Tamar, saying, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah, to shear his sheep." **14** So she took off her garments of widowhood from on her and she covered with a veil and wrapped herself and sat at the entrance of Enaim which [was] on the way to Timna because she saw that Shelah had matured and she was not given to him as a wife.

**15** Then Judah saw her and thought her to be a prostitute because she had covered her face. **16** So he turned aside to her on the way and he said, "Come, please. Let me come to you," because he did not know that his daughter-in-law she [was] and she said, "What will you give to me that you come to me?"

**17** Then he said, "I myself will send for a female kid from the flock" and she said, "If you give a down payment until you send...?"

**18** So he said, "What [is] the down payment which I can give to you?" And she said, "Your signet and your cords and your staff which [is] in your hand." And he gave to her and he

came to her and she conceived for him. **19** Then she arose and she went and she took off her veil from on her and she dressed in the garments of her widowhood.

#### WORDS:

“To be comforted” (verse 12) has been used 7 times (out of a total of 108 times) already in Genesis, first at 5:29, then 6:6-7 (where, see “Words”). It can be translated “to be sorry, regret, console, comfort, or have compassion.” “To be a prostitute” (verse 15) is found here and at 34:31 in Genesis. It is found 60 times and means to “commit fornication, be a prostitute, or be unfaithful.” In the latter sense, it is used in the prophets to refer to Israel’s attitude toward Jehovah God.

“To turn aside” (verse 16) is the same verb translated “to settle” in verse 1. The verb (used 216 times) can mean “to spread out, pitch (a tent), turn, bend.” Here, it seems to have a more temporary connotation, as in a “one-night-stand.” “Down payment” (verse 17) is only used here in Scripture (verses 17-18, 20). “Signet” (verse 18) is found fourteen times and might refer to a seal or a signet ring. “Cords” (11 times) is a cord or thread. “Staff” (252 times) can also refer to a “tribe,” thus the frequency of its use.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Sheep-shearing was a community affair because of its long duration so it had become a lively festival (31:19 and comments there; 1 Sam. 25:2-8; 2 Sam. 13:23-24). “Timnah” is located on the border between Judah and Dan (Josh. 15:10; see also Judges 14:1-5).

The seal or signet was engraved to identify it as Judah’s. There were seals which imprinted by rolling or by stamping. The seal was carried on a cord. The staff was a symbol of authority as well as being used for defense. Its top was engraved or decorated to denote ownership (cf. Num. 17:2 and that context).

#### COMMENTS:

Judah’s own wife, the daughter of Shua (observe that we do not know her name), has passed away and Judah has recovered emotionally from her death. The time for shearing sheep has arrived and Judah goes to Timnah with a friend, an Adullamite as we saw in verse 1. Tamar was told that Judah was on his way to Timnah to shear sheep.

So, Tamar concocts a scheme to become pregnant from Judah himself. He had not given Shelah to Tamar to provide for her. So, Tamar dresses in such a way as to entice Judah. She will be considered a “temple prostitute” although idolatry or pagan temples are not found in the context at all.

Judah desired to have sexual relations with Tamar, not realizing she was who she was, but Tamar requires payment. Judah offered to send after and give her a kid from his female goats. So Tamar asks for a down payment while she waits for the kid to arrive. Judah doesn’t have anything else except the pieces of property that belong to him as an estate owner: his signet, cords, and staff. Being selfishly short-sighted, Judah agrees.

Judah had his relationship with Tamar and the two separated. Judah goes on his way, expecting to send a kid goat to her and get his belongings back. Tamar, pregnant with the child she needed, changes back into her widow’s clothing.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Judah seemed to want a sexual relationship at any price. He was not married; he was widowed. Yet, his behavior still comes across as being ungodly, even by patriarchal standards.

*Contemporaries of Moses* - The Law will forbid sexual relations with one’s daughter-in-law (Lev. 20:12). The Law will also forbid temple prostitutes (Deut. 23:17-18) and fornication (Deut. 22:21).

#### TRANSLATION - 38:20-23:

**20** Then Judah sent the female kid in the hand of his friend, the Adullamite, to take the down payment from the hand of the woman but he could not find her. **21** And he asked the men of that place, saying, “Where is the temple prostitute? She [was] at Enaim on the way?” And they said, “There was not in this place a temple prostitute.” **22** Then he returned to Judah and said, “I did not find her and even the men of the place said there was not in this place a temple prostitute.” **23** Then Judah said, “Let her take for herself lest we be contempt. Behold, I have sent this kid and she herself you could not find.”

#### WORDS:

“Temple prostitute” (verse 21) is the feminine form of the word “holy.” This might suggest the idea of a “temple” prostitute. The feminine form is only found eleven times in Scripture. The word family, “to be holy, holiness, sanctuary” is used well over 700 times. “Contempt” (verse 23) is found only here in Genesis. Its other uses (11 total times) are only in the wisdom literature, Psalms, Job, and Proverbs. It means, here, an object of contempt.

#### COMMENTS:

Judah arrives back home and sends a kid goat to the prostitute, through his friend, the Adullamite. His friend cannot find the woman and, after asking around, learns that no one knows anything about her. When he reports back to Judah, the son of Jacob justifies the events in the sense that he tried to fulfill his part of the bargain, little realizing that his personal property served a purpose in the scheme of Tamar.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - At this point, Judah honestly tried to fulfill his pledge but could not since Tamar had left her cover.

#### TRANSLATION - 38:24-26:

**24** Then it was after three months that it was announced to Judah, saying, “Tamar has prostituted, your daughter-in-law, and even, behold, she is pregnant by prostitutions!” So Judah said, “Bring her out and let her be burned!”

**25** She was brought and she sent to her father-in-law, saying, “To a man whose [are] these, to him I myself am pregnant.” And she said, “Investigate, please, to whom [are] the signet, the cords and the staff, these.”

**26** So Judah investigated and he said, “[You are] more righteous than me because I did not give you to Shelah, my son,” and he did not again know her.

#### WORDS:

“To prostitute” (verse 24; 60 times) means to “commit fornication, act as a prostitute, or be unfaithful.” “Prostitutions” (verse 24) is the noun form of the prior verb, in the plural to suggest a habitual practice or to heighten the intensity of the accusation. It is used a dozen times.

#### COMMENTS:

Pregnancies are notoriously, though not impossibly, hard to conceal. After three months, it was announced to Judah that his daughter-in-law, who was supposed to have been a widow, was pregnant. Judah feels ashamed of his family member and calls for her to be brought and burned to death.

Tamar was brought out, but not yet in the presence of her father-in-law. She sent the signet, cords, and staff and reported that the father of her baby is the owner of those possessions. Judah was convicted by his own conscience, knowing that Tamar was taking care of her future needs and Judah admits that she was acting more righteously than Judah had been. From that point on, Judah had no further sexual relations with Tamar and she passes out of history.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Judah presents a very bad image of a godly person. At least he had the humility to admit his unrighteousness. Yet, it will be Judah through whom God chooses to bring the Messiah into the world. He will present a better image of himself later.

*Contemporaries of Moses* - Tamar was, practically speaking, engaged to Shelah. For this, she would have been stoned to death under the Law (Deut. 22:21). Burning as a form of capital punishment was not practiced much under the Law (but see Lev. 20:14; 21:9).

*Later Hebrew writers* - Tamar is mentioned at the end of the story of Ruth (4:12). Boaz will descend from Perez. The role Tamar serves in the broader biblical story is that she becomes an ancestress of King David and subsequently of the Messiah (1 Chron. 2:4). King David will have a daughter also by the name of Tamar (2 Samuel 13). Committing adultery is compared with being burned by fire (Prov. 6:27-29).

#### TRANSLATION - 38:27-30:

**27** Then it happened at the time for her to give birth and behold, twins [were] in her womb. **28** And it happened that when she gave birth that he gave a hand and the midwife took and bound on his hand a scarlet [thread], saying, ‘This one came out, her firstborn.’

**29** Then it happened he pulled back his hand and behold, his brother came out and she said, ‘What a break through you have made on yourself a break through!’ And she called his name, ‘Perez.’

**30** And afterward, his brother came out, who on his hand [was] the scarlet [thread] and she called his name ‘Zerah.’

#### WORDS:

‘To make a break through’ (verse 29; 46 times) is, obviously, related to the noun ‘break through’ (19) in the same sentence. The verb and noun can mean a ‘break through, breach, burst open, or (the noun) a gap.’ ‘Perez’ is a related, proper, noun to both this verb and its noun.

#### COMMENTS:

When the time for the birth came, it was discovered that Tamar was having twins! Two boys to care for her during her life and into her later years. One put out his hand first so that the mid-wife wrapped a scarlet thread around his hand but he withdrew it before he could be born. The second born, then, exited the womb first, causing a ‘breach’, from which he received his name, ‘Perez.’ Then his brother, the ‘firstborn,’ exited the womb. His name was given ‘Zerah.’ The pregnancy could not have been pleasant!

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Tamar, likely, wanted a child to help provide for her in her later years as well as companionship through life. God blessed her with twins, twin sons. Not only that, but God will choose to bring the Messiah through Tamar’s son, Perez.

*Later Hebrew writers* - Tamar and Perez are found in the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 2:4.

*NT writers* - It would be through Tamar’s ‘second born’, Perez, that the Messiah comes to earth (Matt. 1:3).