

# Judah and Tamar

## Genesis 38:1- 30

### July 28, 2019

*"I fight authority, authority always wins. I been doing it, since I was a young kid and I come out grinnin'. I fight authority, authority always wins."* from **"The Authority Song"** by **John Cougar Mellencamp**

Joseph had been sold into slavery. Judah had pocketed his share of the loot, which was a paltry two pieces of silver, and may have fallen heir to a nagging conscience. It might make you wonder if day by day he looked upon his aging father's inconsolable grief, and night after night could have woke up with Joseph's despairing cry ringing in his ears. If so, it might have made him so restless that he did what many people do when they can no longer deal with the regret of their misdeeds...move out.

*"Oh baby, one thing leads to another...you told me something wrong, I know I listen too long, but then...one thing leads to another."* From **"One Thing Leads to Another"** by **The Fixx**

### Judah Rebels

**Genesis 38: 1-5 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and turned aside to a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.* <sup>2</sup> *There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went into her,* <sup>3</sup> *and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er.* <sup>4</sup> *She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan.* <sup>5</sup> *Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him.*

We are told first of Judah's wayward behavior here in chapter 38 verse 1. "Judah went down from his brothers, and turned aside to a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah." The companionship of the unsaved new friend and Canaanite population might seem a change for the better though when we compare it to the behavior of his brothers back at home.

Hirah, however, soon becomes Judah's evil genius. He turns up three times in this chapter. First, he was Judah's acquaintance, then he became Judah's associate, and he ended up by becoming Judah's accomplice. It was while staying with his pagan friend that Judah met the woman he married. As it has been said before...as evidenced by the immortal lyrics of the new wave rock and roll band The Fixx...one thing leads to another.

**Question for Discussion:** Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all divinely led to avoid taking a wife from the Canaanite population. Why do you believe this was so?

**Question for Discussion:** Judah would have been well aware that neither his father, grandfather nor great grandfather took Canaanite wives. As far as we know though, he was never directly instructed not to do so personally. Do you believe it was a lapse in judgement on Judah's part to marry into the local population?

We are given some description of Judah's worldly bride here in the opening portion of chapter 38. We are told about the family she represented and the family that she raised. She was "the daughter of a

certain Canaanite whose name was Shuah." That is to say, she was a raw pagan and a pagan of the very worst kind, a Canaanite pagan, a member of a sin-cursed race that practiced a religion of utter vileness. To make things worse, this unsaved wife of Judah's seems to have had no interest whatsoever in spiritual things and, worse still, his sons took after their mother.

The first son was Er, which means "the watcher". You can imagine that his young eyes watched his father and mother alike and took in everything—his mother's indifference to his father's mysterious, unseen God, and his father's neglect of spiritual things. Those bright eyes watched with interest and growing approval the impropriety of his mother's religion.

The second son was Onan, which means "strength". Onan, as opposed to his older brother who was named by his father, was named by his mother. That, together with the name chosen, suggests the growing influence and family dominance of the pagan woman Judah had chosen for a wife. Onan, as we shall see, grows up to be strong in wickedness.

The third son was named Shelah, which means "he that breaks". The mother names this boy too, a further indication that Judah had surrendered the headship of his home and was leaving the training of his sons to his wife.

## The Wages of Sin is Death

*"You've got to change your evil ways, baby. Before I stop loving you."* From "**Evil Ways**" by **Santana**

**Genesis 38: 6-11 (ESV)** <sup>6</sup> And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. <sup>11</sup> 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.

With a pagan woman exercising increasing influence in his family affairs, should we be surprised that before long we're contemplating the wickedness of Judah's sons? Er, the oldest of the sons, had grown to young manhood, and Judah decides that the boy should be married. The woman he chose for his son was Tamar. Her name means "Palm Tree". Maybe the name suggests beauty, slenderness, grace, and usefulness. From what we will read in the rest of this chapter, and from the position God will give her in the Messianic line, we have to conclude that she must have been a woman of high character despite her pagan birth and background.

Er, it appears, was not interested in his father's religious stories. Obviously, the mother's influence came through strong and sure in his life, a life that must have been very bad and unfortunately for Er, very brief. It is summed up in a single sentence: " *But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.*" Payday it seems, came very swiftly for this godless young man.

**Question for Discussion:** Why would Judah, after the death of his oldest son, request that his second son father a child with his older brother's widow? Was this an immoral request?

Judah presents here what would be considered today, an unusual request. He asks his second son to father a child with his dead brother's wife. This was a request that would be repeated in Mosaic Law. Levirate marriage was part of the Mosaic Law (Deut. 25:5-6) which stated that if one brother died without leaving a male heir, one of his surviving brothers must marry the dead brother's widow. The first son of this latter marriage would take the name and privileges of the brother who had died. The purpose of this law was to produce a son for the dead brother so his name would not disappear and his son could inherit all of his father's property. The incident of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 predates the Mosaic Law. But the essentials of the later law seem to be part of early patriarchal custom.

**Question for Discussion:** Onan obviously had no interest in following his father's instructions. Choosing instead, to deliberately avoid fathering a son with his dead brother's wife. Why do you believe he refused to do so?

Onan, not wanting to share anything with a son who would not be regarded as his, practiced a form of birth control sometimes called "onanism." This method of birth control involved the withdrawal of the male sex organ from the body of the woman before ejaculation in order to avoid the fertilization of the egg. Onan revealed a selfish heart toward his dead brother, toward Tamar, and ultimately toward the Lord.

So, the second of the two sons was as bad as his brother. Like Er, Onan had no interest in matters pertaining to his father's God, and he had no intention of cooperating with his father's wishes. He showed his contempt in a blatant and selfish way, and God simply reunited him with his older brother on an accelerated schedule.

Following the death of his second son, Judah then instructs his daughter-in-law to live as a widow, but in her father's house, until his third son Shelah matured. This request that Tamar return to her father's house was a selfish act on the part of Judah and perhaps explains to some extent why his son Onan had developed into such a selfish person. But the Scriptures reveal that his real motive in asking Tamar to return to her father was to avoid the possible death of his last son. Obviously Judah was either unaware of the wickedness of his sons, or he assumed that Tamar was somehow responsible for their deaths, since he thought that Shelah may die too, just like his brothers.

## **A Plan for Survival**

*"Believing the things I heard. Being a fool...Ain't that what you said...Ain't that what you said...Ain't that what you said? Liar, liar liar!"* From "**Liar**" by **Three Dog Night**

**Genesis 38: 12-19 (ESV)** <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup> 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?" <sup>17</sup> 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—" <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.*

After a long time during which Judah's wife died and Shelah matured, Tamar realized that Judah had no intention of giving Shelah to her as a husband. Hearing that Judah was going to Timnah, she decided to act to obtain a child from Judah's family on her own. This was something that she obviously believed was her right.

Tamar disguises herself as a shrine prostitute with the intention of acquiring a son from Judah himself. This required her to take a great risk. If she had been discovered engaged in such conduct, Judah could easily have had her killed. She entices Judah by way of her dress hoping to solicit Judah himself to provide her with what he had failed to deliver through his sons. It is interesting to note that the formal offer seems to have been made by Judah himself, not Tamar.

**Question for Discussion:** Tamar's decision to dress as a shrine prostitute and position herself along the road to Timnah where she knows Judah will be traveling, appears bizarre on the surface. What might it tell us though about her own nature as well as Judah's?

**Shrine Prostitution** - The Canaanites used cult prostitution as a way of promoting fertility of the land and animals. The mother goddess, who went by the names Ishtar and Anat, was represented by young devotees who would dress in a veil as the symbolic bride of the god Baal or El. Positioning themselves at or near a shrine, these young women would service the men of the community prior to such activities as planting their fields or during the period of lambing. This was an ungodly practice that enabled sinful men to engage in adultery, all under the belief that it reenacted divine marriage and ensured fertility and prosperity for the fields and herds.

In Judah's willful desire to take advantage of pagan rituals to satisfy his own carnal desires, he plays right into the hands of Tamar. Tamar thinking quickly, must have recognized that Judah brought with him insufficient means of payment for the services he had requested she render. Judah agrees to give to her a goat but must promise to provide it to her after the fact.

As a result, she demands a pledge for the payment of the goat to be sent later, Judah's seal and his cord, as well as his staff. These items would have been among his most personal items. They would have evidenced both his personal and corporate identity. In modern terms, it would be similar to be giving her your driver's license and social security card.

His "signet" was not a ring, but a seal (likely cylindrical) that he wore on a cord around his neck. The staff, often carved, was equally distinctive. Obviously, Tamar isn't your typical dimwitted Canaanite prostitute! What she negotiates from Judah, will prove to be far more valuable than a single goat.

**Question for Discussion:** Was it wrong for Tamar to decide to take matters into her own hands and deceive Judah into sleeping with her? Why or why not?

**Question for Discussion:** Tamar's plan was bold. The odds of her achieving her objectives would have been incredibly low. The way everything played out, including the fortuitous acquisition of Judah's personal effects as insurance of payment will prove to be incredibly fortunate for Tamar. Do you believe Tamar was just lucky, or do you believe God directed the events that occurred at the side of the road to Timnah?

## A Turning of the Tables

*“I’m starting with the man in the mirror...I’m asking him to change his ways. And no message could have been any clearer, if you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and then make a change.”*

From **“Man in the Mirror”** by **Michael Jackson**

**Genesis 38: 20-26 (ESV)** <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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.” <sup>22</sup> 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.’” <sup>23</sup> 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.”

<sup>24</sup> 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.” <sup>25</sup> 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.” <sup>26</sup> 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.

As we mentioned in the early part of our lesson, Judah’s friend Hirah at last becomes an accomplice to the unseemly actions of Judah himself. Judah is too embarrassed to be seen delivering a goat to what he thought was a shrine prostitute. So what does he do, enlist his friend Hirah to follow through on the promise and retrieve his personal belongings after delivering the promised goat.

But, Judah's friend Hirah is unable to find any shrine prostitute to whom he could make the payment of a goat, so Judah gives up trying to find her to save himself embarrassment.

Three months later Tamar reveals that she is pregnant. After three months, Tamar’s pregnancy must have been obvious to all. Such news would have been readily passed to Judah, for she evidently still had marital obligations to Judah’s family. He had not released her to marry another, which later was an option provided in Deuteronomy 25:5-10.

Judah, in a fit of hypocritical indignation, orders her to be burned to death for her sin. Of all the world’s hypocrites, it would be hard to find a worse one than Judah. Talk about a double standard! The only difference here between himself and Tamar, was that she was a woman and he was a man. And, that Tamar had been caught and he had not!

**Question for Discussion:** When Judah hears of Tamar’s pregnancy, he instantly calls for her to be burned alive. This was his daughter-in-law, the woman that his oldest son had been married to. Do you believe this was an overreaction on his part? What does it say about his personal nature?

In later times in Israel, burning was the penalty for prostitution practiced by the daughter of a priest (Lev. 21:9).

What happens next, reads like a high suspense drama that reaches the climax of the story. Literally, at the moment she is being drug out to be burned alive, Tamar produces the personal belongings of Judah taken in pledge to reveal that it was he himself who was the father of her unborn child.

All of a sudden, there’s no more talk of burning. The shoe was now on HIS foot...and a very uncomfortable shoe it must have proved to be! A remorseful, and certainly embarrassed Judah declares that she is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah. Judah’s statement did not mean necessarily that her actions were approved; rather, Judah acknowledged that her motivation was

consistent with the purpose of levirate marriage, which was in contrast to Judah's efforts to circumvent the custom. The statement that he did not sleep with her again shows that this act did not create a marriage between the two of them, nor should it have done so.

Judah had been secretive and careful in his efforts to hide his sin. But God does not allow immorality to go unpunished. Judah might have evaded his embarrassing guilt for a short time, but the incident was not to be closed in such an easy way. All of his relatives, all of his immediate friends, virtually everyone that knew him became aware of his unrighteousness on that day. Even more, Moses was told by God to write up the whole story. It was incorporated into the Holy Scriptures, and has been read by millions of people down through all the ages from that day to this.

*"You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will be as one."* From **"Imagine"** by **John Lennon**

**Genesis 38: 27-30 (ESV)** <sup>27</sup> *When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb.* <sup>28</sup> *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."* <sup>29</sup> *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.* <sup>30</sup> *Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.*

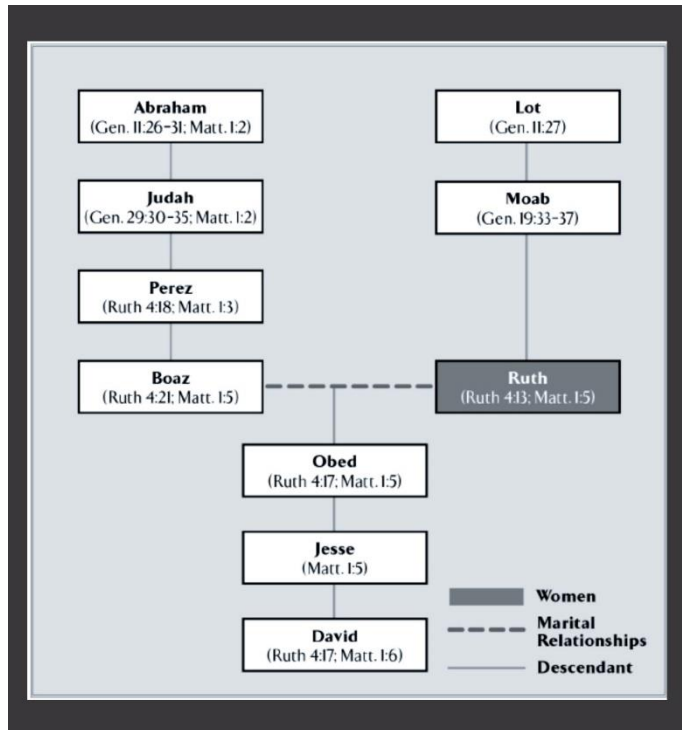
The name Perez means, "breach" or "break through" referencing his breaking through in birth first.

The name Zerah means, "brightness" or "redness" with reference to the scarlet thread placed around his wrist by the midwife.

That Tamar had twins echoes the birth of Jacob and Esau, employing almost the exact words from Genesis Chapter 25 verse 24...

**Genesis 25:24 (ESV)** <sup>24</sup> *When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb."*

The order of birth was paramount in the psyche of the Hebrews. To make sure that the firstborn was noted, since the birth of twins might compromise the firstborn's identity, the midwife ties a "scarlet thread" to the emerging hand of Zerah. "This one came out first," spoken by the midwife, establishes the priority of the child. Although formally Zerah was the firstborn, inexplicably the child retracted his hand and his twin came out. This unusual circumstance of his birth elicited the infant's name, "Perez", meaning "breach or break through." The explanation of the name makes this certain, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" The scripture clarifies that only after the birth of Perez did Zerah fully come forth, repeating the vital information that the infant bore the scarlet thread.



raw.

This story is sandwiched between the record of Joseph's position at home and his piety abroad in Egypt. The bright light of Joseph's high morals brings into even sharper contrast the sordid nature of Judah's unprincipled behavior.

It's amazing that God would pick a man like Judah and make him a prince in Israel, and then send His own Son into the world, not merely from Judah's line, but from the results of the very events recorded in this chapter. Truly, it is nothing less than a miracle of grace.

So this story closes with another remarkable twin birth, replacing, as it were, Judah's two lost sons, Er and Onan, with Zerah and Perez. Perez, headed the Judahite clan from which Boaz came. Boaz was the ancestor of King David, who in turn was the forefather of Jesus Christ.

So this story, which at first sight seems to be so marginal to biblical history, records a vital link in saving history. Tamar, through her determination to have children, secured for Judah the honor of fathering both David and the Savior of the world.

Genesis 38 is one of those chapters of the Bible rarely read in public— rightly so perhaps, because it contains the record of embarrassing and dark deeds. But, the Bible does not shun telling the whole, sad truth about human nature. Human nature, as a result of the Fall, is