

The Book of Genesis

Chapter 38

38:1 About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. (TAN)

Time Frame

From the selling of Joseph until Israel moved into Egypt during the famine, not more than 23 years could have elapsed [13 years as slave and prisoner + 7 years of plenty + 2 years of famine]. Therefore, it is improbable that Judah could take a wife, and father three sons of marriageable age by the second year of the famine. The events of this chapter must have occurred soon after Jacob returned to Canaan from Haran.

38:2-5 There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite* [“a merchant”, according to one Targum] *man named Shua* [“wealth”]. ***He married her and lay with her; she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er. She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib* [if it is the same place as “Aczib,” then this is in the lowland of Judah, approximately 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem] ***that she gave birth to him. (NIV)****

Judah's Jeopardy

If this was a Canaanite, by marrying her, Judah would have gone against the precedent set by Abraham and Isaac. The promise regarding the descendants of the patriarchs was being jeopardized.

38:6 Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. (NIV)

Since Judah's wife is specifically pointed out as a Canaanite in all translations except one Targum, it would seem that if Tamar had also been a Canaanite, the fact would be preserved. Since Judah “got” Tamar as a wife for his son, it is quite possible she was travelling with a caravan out of Egypt or Mesopotamia.

38:7-8 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, "Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother." (NIV)

Providing an Heir

Just as tithing was an ongoing statute long before Sinai, the custom of levirate marriage was also being practiced several centuries prior to being included with God's instructions to Israel. We find in DEU 25:5-10, that the only difference between Judah's command and what God commanded Israel was that if a man did not want to produce an heir for his brother, the wife of his dead brother was to spit in his face and his name would be called "*the house of him that has his shoe loosed*," a designation of shame.

38:9 But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he spilled his seed on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. (NIV)

Onan did not refuse to sleep with his brother's widow, but only refused to impregnate her.

38:10 What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so He put him to death also. (NIV)

His attitude was one of mocking and shaming his brother's wife as well as his own family. Onan's deceit, selfishness and disobedience to his father's instructions led to his death.

38:11-14 Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Live as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up." For he thought, "He may die too, just like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's house. After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him. When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep," she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim [NKJ: "in an open place"], which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife. (NIV)

Tamar's Deceit

Tamar used the same tactic as Jacob by disguising herself to get what should have been rightfully given to her.

38:15-24 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, "Come now, let me sleep with you." "And what will you give me to sleep with you?" she asked. "I'll send you a young goat from my flock," he said. "Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?" she asked. He said, "What pledge should I give you?" "Your seal and its cord [possibly a robe, belt, or turban—all representing rank], and the staff in your hand," she answered. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him. After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again. Meanwhile Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get his pledge back from the woman, but he did not find her. He asked the men who lived there, "Where is the shrine prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?" "There hasn't been any shrine prostitute [REB,NRS: "temple prostitute"; TAN: "cult prostitute"] here," they said. So he went back to Judah and said, "I didn't find her. Besides, the men who lived there said, 'There hasn't been any shrine prostitute here.'" Then Judah said, "Let her keep what she has, or we will become a laughingstock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you didn't find her." About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant." Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!" (NIV)

Sin of Prostitution

A daughter of a priest was to be burned for such an offense (LEV 21:9). Tradition states that Tamar was a descendant of Shem, who was viewed as a priest of God.

38:25 *As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are."* (NIV)

38:26 *Judah recognized them, and said, "She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he was not intimate with her again.* (TAN)

38:27-28 *When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. As she was giving birth, one of them put out his hand; so the midwife took a scarlet thread and tied it on his wrist and said, "This one came out first."* (NIV)

38:29 *But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez ["breach"].* (TAN)

38:30 *Then his brother, who had the scarlet thread on his wrist, came out and he was given the name Zerah ["shining"].* (NIV)

The Breach

The breach was a break in the normal continuity of birth. Although Perez [Pharez] was the first to break out of the womb, his brother was the actual firstborn. This break symbolized the fact that the line of Pharez would be the first Jews to produce the kings of Israel, not the line of the firstborn. This breach was ultimately healed by the marriage of king Zedekiah's daughter of the Pharez line to Ireland's king Herremon of the Zarah line. At that time the sceptre, representing the rulership over Israel, was established into one line.