



Genesis - Chapter Thirty Eight

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.c Genesis 37:1-50:26 - Jacob's Descendants (continues)

Summary of Chapter Thirty Eight

This sad and perhaps unsavoury tale is of great significance because it records how the tribe with whom the Messiah is associated came into being. Jacob's son Judah is married and has three sons but the eldest is punished by death by God for some unspecified wickedness. Jacob's second son is then required to take his eldest brother's widow for his own wife with the first born son to be legally acknowledged as perpetuating the line of the dead brother. The second son deliberately fails to impregnate his wife and God also punishes him by death.

Jacob should then have given his youngest son to his daughter-in-law Tamar but he does not do so, fearing that he too may die. Instead, he sends Tamar back to her father with the assurance that she will be married to the youngest son at some point in the future, a promise he did not intend to keep.

When Tamar realises what has happened, she dresses as a temple prostitute and Judah, not recognising her, goes to her and she becomes pregnant by her father-in-law. He pledges to pay her, as a prostitute, with a young goat. At her request he gives her his signet, cord and staff in lieu of payment. He then sends a friend to make the payment but he cannot find the prostitute.

When Judah finds out that Tamar is pregnant he becomes enraged at her immorality and demands that she be put to death. When she produces his pledge he realises that she is the one in the right and he was wrong. He then treats her as a father should treat a daughter.

When Tamar gives birth, Zerah puts a hand out and it is tied with a crimson thread to denote him as the first born. However, the hand is withdrawn and it

is his brother Perez who would be the actual firstborn son; the one whose line would produce the Messiah.

II.c.ii Genesis 38:1-30 - Judah and Tamar

Readers are likely to be shocked by the sexually oriented content of this chapter, with its references to spilled semen and prostitution. Nevertheless, the unsavoury account of Judah's relationship with Tamar, which interrupts the ongoing story of Joseph's time in Egypt, fulfils an important role in Genesis, for it focuses on the continuation of Judah's family line and concludes with a birth account in which a firstborn twin is pushed aside by his younger brother.

In light of preceding episodes, these features highlight the potential importance of Judah's line through Perez (v.29). Later, in Chapter 49, kingship will be associated with Judah's descendants, and biblical history reveals that from Perez comes the Davidic dynasty, as recorded in Ruth 4:18-22.

Although this chapter shows Judah at his worst, it also accounts for a remarkable transformation in his life, which comes through in the remaining episodes of the Joseph story. Further, Judah provides a stark contrast to the chaste Joseph in Chapter 39 for, although he suffered for his chastity, Joseph's behaviour is the right way to bring blessing to the Gentiles.

¹ It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. ² There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her.

Genesis 38:1-2

A sense of foreboding is conveyed through Judah's separation from the rest of his family, his friendship with Hirah, a native of the Canaanite city of Adullam, which was located about 12 miles or 19 km southwest of Bethlehem, and his marriage to an unnamed Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua. In Genesis, marriages to Canaanites are never applauded; refer to 24:3, 26:34-35 and 28:1.

³ She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. ⁴ Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. ⁵ Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him. ⁶ Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; 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.

Genesis 38:3-7

Judah is instrumental in arranging Er's marriage to Tamar. The reference to Er's death is tantalisingly brief, and the precise nature of his wickedness is not disclosed. However, growing up with a father from such a dysfunctional family and with a mother who was a Canaanite did not help Er to lead a godly life. No information on Tamar's background is provided, although it is likely that she was a Canaanite as well.

Two sons of Aaron would also die at the Lord's hand for their disobedience in their temple duties: *<<Now Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD>> (Leviticus 10:1-2). Perhaps Er had shown some similar form of disobedience.*

⁸ Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.'

Genesis 38:8

Judah instructs his second son Onan to fulfil the custom of levirate marriage, which required a brother to marry his brother's childless widow and give her children. Brief details about this obligation are given in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. It plays an important role in the Book of Ruth (Ruth 1:11-13 and 4:1-12); and it is referenced in the NT: *<<Teacher, Moses said, "If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother." Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother>> (Matthew 22:24-25). Judah is eager that Tamar should have a son to continue the firstborn line of Er.*

Since Genesis has a particular interest in the firstborn son, this concern is noteworthy. The motif of firstborn also figures prominently in the birth account at the end of the chapter.

⁹ But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother.

Genesis 38:9

Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. While publicly Onan appears to fulfil his father's request, in private he refuses to father a child on behalf of Er.

He spilled his semen on the ground. Onan engaged in coitus interruptus, not self-gratification as some early rabbis mistakenly thought. A detailed explanation for

his action is not given, but selfishness is the most likely explanation; he probably feared that a son born to Tamar would be privileged over all other sons born to him, reducing the importance of his own family line and reducing his share of Judah's inheritance.

Although the circumstances are different, Ruth 4:5-6 provides another example of a man refusing to undertake the duty of levirate marriage.

¹⁰ What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also.

Genesis 38:10

Onan's hypocritical behaviour causes God to punish him by death.

¹¹ Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up' – for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

Genesis 38:11

Following the deaths of his two eldest sons, Judah protects his remaining son, Shelah, by sending Tamar back to her own family, under the pretext that one day she will marry Shelah. He treats Tamar as if she were dangerous, while it was actually the evil of the two sons that brought about their deaths.

¹² In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over, he went up to Timnah to his sheep-shearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.

Genesis 38:12

Some time later Judah becomes a widower. After a period of mourning he travels to Timnah. Two locations are known by this name, but this one is probably located in the southern hill country of Judah, the one referred to in Joshua 15:57.

¹³ When Tamar was told, 'Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep', ¹⁴ she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage.

Genesis 38:13-14

Having waited in vain for Judah to fulfil his promise regarding Shelah (v.11), Tamar decides to take action. She puts off her widow's garments and covers

herself with a veil, possibly intending at first to remind Judah that she is betrothed to Shelah, refer to the comment made on 24:65 regarding the wearing of a veil. She then goes to the entrance to Enaim in the hope of meeting her father-in-law. The location of Enaim, whose name means ‘two springs’ or ‘eyes,’ is unknown; it probably ought to be distinguished from Enam mentioned in Joshua 15:34. Given Tamar’s veil and Judah’s inability to recognise her, it is ironic that these events should take place at a location known as ‘eyes.’

She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. Tamar did not want to face what would be a very difficult existence in that culture or in any culture: life without a husband or children. Tamar did not have the option of just finding another man to marry. She was under the headship of her father-in-law Judah, and he had to give her a husband. He determined whom and when she could marry.

¹⁵ When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face.

Genesis 38:15

When Judah sees Tamar, he assumes that she is a prostitute, for she had covered her face, thus effectively achieving anonymity. Since betrothed women wore veils, Judah’s belief that Tamar is a prostitute would not have been simply based on her covered face. Her lone presence by the roadside possibly contributed to his assumption; Jeremiah 3:2 links ‘waysides’ with prostitution: *<<Look up to the bare heights, and see! Where have you not been lain with? By the waysides you have sat waiting for lovers, like a nomad in the wilderness. You have polluted the land with your whoring and wickedness>>*.

¹⁶ He went over 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 kid from the flock.’ And she said, ‘Only 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 the staff that is in your hand.’ So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him.

Genesis 38:16-18

Come, let me come in to you. Judah’s request for sexual intercourse reinforces the reader’s perception of him as a man driven by personal gratification. Having knowingly deceived Tamar by sending her away, he now takes advantage of her for his own pleasure.

Tamar's request: What will you give me, that you may come in to me? plays on Judah's refusal to give her Shelah as a husband. Judah's offer of a kid or young goat results in Tamar's taking from Judah his signet, cord, and staff in pledge; three items that would readily identify him as the owner. From experience, she knows that he is not a man to be trusted.

The signet may have been a small cylinder seal that was worn on a cord around the neck. The seal was rolled over soft clay to give a unique impression, identifying the owner; the seal was often perforated for suspension by the cord.

¹⁹ Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

Genesis 38:19

Then she got up and went away. Tamar returns home and resumes her status as a widow, traditionally recognised by the garments of her widowhood.

²⁰ When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. ²¹ He asked the townspeople, 'Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?' But they said, 'No prostitute has been here.' ²² So he returned to Judah, and said, 'I have not found her; moreover, the townspeople said, "No prostitute has been here."' ²³ Judah replied, 'Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her.'

Genesis 38:20-23

Hirah searches for Tamar in vain. Ironically, Hirah's description of Tamar as a temple prostitute introduces into the account a religious dimension linked to fertility rituals. The term used by Hirah, Hebrew *qedeshah*, is rarely used in the OT: <<*None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute; none of the sons of Israel shall be a temple prostitute*>> (Deuteronomy 23:17), and: <<*I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with whores, and sacrifice with temple prostitutes; thus a people without understanding comes to ruin*>> (Hosea 4:14), possibly because it resembles Hebrew words associated with holiness.

Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at. Judah believed that he had done the right thing by trying to pay the agreed price of a young goat. He failed to realise that he had left something that would be so damning to him when it was revealed.

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, ‘Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.’ 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, ‘It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.’ And she said, ‘Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.’

²⁶ Then Judah acknowledged them and said, ‘She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.’ And he did not lie with her again.

Genesis 38:24-26

The report of Tamar’s whoredom produces an outburst of righteous indignation that prompts Judah to demand that she should be burned to death.

It was the owner of these who made me pregnant. When Judah discovers that he was responsible for Tamar’s pregnancy, he acknowledges her righteousness in contrast to his own failure. This realisation marks an important turning point in the life of Judah.

²⁷ When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb.

²⁸ While she was in labour, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, ‘This one came out first.’ 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!’ Therefore he was named Perez. ³⁰ Afterwards his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

Genesis 38:27-30

Knowing that Tamar has twins, the midwife ties a crimson thread on the hand of Zerah so that she can identify him as the firstborn, the one who came out first. But before Zerah is fully born, his twin brother breaks out in front of him. Consequently, in the light of the midwife’s observation, he is called Perez, which means ‘breach.’ Viewed in the light of Genesis as a whole, the unusual nature of this brief birth account, especially with its focus on the identity of the firstborn, suggests that something significant will develop in the line of Perez, and both Matthew 1:3 and Luke 3:33 list Perez in the genealogy of Jesus.