

GENESIS

Chapter 38

Judah and Tamar

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah. 2 There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, 3 and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. 4 She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. 5 Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him. 6 And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. 8 Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." 9 But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went in to his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. 10 And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also. 11 Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house. 12 In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. 13 And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," 14 she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that Shelah was grown up, and she had not been given to him in marriage. 15 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. 16 He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" 17 He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" 18 He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. 19 Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood. 20 When Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite to take back the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her. 21 And he asked the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute who was at Enaim at the roadside?" And they said, "No cult prostitute has been here." 22 So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" 23 And Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her." 24 About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." 25 As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." 26 Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again. 27 When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. 28 And when she was in labor, one put out a hand, and the midwife took and tied a scarlet thread on his hand, saying, "This one came out first." 29 But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore his name was called Perez. 30 Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

Ch 38 A digression from the Joseph story. (TLSB)

38:1–30 The unsavory events of this chapter illustrate the danger that Israel as God’s separated people faced if they remained among the Canaanites. In Egypt the Israelites were kept separate because the Egyptians despised them (43:32; 46:34). While there, God’s people were able to develop into a nation without losing their identity. Judah’s actions contrasted with those of Joseph (ch. 39)—demonstrating the moral superiority of Joseph, to whom leadership in Israel fell in his generation (see 37:5–9). (CSB)

38:1 *at that time*. I.e., about the time Joseph was sold. (TLSB)

went down from his brothers. Joseph was separated from his brothers by force, but Judah voluntarily separated himself to seek his fortune among the Canaanites. *Adullam*. A town southwest of Jerusalem (see 2Ch 11:5, 7). (CSB)

Adullamite. A man from the city of Adullam, c 10 mi W of Jacob’s home at this time. (CSB)

Hirah. Later referred to as Judah’s friend (v 12). This incident shows that Jacob’s family lived at peace with the inhabitants of the land. (TLSB)

38:2 *Canaanite*. Simeon also had a Canaanite wife, though later this was forbidden (Dt 7:1–3). (CSB)

He took her. Likely in marriage. The woman is not named, only referred to as the daughter of Shua. (TLSB)

38:3–4 *Er ... Onan*. The names also appear as designations of tribes in Mesopotamian documents of this time. (CSB)

Er. Name might mean “watchful” or “vigilant,” but the text does not specify any significance. (TLSB)

38:5 *Shelah*. Perhaps means “drooping,” since he may have been less robust than his brothers. (TLSB)

Kezib. Probably the same as Aczib (Jos 15:44), three miles west of Adullam. The “men of Cozeba” (another form of the same word) were descendants of Shelah son of Judah (see 1Ch 4:21–22). The Hebrew root of the name means “deception,” a theme running throughout the story of Jacob and his sons. (CSB)

Chezib. Probably the same as Achzib (Jsh 15:44), c 3 mi W of Adullam. All the places mentioned here would later be in the territory given to the tribe of Judah. (TLSB)

38:6 *Judah took a wife for Er*. The father usually selected a bride for his son. (TLSB)

Tamar. Means “palm tree.” Probably a Canaanite. (TLSB)

38:7 *wicked in the sight of the LORD*. “Er erred”; in Hbr, there is a pun on the name, since to do evil is “Er” spelled backward. (TLSB)

38:8 A concise description of the custom known as “levirate marriage” (Latin *levir* means “brother-in-law”). Details of the practice are given in Dt 25:5–6, where it is laid down as a legal obligation within Israel (cf. Mt 22:24). The custom is illustrated in Ru 4:5, though there it is extended to the nearest living relative (“kinsman-redeemer,” Ru 3:12), since neither Boaz nor the nearer kinsman was a brother-in-law. (CSB)

The ancient custom, known as levirate marriage (from the Lat for “brother-in-law”), was that a brother would take his deceased brother’s widow if she had not borne a male heir. Later, this would become part of Mosaic Law. (TLSB)

38:9 *knew that the offspring would not be his.* Similarly, Ruth’s nearest kinsman was fearful that if he married Ruth he would endanger his own estate (Ru 4:5–6). (CSB)

The first male offspring would belong to the line of the deceased brother, not to Onan. (TLSB)

waste semen on the ground. A means of birth control sometimes called “onanism” (after Onan). (CSB)

whenever. Hbr implies that Onan did this repeatedly. *waste the semen on the ground.* Means of birth control, sometimes called onanism. *not to give offspring.* He did not want the family inheritance to be divided up further. Yet if this was all he desired, he could have abstained from intercourse altogether. Instead, Onan wanted to enjoy sexual intercourse while intentionally depriving Tamar of a family and inheritance. Imagine how this hurt and offended her at each encounter. Luther: “Onan must have been a malicious and incorrigible scoundrel. This is a most disgraceful sin.... We call it unchastity, yes, a Sodomitic sin. For Onan goes in to her; that is, he lies with her and copulates, and when it comes to the point of insemination, spills the semen, lest the woman conceive. Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed” (AE 7:20–21). (TLSB)

38:10 *What he did.* His refusal to perform his levirate duty. (CSB)

38:11 *a widow in your father’s house.* Though subject to her father-in-law, Tamar could live with her parents. (TLSB)

he feared, “He may die too, just like his brothers.” Thus Judah had no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar (see v. 14). (CSB)

38:12 *In the course of time.* Long enough to make it clear that Judah had no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar. (TLSB)

When Judah was comforted. At the end of his time of mourning. (TLSB)

Timnah. Exact location unknown, but somewhere in the hill country of Judah (see Jos 15:48, 57). (CSB)

Town in the hill country of what would later be southern Judah, perhaps east of Debir. (TLSB)

sheepshearers. Time of sheepshearing was festive and given to drinking of wine. (TLSB)

38:14 *veil, wrapping herself up.* To conceal her identity. (TLSB)

sat down ... the road. Prostitutes (see v. 15) customarily stationed themselves by the roadside (Jer 3:2). (CSB)

The gate was typically the place of business and activities in ancient walled towns. She may have been at the wayside leading up to the town. (TLSB)

Enaim. Means “two springs”; probably the same as Enam in the western foothills of Judah (see Jos 15:33–34). (CSB)

Probably the same as the village of Enam (Jsh 15:34). (TLSB)

Shelah was grown up. Tamar’s motive is clear: Judah had failed to give Shelah to Tamar. (TLSB)

38:15 *prostitute*. Her appearance and place gave this impression. Tertullian: “Provision must be made in every way against all immodest associations and suspicions.... Why does not my garb pre-announce my character?” (ANF 4:24–25). (TLSB)

she had covered her face. Judah did not recognize her because of her veil. (TLSB)

38:17 *young goat*. Seems to have been the typical payment. Cf Jgs 15:1. (TLSB)

pledge. Judah had nothing with him to pay for the transaction, an indication that his act was spontaneous rather than premeditated. She asked for some kind of security that he would pay later. (TLSB)

38:18 *signet and its cord*. Probably a small cylinder seal of the type used to sign clay documents by rolling them over the clay. The owner wore it around his neck on a cord threaded through a hole drilled lengthwise through it. (CSB)

Tamar shrewdly asked for things she could later use as evidence. (TLSB)

signet. A seal engraved with Judah’s personal sign, which left its mark when pressed into soft clay. Usually worn on a cord around the neck or as a ring. (TLSB)

went in to her. Mosaic Law would later make clear that sexual relations between a man and his daughter-in-law are immoral (Lv 18:15). (TLSB)

38:20 *sent the young goat by his friend*. Hirah seems to have been a partying friend who would support Judah in this type of behavior. (TLSB)

woman’s. Judah had not bothered to find out her name. (TLSB)

38:21 *cult prostitute*. The Hebrew here differs from that used for “prostitute” in v. 15. Judah’s friend perhaps deliberately used the more acceptable term, since ritual prostitutes enjoyed a higher social status in Canaan than did ordinary prostitutes. (CSB)

Hbr refers to a prostitute who practiced her trade in the service of a false deity, often in connection with a fertility cult. This may have been a more socially acceptable prostitute than the term used in v 15. Hirah may have used the term in embarrassment for seeking out a mere harlot. (TLSB)

38:23 Although what Judah had left with Tamar was valuable, he did not want to pursue the matter and let his deed be made public. (TLSB)

38:24 Tamar was living with her family (v 11), but word reached Judah. (TLSB)

Bring her out. To the city gate, where justice was carried out. (TLSB)

have her burned to death. In later times, burning was the legal penalty for prostitution (see Lev 21:9). (CSB)

Later, this became the legal punishment for prostitution, but only in the case of a priest's daughter. Perhaps it was the law among the Canaanites at the time. (TLSB)

38:25 Tamar confronted Judah with the evidence by sending it to him (cf v 18). Judah's immorality contrasts sharply with Joseph's chaste conduct in the next chapter. (TLSB)

38:26 Confronted with the facts, Judah confessed his guilt. He had withheld his son Shelah from Tamar and had illegitimate sexual relations with his daughter-in-law. This admission of sin may have been a turning point for Judah. Later, he showed strong character and selflessness (44:30–34). (TLSB)

38:27–30 For a similarly unusual birth of twin boys see 25:24–26. (CSB)

The birth of twins parallels that of Jacob and Esau (25:24–26). In both cases, the older twin takes second place. Perez later became the father of the leading clan of Judah, an ancestor of David (Ru 4:18–22), and eventually an ancestor of Christ (Mt 1:1–6). (TLSB)

38:28 *midwife.* A woman who assisted in childbirth. (TLSB)

scarlet thread. To identify the firstborn. (TLSB)

first. The midwife was sure the one who put out a hand would be born first. (TLSB)

38:29 *Perez.* Became the head of the leading clan in Judah and the ancestor of David (see Ru 4:18–22) and ultimately of Christ (see Mt 1:1–6). (CSB)

“Breach” or “opening,” i.e., one who breaks or bursts out. (TLSB)

38:30 *Zerah.* “Brightness,” probably an allusion to the scarlet thread. From Zerah would come another clan of Judah. (TLSB)

Ch 38 The sins of Onan, Judah, and Tamar make this one of the most sordid chapters of the Bible. Yet despite human sinfulness, God is at work. Through Judah's son Perez, the line that would eventually give birth to the Savior was preserved (cf Mt 1:3). Sexual sins lead to trouble and heartache in this life. Yet God does not cast away those who were conceived and born out of wedlock, but He preserves those who fear Him, just as He preserved Perez. So let us flee from sexual immorality, being mindful that God punishes unchastity. And let us confess our sins as Judah did, knowing that God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, will forgive all who repent. • Holy God, forgive us our sins. Fill our hearts with the sober and chaste love of Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)