

Genesis Chapter 38

Verses 1-30: the Judah-Interlude, as it is sometimes known, is bracketed by references to the sale of Joseph to Potiphar (37:36; 39:1). Such a parenthesis in the Joseph story demands some reason why a chapter laced with wickedness, immorality and subterfuge should of necessity be placed in this spot.

The answer is that the events recorded are chronologically in the right place, being contemporary with the time of Joseph's slavery in Egypt (verse 1, "at that time"). The account is also genealogically in the right place, i.e., with Joseph gone (seemingly for good), with Reuben, Simeon, and Levi out of favor (for incest and for treachery); Judah would most likely accede to firstborn status.

It provides a contrast because it also demonstrates the immoral character of Judah, as compared with the virtue of Joseph. Canaanite "syncretistic" (the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief), religion and inclusivism (the practice or principle of being inclusive and acceptance of other belief systems), threatened to absorb the fourth and later generations of Abraham's heirs. But Egyptian exile and racial exclusivism (the action or policy of excluding a person or group from a place, group, or privilege), produced not loss of their ethnic identity, but preservation of it.

Genesis 38:1 "And it came to pass at that time, that Judah went down from his brethren, and turned in to a certain Adullamite, whose name [was] Hirah."

"And it came to pass at that time": Some refer to the time of Jacob's coming from Padan-aram into Canaan, soon after he came to Shechem, and before the affair of Dinah. But to this may be objected the marriage of Judah at an age that may seem too early for him. His separation from his brethren, and having a flock of his own to keep, which seems not consistent with the above history.

Wherefore it is better to connect this with the history of "Joseph's being sold into Egypt": For though there were but twenty three years from hence to Jacob's going down into Egypt. Joseph being now seventeen, and was thirty years when he stood before Pharaoh, after which were seven years of plenty, and two of famine, at which time Jacob went there with two of Judah's grandsons, Hezron and Hamul (Genesis 46:12), which make the number mentioned.

Yet all this may be accounted for. At seventeen, Er, Judah's firstborn, might marry, being the eighteenth from the selling of Joseph, and the marriage of his father; and Onan at the same age, which was the nineteenth.

And allowing two or three years for Tamar's staying for Shelah, there was time for her intrigue with Judah, and bearing him two sons at a birth, before the descent of Jacob into Egypt. As for his two grandsons, they may be said to go into Egypt; as Benjamin's sons did in their father's loins, being begotten there during Jacob's abode in it.

"That Judah went down from his brethren": Not from Dothan to Adullam, as Ben Melech observes, as if this separation was at the time and place of the selling of Joseph. But rather from Hebron thither, after he and his brethren were come home to their father, and had reported and expressed sympathy for the death of Joseph.

And Judah is said to go down, because he went from the north to the south, as Aben Ezra notes. Whether this departure from his brethren was owing to a misunderstanding or quarrel between them on account of the affair of Joseph, or on any account, is not certain.

"Adullamite" describes a person from Adullam, a Canaanite town situated on the route through Azekah and Sochoh, halfway between Lachish and Jerusalem. It controlled one of the principal passes into the hill-country of Judah from the northern Shephelah. It was about 15 miles northwest of Hebron.

Judah married a Canaanite there (verse 2), and there his firstborn was slain by the Lord for acting wickedly (verse 7).

Whether Judah did this after the incident with Joseph or not we cannot say. We do know, at this point, that Judah left his brethren temporarily. This separation could be because of guilt he felt from what he did to Joseph, or maybe, he could not face his father knowing what he had done to him.

"Hirah" means nobility. This person must have been from a renowned family.

Verses 2-5: Judah's separation from his brethren was marked by more than the geographical; it involved integration. His Canaanite wife had 3 sons for his family line.

Genesis 38:2 "And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name [was] Shuah; and he took her, and went in unto her."

"Judah" was the fourth son of Jacob by Leah (29:35). In spite of his early failures (verses 1-30), he later rose to a position of leadership among his brothers by interceding for Joseph (37:26-27), Simeon (43:8-9), and Benjamin (44:14-34). Jacob eventually blessed him with the position of leadership among the 12 brothers (49:8-10).

Judah was promised that he would be the ancestor of the Messiah. He became the founder of the tribe of Judah, thus also of the line of David and of Christ (Matt. 1:3-16). He is symbolized (in Genesis 49:9), as a lion. Later, therefore, Christ is called the "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5; Genesis 29:35; 49:9-10).

From "Shuah" he had three sons, "Er, Onan," and "Shelah." Er was the firstborn who was slain by the Lord. Evidently, he represented the rapid degeneration resulting from Shuah's intimate Canaanite alliances (chapter 19).

"Shuah" means wealth. This "took" means he became her husband, and he slept with her. I am almost certain this does not mean he forced her.

Genesis 38:3 "And she conceived, and bare a son; and he called his name Er."

"And she conceived, and bare a son, and he called his name Er": Which signifies a "watchman": but the reason of the name given by the Targum of Jonathan is, "because he should die without children;" as if it was the same with ariri, "meaning childless".

It is not the custom for the father to name the child, but that was the case here.

Genesis 38:4 "And she conceived again, and bare a son; and she called his name Onan."

"And she conceived again, and bare a son": As soon as she well could.

"And she called his name Onan": The first son Judah gave the name to, but his wife named this, so called from grief or sorrow; the reason of it, according to the above Targum, was, "because his father would mourn for him; "he was a Benoni, (son of my sorrow; see Genesis 35:18), whose sin and immature death caused sorrow.

Genesis 38:5 "And she yet again conceived, and bare a son; and called his name Shelah: and he was at Chezib, when she bare him."

"And she conceived, and bare a son": A third son.

"And called his name Shelah": Which signifies tranquil, quiet, peaceable and prosperous, and is a word that comes from the same root as Shiloh, that famous son of Judah that should spring from him (Genesis 49:10). The reason of the name, as given by the Targum, is, "because her husband forgot her."

"And she was at Chezib when she bare him": Chezib is the name of a place, by some taken to be the same with Achzib or Ecdippe, now Zib (see Micah 1:14). It seems to be a city in the tribe of Judah; and Jerom says, in his time there was a desert place of this name near Adullam, on the borders of Eleutheropolis.

These two sons were both named by their mother. "Onan" means strength.

"Shelah" means prayer, or peace.

Verses 6-10: Two sons were executed by the Lord, one for unspecified wickedness and one for deliberate and rebellious rejection of the duty to marry a relative's widow, called a levirate marriage. This was a rather dubious distinction for the line of Judah to gain. For details on levirate marriage according to later Mosaic Law (see note on Deut. 25:5-10).

Genesis 38:6 "And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name [was] Tamar."

"And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn": Chose one for him, and presented her to him for his liking, whom he approving of married.

"Whose name was Tamar": Which signifies a "palm tree": the Targum of Jonathan says, she was the daughter of Shem; but it is altogether improbable that a daughter of his should be living at this time, and young enough to bear children.

It is much more probable that she was daughter of Levi, Judah's brother, as an Arabic writer asserts. But it is more likely still that she was the daughter of a Canaanite, who was living in the same place, though his name is not mentioned (Genesis 38:11).

Genesis 38:7 "And Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him."

"And Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord": That is, exceedingly wicked, as this phrase signifies (Genesis 13:13). He was guilty of some very heinous sin, but what is not mentioned. According to the Targum of Jonathan and Jarchi, it was the same with his brother Onan's (Genesis 38:9).

Which it is suggested he committed, lest his wife should prove with child, and lose her beauty; but if it had been the same with his, it would have been expressed as well as his. An Arabic writer says, that he cohabited with his wife not according to the course of nature, but in the "sodomitical" (someone who engages in anal copulation), way.

"And the Lord slew him": By his immediate hand, striking him dead at once, as Ananias and Sapphira were stricken (Acts 5:5); or by sending some distemper, which quickly carried him off, as a token of his displeasure at his sin.

The indication, here, was that whatever his sin was, it was punishable by death. Just as those in Sodom were killed for their evil sex sin, so was the son condemned of God and died.

Genesis 38:8 And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother."

Er left no heir; so according to the law of levirate marriage (the marriage of a widow to the brother of her deceased husband), his brother Onan was to marry the childless widow and provide a son for Er. This was a widely practiced custom in the ancient Near East and was later incorporated into the Law of Moses (Deut. 25:5-10).

Genesis 38:9 "And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled [it] on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother."

"And Onan knew that the seed should not be his": Should not be called a son of his, but a son of his brother Er; this is to be understood only of the firstborn. All the rest of the children born afterwards were reckoned the children of the real parent of them; this shows this was a custom in use in those times, and well known, and was not a peculiar case.

"And it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife": To cohabit with her, as man and wife, he having married her according to his father's direction.

"That he spilled it on the ground, lest he should give his seed to his brother": Lest his brother's wife he had married should conceive by him, and bear a son that should be called his brother's, and inherit his estate.

And this is the sin, which from him is called Onania, a sin condemned by the light of nature, as well as by the word of God, and very prejudicial to mankind, as well as displeasing to God.

Thus, he forsook his responsibility in favor of his own desires (Ruth 4:6), and God killed him.

Genesis 38:10 "And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also."

"And the thing which he did displeased the Lord": Being done out of envy to his brother, and through want of affection to the memory of his name. And it may be out of covetousness to get his estate into his own hands, and especially as it frustrated the end of such an usage of marrying a brother's wife.

Which appears to be according to the will of God, since it afterwards became a known law of his. And it was the more displeasing, as it was not only a check upon the multiplication of Abraham's seed as promised, but since the Messiah was to come from Judah. This was doing all to hinder it that lay in his power

"Wherefore he slew him also": In like manner as he had slain his brother (Genesis 38:7).

This was a very perverted thing to do. He should not have married her, if he did not allow her to have a child for her dead husband. Not only did he do a very sick thing and displeased God, but he disobeyed his father Judah, as well.

It was a custom among these people, if a man died without having a child to carry on his name, his brother would marry his wife. The firstborn from his marriage would be the dead brother's child. Onan was just as evil as Er. God killed both of them.

Genesis 38:11 "Then said Judah to Tamar his daughter in law, Remain a widow at thy father's house, till Shelah my son be grown: for he said, Lest peradventure he die also, as his brethren [did]. And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house."

"Remain a widow ... my son be grown": Taking her father-in-law at his word and residing at her father's household as a widow would do. Tamar vainly waited for Judah's third son to protect the

inheritance rights of her deceased husband (verse 14), and finally resorted to subterfuge to obtain her rights (verses 13-16).

In so doing, she may have been influenced by Hittite inheritance practices which wickedly called the father-in-law into levirate marriage in the absence of sons to do so.

"Tamar" means palm trees.

This was really not fair to Tamar. Judah had no intention of his third son marrying Tamar. He was fearful that his son also would die. Tamar did not remarry, but went to live in her father's house.

Genesis 38:12 "And in process of time the daughter of Shuah Judah's wife died; and Judah was comforted, and went up unto his sheepshearers to Timnath, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite."

"And in process of time the daughter of Shuah, Judah's wife, died": Shuah was his wife's father, who was a Canaanite (Genesis 38:2). What her name was, is not certain, nor the exact time of her death. It was some time after Tamar was sent home to her father's house.

And some take the death of Judah's wife to be a correction and reproof to him for his ill usage of his daughter-in-law, in neglecting to give her to his son, or not designing to do it at all.

"And Judah was comforted": He mourned awhile for the death of his wife, according to the custom of the country, and of those times, and then he laid aside the signs of it, and his sorrow wore off, and he appeared in company and conversed with his friends.

"And went up unto his sheepshearers to Timnath": A city in the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:57), said to be six miles from Adullam, where Judah lived. Here he had his flocks of sheep; at least this was judged a proper place for the shearing and washing of them, and this time of the year a proper time for it, at which it was usual to have a feast.

And Judah went up to his shearers, not only to see how they went on with their work, but with this view to make an entertainment for them (see 1 Samuel 25:3).

"Timnath": The specific location in the hill country of Judah is unknown (Samson, Judges 14:1).

"He and his friend Hirah the Adullamite": He took him along with him for a companion, and to partake of the entertainment.

Shuah's daughter, Judah's wife, died. Judah mourned for her, but after his time for mourning was over, he went to town with his friend, Hirah.

Genesis 38:13 "And it was told Tamar, saying, Behold thy father in law goeth up to Timnath to shear his sheep."

"And it was told Tamar": By some of her neighbors, or by some of Judah's family.

"Saying, behold, thy father in law goeth up to Timnath to shear his sheep": Which might be told her as an indifferent thing, without any design in it; but she took notice of it, and it gave her an opportunity she wanted.

“Shear his sheep”: Such an event was frequently associated, in the ancient world, with festivity and licentious behavior characteristic of pagan fertility-cult practices.

Verses 14-15: Feeling that no one was going to give her a child, Tamar resorted to disguising herself as a prostitute, obviously knowing she could trap Judah, which says little for his moral stature in her eyes.

Judah’s Canaanite friend, Hirah (verses 1, 20), called her a temple prostitute (verse 21), which made Judah’s actions no less excusable just because cultic prostitution was an accepted part of Canaanite culture.

He solicited the iniquity by making the proposal to her (verse 16), and she played the role of a prostitute, negotiating the price (verse 17).

Genesis 38:14 "And she put her widow's garments off from her, and covered her with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place, which [is] by the way to Timnath; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given unto him to wife."

"And she put her widow's garments off from her": By which it appears that in those times and countries it was usual for widows to have a different apparel from others, especially in the time of their mourning, as it has been since in other nations and with us at this day, and which is commonly called "the widow's weed".

"And covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself": In it, or in a cloak, or some such like garment, which the Arabs now call "hykes".

"And sat in an open place, which is in the way to Timnath": The Septuagint version renders it, "at the gates of Aenan"; some take it to be the name of a place, and suppose it had its name, as Aben Ezra observes, from two fountains of water that were in the way, like a door, through which Judah passed when he returned home.

"For she saw that Shelah was grown": Was at least at the age of her former husbands’ when they married, if not older. this might be two or three years after his brother's death: for it was in process of time.

"And she was not given unto him for wife": As he had given her reason to expect (Genesis 38:11), and as was usually done.

Genesis 38:15 "When Judah saw her, he thought her [to be] a harlot; because she had covered her face."

"When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot": By her posture and the place she was in.

"Because she had covered her face": With her veil, that he did not know her; for this is not given as a reason why he took her to be a harlot.

The reason of this was, because she sat in the public road; but having covered her face he could not discern who she was, and therefore, from the other circumstance, concluded that she was a harlot, and sat there to prostitute herself to any that passed by.

"Harlot": The word (zonah), in verse 15 indicates a common harlot. But verses 21 and 22 make it clear that she dressed and acted like a Canaanite temple prostitute.

Genesis 38:16 "And he turned unto her by the way, and said, Go to, I pray thee, let me come in unto thee; (for he knew not that she [was] his daughter in law.) And she said, What wilt thou give me, that thou mayest come in unto me?"

"And he turned unto her by the way": Which led to her; he turned out of the way in which he was to that where she sat. Very probably it was at some little distance from the way, and therefore he turned aside to it, his lust towards her being excited at the sight of her. Perhaps he left his friend Hirah the Adullamite, and sent him on his way, while he committed the following crime.

"And said, go to, I pray thee, let me come in unto thee": That is, lie with her.

"For he knew not that she was his daughter in law": Or otherwise, it is suggested by the historian, he would not have offered such a thing to her. Though this may excuse him from willful incest, but not from fornication, for he took her to be a harlot, He knew she was not his wife, and whom he ought not to have had any concern with in such a manner.

"And she said, what wilt thou give me, that thou mayest come in unto me?" Perhaps she said this with a very low voice that he might not know her by it; and she behaved like a harlot by requiring a hire, on condition of which she consented. She knew Judah though he did not know her, and therefore cannot be excused from willful incest.

Some indeed extenuate her crime, by supposing that she, though a Canaanite, was become a proselyte to the true religion by marrying into Judah's family, and had knowledge of the Messiah being to be born of Jacob's line.

And therefore, was desirous of being the mother or ancestor at least of that great Person, and so took this method. That since she could not have the son for her husband, was desirous of enjoying the father, not for the gratification of her lust, but in hopes of the promised seed. And then accordingly she would have a place in the genealogy of the Messiah (Matthew 1:3).

Genesis 38:17 "And he said, I will send [thee] a kid from the flock. And she said, Wilt thou give [me] a pledge, till thou send [it]?"

"And he said, I will send thee a kid from the flock": Either from Timnath, where his flock was shearing, or rather from Adullam, where he lived. Since it is probable he was now returning from Timnath, where he had been feasting and making merry with his shearers, and so in a disposition to commit such an action.

"And she said, wilt thou give me a pledge, till thou send it?" She made no objection to the hire or present, only required a pawn or security for it till she had it. And this was her view indeed in asking a hire that she might have something to produce, should she prove with child by him, to convince him by whom it was.

Genesis 38:18 "And he said, What pledge shall I give thee? And she said, Thy signet, and thy bracelets, and thy staff that [is] in thine hand. And he gave [it] her, and came in unto her, and she conceived by him."

"Thy signet, and thy bracelets, and thy staff": A prominent man in the ancient Near East endorsed contracts with the cylinder seal he wore on a cord around his neck.

Her request for the walking stick suggests it also had sufficient identifying marks on it (verse 25, "whose these are"). The custom of using 3 pieces of identification is attested to in Ugaritic (Canaanite), literature.

Judah had told his daughter-in-law to remain a widow for years. After a short time of grief, he was seeking a prostitute. Tamar was a smart woman. She decided, if Judah's sons would not give her a child for her husband, then she would trick her father-in-law and have his child for her husband.

By our standards today, this would be evil, but it was their custom that she should be allowed to have children for her dead husband by his near kinsman.

There would be no question when the time of delivery came, because she had his seal for evidence. He would not be able to deny the fatherhood of this offspring. Notice that wearing a veil meant she was a prostitute.

Judah was unfair to her, and had lied to her. His third son was grown, and Judah had promised her, if she would wait for him, as soon as he came of age, he would marry her. She tricked him, because he lied to her.

Genesis 38:19 "And she arose, and went away, and laid by her veil from her, and put on the garments of her widowhood."

"And she arose and went away": To her father's house immediately, as soon as ever she had parted with Judah; and lest she should be found by the person that would be sent with the kid, and be discovered, she made all the haste she could.

"And laid by her veil from her, and put on the garments of her widowhood": That it might not be known or suspected that she had been abroad.

She was not a prostitute; she immediately went back to her home to wait on the birth.

Verses 20-23: It was not good for one's reputation to keep asking for the whereabouts of a prostitute.

Genesis 38:20 "And Judah sent the kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive [his] pledge from the woman's hand: but he found her not."

"And Judah sent the kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite": Who went with him to Timnath, and was privy to all this wickedness, and kept the secret. But would have acted the more friendly and faithful part had he dissuaded him from it. Him he employed to carry the kid he had promised, and not any of his servants, for the greater secrecy.

"To receive his pledge from the woman's hand": His signet, bracelets, and staff, or whatever they were.

"But he found her not": She was gone from the place where she sat, or where she retired to with Judah.

Genesis 38:21 "Then he asked the men of that place, saying, Where [is] the harlot, that [was] openly by the way side? And they said, There was no harlot in this [place]."

"Then he asked the men of that place": Or "of her place", of the woman's place, supposing that she dwelt somewhere thereabout.

"Saying, where is the harlot that was openly by the wayside?" That sat there very publicly some little time ago.

"And they said, there was no harlot in this place": They had not known any harlot to frequent that place lately, and Tamar sat there so small a time as not to have been observed by them.

Genesis 38:22 "And he returned to Judah, and said, I cannot find her; and also the men of the place said, [that] there was no harlot in this [place]."

"And he returned to Judah, and said, I cannot find her": That is, the Adullamite returned to him, and informed him that he could not find the harlot to whom he was sent to deliver the kid and receive the pledge, after he had made the strictest inquiry for her he could.

"And also the men of the place said, that there was no harlot in this place": By which it appears, that near the place where Tamar was, there was a town or city, and which was so free from such

infamous persons, that there was not one in it that was known to be of such a character, at least, that in such a public manner exposed herself.

It would be well if the same could be said of many other places.

Genesis 38:23 "And Judah said, Let her take [it] to her, lest we be shamed: behold, I sent this kid, and thou hast not found her."

"And Judah said, let her take it to her": The pledge, and make no further inquiry after her.

"Lest we be shamed": Judah for committing fornication, which even among Heathens, at least at that time of day, was reckoned a shameful action. And he laughed at also, for committing such a pledge to a whore, who had tricked him out of it, and his friend Hirah for conniving at the sin, and being employed on such an errand.

"Behold, I sent this kid, and thou hast not found her": Who could be a witness for him, if there should be any occasion, that he was faithful to his promise.

Judah had still not caught on. He was ashamed to inquire too much. People would know of his indiscretion. He told his friend to just forget it. He had tried to send the kid and she was not there, so he was off the hook. Judah must have forgotten that she had his signet.

Genesis 38:24 "And it came to pass about three months after, that it was told Judah, saying, Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot; and also, behold, she [is] with child by whoredom. And Judah said, Bring her forth, and let her be burnt."

"And it came to pass about three months after": The above affair happened, and when the pregnancy of Tamar began to be somewhat visible, as it does in women with child about that time.

"That it was told Judah, saying, Tamar thy daughter in law hath played the harlot": Her being with child being observed by some of the family, or her neighbors, and knowing that she did not cohabit with Shelah, who, according to custom, ought to have been her husband, concluded that she had had a criminal conversation with some other person.

Which they were assertive of authority enough to report to Judah.

"And also, behold, she is with child by whoredom": Which was judged to be a plain proof and evidence that she had played the harlot.

"And Judah said, bring her forth, and let her be burnt": Double standards prevailed in that Judah, no less guilty than Tamar, commanded her execution for immorality. Later Mosaic legislation would prescribe this form of the death penalty for a priest's daughter who prostituted herself or for those guilty of certain forms of incest (Lev. 20:14; 21:9).

Not that Judah can be thought to be a civil magistrate in a Canaanitish and Heathen city where he sojourned, and as such pronounced this sentence on her at once, or even had the power of life and death in his own family; and besides Tamar was not in his, but in her own father's house.

But the sense seems to be, that as he was a man of credit and esteem in the neighborhood, and had an influence and interest in it; he moved that she might be brought out of her father's house, and take her trial before the civil magistrates, and be committed to prison until she was delivered.

For it would have been barbarous and contrary to the law and in light of nature to have burnt her when she was with child. Then indeed to be burnt to death according to the usage of this country.

And as we find adultery in later times was punished with this kind of death, even among Heathens (Jeremiah 29:22); as it was in Egypt in the times of Sesostris II.

So Salaethus, prince of Croton in Italy, made a law that adulterers should be burnt alive, as Lucian relates. As did also Macrinus the emperor, that those that were guilty of adultery should be burnt alive together, their bodies joined to each other.

And this criminal action of Tamar was judged adultery, because she was, of right, and according to a custom or law then in use, the wife of Shelah. The Targum of Jonathan intimates, she was judged deserving of this death, because the daughter of a priest; the same law obtaining among the patriarchs as did in the times of Moses (Leviticus 21:9).

and some, as Jarchi relates, say she was the daughter of Shem, the same with Melchizedek, priest of the most high God. One reason why Judah was in haste to have the sentence pronounced on her, and as soon as could be executed, was not only the disgrace she brought upon his family, but that she might be dispatched, and so his son Shelah freed from being obliged to marry her.

Which he did not care he should, and was glad of this opportunity to prevent it.

Judah was quick to pass Judgment on her for committing the very same sin that he was involved in himself. He still did not make the connection. God does not discriminate.

Genesis 38:25 "When she [was] brought forth, she sent to her father in law, saying, By the man, whose these [are, am] I with child: and she said, Discern, I pray thee, whose [are] these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff."

"When she was brought forth": From her father's house, not to the place of execution, or in order to be burnt, but to the court of judicature, in order for her trial.

"She sent to her father in law, saying, by the man whose these are, am I with child": She sent a messenger to him, and by him the signet, bracelets, and staff, be they what they may, she had received from him as a pledge for the kid he promised her.

And ordered the messenger to say, at the same time he showed him these things that she was with child by the person to whom they belonged. Which was a very modest way of laying it to his charge, and yet very striking and convincing.

"And she said; by the messenger she sent: discern, I pray thee, whose are these, the signet, and bracelets, and staff": Which were the things given her as a pledge till she received the kid, the hire she was to have for his lying with her.

Suddenly the tables were turned. Judah was the guilty one. She had the evidence against him.

Genesis 38:26 "And Judah acknowledged [them], and said, She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more."

“She hath been more righteous than I”: This was not an accolade for her moral character and faith, but a commendation by Judah for her attention to inheritance rights of her family line and his shameful neglect thereof. Her death sentence was rescinded.

Judah was wrong on two accounts. He had committed fornication with her, and he had not kept his word when he refused to give Tamar his son Shelah.

Judah realizes he was the one who sinned and admitted it.

Genesis 38:27 "And it came to pass in the time of her travail, that, behold, twins [were] in her womb."

Although the hand that appeared first belonged to “Zarah,” the child (Pharez meaning “Breach”), was actually born first. He is listed in the genealogy of Christ (in Matthew 1:3; Ruth 4:18). The prenatal struggle, like Esau and Jacob’s (25:22-26), brings a violent chapter to an end.

It also launches the tribe of Judah on its career and provides the dark and dismal background for the appearance of godly Joseph.

Genesis 38:28 "And it came to pass, when she travailed, that [the one] put out [his] hand: and the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying, This came out first."

"And it came to pass when she travailed": Her birth throes came strong and quick upon her.

"That the one put out his hand": Which showed that she was like to have a difficult and dangerous time of it; that the birth was not like to be according to the usual and natural order, which may be considered as a correction for her sin.

"And the midwife took and bound upon his hand a scarlet thread, saying": This came out first; she tied this to his wrist, that she might know whose hand it was, and so which was the firstborn; which, to know was a matter of consequence, since to the firstborn there were some special and peculiar privileges.

Genesis 38:29 "And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold, his brother came out: and she said, How hast thou broken forth? [this] breach [be] upon thee: therefore his name was called Pharez."

"And it came to pass as he drew back his hand": Into the "uterus" again.

"That, behold, his brother came out": Out of his mother's womb, and so was properly born first.

"And she said": Either Tamar, or rather, her midwife.

"How hast thou broken forth?" It was astonishing to her how it could be, having never met with the like in her practice before. She could not imagine how it was possible for him to come forth first, when his brother lay in the way of him, and nearest the birth, as appeared by his putting out his hand.

"This breach be upon thee": If any damage comes either to the mother or to the brother, and so carries in it the nature of an imprecation; or rather, that the memory of so strange an event might be preserved, she imposed a name on him that should continue it.

"Therefore his name was called Pharez": Or "therefore he called", etc. Judah called his name Pharez, agreeably to what the midwife had related. From him, in a line of succession, sprang the Messiah, the Pharez or breaker (Micah 2:13); for the sake of which the whole history of this chapter seems to be recorded (Matthew 1:3).

"Pharez": This first of the twins, born of prostitution and incest to Tamar, nevertheless came into the messianic line, which went through Boaz and Ruth to King David (Ruth 4:18-22; Matt. 1:3). His name means "breach" or "pushing through."

Genesis 38:30 "And afterward came out his brother, that had the scarlet thread upon his hand: and his name was called Zarah."

"And afterward came out his brother that had the scarlet thread upon his hand": By which it was known that he so far came out first; which confirms the remarkable birth of his brother, who notwithstanding got the start of him.

"And his name was called Zarah": Not from "rising", or his coming forth like the rising sun, as is usually observed; but rather from his return, or drawing back his hand, and as it were returning to his mother's womb.

And so, according to Hillerus, Zarah, by a transposition of letters, comes from "Chazar", to return: but Jarchi thinks he had his name from the brightly shining appearance of the scarlet thread on his wrist.

"Pharez" means breach.

"Zarah" means splendor

This birth was unusual, Rebekah had twins, and this was really the second mention of such a birth. In Rebekah's case, the son was hanging on to his brother's heel. In this case, one son had been nearest birth and even had an arm born. Then he gave place to his brother, and the brother came first.

In Rebekah, there was war with the two sons in the mother's womb. Here, there was a struggle, also. Pharez was the one actually born first. Zarah was the one with the scarlet thread born last.

Genesis Chapter 38 Questions

1. Who did Judah turn in to that was the Adullamite?
2. What was, probably, the reason for Judah leaving his brothers?
3. What does "Hirah" mean?
4. The Canaanite woman Judah took, was the daughter of whom?
5. What does her name mean?
6. What was the first son's name?
7. What happened at the birth of this first child that was not the custom?
8. What was the second son's name?
9. What was the third son's name?
10. What does "Onan" mean?
11. What does "Shelah" mean?
12. What was Er's wife's name?
13. Why did the Lord kill Er?
14. What does "Tamar" mean?
15. What did Judah tell Onan to do that was the custom of their people?
16. Why did God kill Onan?
17. Besides displeasing God in his actions, who did he disobey?
18. What difficult thing did Judah tell Tamar to do?
19. Where did Tamar live after her husband died?

20. Where did Judah go, after he was comforted of his wife's death?
21. Who had become a friend of Judah's?
22. Why did Tamar take off her widow's clothes and go to deceive Judah?
23. What did Judah think she was?
24. What three things did he give her to hold?
25. Why would Judah not be able to deny fatherhood?
26. What did Tamar do after deceiving Jacob?
27. Judah sent the kid by whom?
28. What news did the friend bring back?
29. Why did Judah drop the matter and not make every effort to find the prostitute?
30. What bad news was brought to Judah about Tamar?
31. What punishment did he want for her?
32. Does God have a double standard for men and women who sin?
33. What evidence did she send to Judah to show who the child was fathered by?
34. What did Judah say when he was caught?
35. Tamar gave birth to_____?
36. What other Bible birth does this remind us of?
37. Explain.
38. "Pharez" means what?
39. "Zarah" means what?