

# The Book of Genesis

## Lesson 33

### ***Chapter 38***



Figure 6: Amenemhet II

Chapter 37 ended with Joseph's being sold into slavery to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's bodyguards. If the dates in Peter A. Clayton's *Chronicle of the Pharaohs* are correct, Amenemhet II was in the 27<sup>th</sup> year of his reign when Joseph entered Egypt. Amenemhet II was murdered in his 34<sup>th</sup> year and his son, Senusret II, took the throne. Six years later, Senusret II made Joseph second in command of all of Egypt. Senusret II was still Pharaoh when Jacob and his family moved to Egypt.



Figure 7: Senusret II

With Joseph in Egypt, Moses returned to tell the story of Judah and the events in his life over the next 22 years.

#### **Judah Visits Hirah**

**Genesis 38:1 And it came about at that time, that Judah, departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.**

About the time Joseph was sold into Egypt, Judah, the fourth son of Jacob, had decided to visit a friend named Hirah who lived in Adullam, a city southwest of present day Jerusalem near Lachish, about 15 miles from Hebron. Later, during the reign of King Saul, David will hide in a cave in this village.<sup>44</sup> We know nothing more about Hirah than what is recorded in this passage.

#### **Daughter of Shua as Wife**

**Genesis 38:2 And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; and he took her and went in to her.<sup>3</sup> So she conceived and bore a son and he named him Er.<sup>4</sup> Then she conceived again and bore a son and named him Onan. <sup>5</sup> And she bore still another son and named him Shelah; and it was at Chezib that she bore him.**

Shua lived in Adullam and had a beautiful daughter. We do not know her name. Judah took this beauty as a wife and she gave birth to three boys. We do not know how quickly she gave birth to the first or the spacing between the ages of the three. We do not know whether the first two were born in Adullam or in Judah's home, Hebron; however, we do know that the last son was born in

<sup>44</sup> 1 Samuel 22:1

Chezib.<sup>45</sup> If the boys were born as quickly as humanly possible after the marriage, they could have all been born within about 2 ½ years after the marriage.

## Er

**Genesis 38:6 Now Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, and her name was Tamar.**

**7 But Er, Judah's first-born, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life.**

As soon as Er was of the age to marry, Tamar became his wife. As indicated, the LORD did not put up with Er's evil act and "took his life" because of his wickedness.

## Onan

**Genesis 38:8 Then Judah said to Onan, " Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother."**

**9 And Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so it came about that when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, in order not to give offspring to his brother. 10 But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also.**

Onan, Judah's second son, was of the age to marry and Judah instructed him to perform his "brother-in-law" duty with Tamar. We have not seen this belief practiced anywhere in Genesis before. What was the purpose of this duty? This practice was known as the "kinsman redeemer" and it was accepted in that day. The living brother of a childless deceased brother would have sexual relations with the widow in order to produce a child in the name of the deceased to be raised as if it were actually the child of the deceased.

Some read this passage to say that Onan made one visit to Tamar and failed to produce a child by failing to complete the act leading to conception by spilling his seed on the ground instead of within the womb of Tamar. It is hard to conceive that that one act was sufficient to deem Onan as evil and the LORD would take his life. Such actions on the part of the LORD are not characteristic of how He worked and interacted with humanity in the past. The LORD had always allowed second, third and fourth chances for every sinner before judgment. If Onan was judged for one sinful act, why did the LORD allow Adam, Abraham and Jacob to sin repeatedly without judgment? Rather, a different reading of the passage might be more accurate.

When Moses said, "**so it came about that when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, in order not to give offspring to his brother,**" it is an indication that Onan took advantage of Tamar repeatedly, never intending to conceive a son who would not bear his name. Neither did he intend to stop his sinful relationship with Tamar. For that, Onan was evil and the LORD took his life. A literal translation of the passage should be "**so it came about that when he would come and go in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, in order not to give offspring to his brother.**"

---

<sup>45</sup> Achzib

## Promise of Shelah

Genesis 38:11 **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 thought, " I am afraid that he too may die like his brothers." So Tamar went and lived in her father's house.**

With this passage, a problem comes to light in the timeline of this story. At the beginning of chapter 37, Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold to the Ishmaelite/Midianite clans and then again to Pharaoh's bodyguard in Egypt. In Genesis 41:46, Joseph will be elevated to second in command of Egypt at the age of 30. Nine years later, Joseph will move his father and family to Egypt. Therefore, only 22 years are allotted for Judah's story to transpire. Many commentators take the position that this story could not have fully concluded within the restriction of the 22 years; however, it was possible and therefore completely accurate.

The Jewish Virtual Library, which is the official website of all Jewish literature reveals that in the Jewish heritage, marriage arrangements for a girl could be set in place upon her weaning and the consummation of that marriage could occur as soon as the completion of the girls first monthly cycle, whatever age that might have occurred. This practice was not limited to Jews; 2,500 years after this story, Mohamad, founder of the Islam, a descendant of Ishmael and Esau, at the age of 53, took Aisha to be his wife when she was six and consummated the marriage during her ninth year of life. The practice is still acceptable in all Islamic cultures today. Furthermore, a Jewish son could marry as early as 13 years of age although in medieval times that age could have been as early as 10 or 11. Other cultures, including Islam, held the same basic traditions.

With that knowledge, Er could have married Tamar as early as 10 – 13 years of age and lived with her several years before he died. Onan, the second son, could have then entered into the relationship with Tamar for several years after the official mourning period for Er was over. Shelah still could have been too young, not having reached the age of 13 by this time in the passage and still have had several years to mature before Judah sent him to do his "brother-in-law" duties with Tamar. When Judah uses the words "grow up," he could be referring to his mental maturity instead of his physical growth. Becoming a husband required the mental ability to think through life's issues and provide for the family. Even through a kinsman redeemer would provide the seed to bear a son in a deceased brother's name, his responsibilities did not stop there. As the biological father of the child and kinsman husband of the mother, he was responsible for the care, feeding and support of both. In Judah's mind, Shelah, though he might have been nearly 13, he might not have been ready for such responsibilities. In reality, Judah was heartbroken over the death of his first two sons and he did not want to risk his third with Tamar.

## Judah's Wife Died

**Genesis 38:12 Now after a considerable time Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died; and when the time of mourning was ended, Judah went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.**

Judah's wife, the mother of his three sons, died and he mourned for her for seven days. Jewish customs on this topic are interesting. Mourning was allowed only for those 13 years of age and over; those 12 years old and under were not mourned. Mourning was also acceptable only for immediate family members, father, mother, son and daughter relationships. After mourning seven days for his wife, Judah and Hirah, his friend, traveled to Timnah to inspect the sheep shearing process of his flock. Timnah was about three miles from Adullam.

### **Tamar's Plan**

**Genesis 38:13 And it was told to Tamar, "Behold, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." 14 So she removed her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in the gateway of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife.**

Much has been said in the past about the widow's garments; however, nothing definitive on the subject exists. Although the custom was distinctly cultural, the practice was somewhat dependent on the customs of surrounding tribal cultures.

The dress adorned by Tamar was distinctly religious. As indicated in verse 21, she appeared to Judah to be a temple prostitute engaged in the Canaanite cult business of the worship of Baal. Her veil and dress would have been scarlet and jewels would dangle from her ears, neck, wrists and waist. According to the Holman Dictionary, temple prostitutes were part of fertility cult worship who entered into a "sacral sexual intercourse as an act of worship intended to emulate the gods and share in their powers of procreation or else an act of imitative magic by which the gods were compelled to preserve the earth's fertility."

Why did Tamar do this? When Tamar heard that Judah was just three miles from her father's home where she was living, she must have been inquisitive and went to visit him. From a distance, she must have seen Shelah and was shocked that he was a grown man, although still in his mid-teens, but well capable of fulfilling his "brother-in-law" duties for her. Surely she became angry with Judah because he failed to fulfill his promise to her as her father-in-law. Tamar dressed as a prostitute with the full intention of engaging with Judah.

### **Judah's Agreement with Tamar**

**Genesis 38:15 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, for she had covered her face. 16 So he turned aside to her by the road, and said, "Here now, let me come in to you"; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" 17 He said, therefore, "I will send you a kid from the flock." She said, moreover, "Will you give a pledge until you send it?" 18 And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" And she said, " Your seal 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 departed, and removed her veil and put on her widow's garments.**

How did Judah not know that Tamar was his daughter-in-law? Was her clothing enough to conceal her true identity? It may have been more than that! From the time Tamar married Er, probably before reaching her teen years, more than six years had probably passed. From age 8 to 18, many changes occur in the body of a girl. After the death of Onan, it is quite possible that Judah had not seen Tamar in five to ten years, all within the realm of time allowed within the 22 year window of opportunity. Judah did not have Tamar on his mind. However, Tamar had every intention on entrapping Judah in her plan.

Before the physical intercourse, Tamar received Judah's ring that had his seal on it, the cord that he wore around his waist and his shepherd's staff. These three items were the most prized possessions of every man. The seal on the ring was used with every legal transaction such as the sale of land, livestock or supplies. The cord was used to tie up his outerwear when crossing a stream or performing strenuous work. The staff was his protection from wild beasts and his prod was used to move the herd along. It was impossible to be a business man and a shepherd without all three. The kid for payment was incidental to the transaction. The three items would seal the fate of Judah.

### **Judah Payment Sent**

**Genesis 38:20 When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to receive the pledge from the woman's hand, he did not find her.<sup>21</sup> And he asked the men of her place, saying, "Where is the temple prostitute who was by the road at Enaim?" But they said, "There has been no temple prostitute here."<sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah, and said, "I did not find her; and furthermore, the men of the place said, 'There has been no temple prostitute here.'"<sup>23</sup> Then Judah said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. After all, I sent this kid, but you did not find her."**

Judah was not an unscrupulous man. He was sincere concerning his debt, even if it was payment for a sexual act outside of marriage with a temple prostitute. Was the use of a prostitute banned in Judah's faith? To this point in the Genesis story, visiting a prostitute has not been addressed although it will be in the Law given to the offspring of Israel many years later after they have left Egypt. For now in this story, the LORD had not passed down a prohibition on it.

Hirah could not find the prostitute when he sought to pay her the wages for her service to Judah. Tamar was not one of the regular temple prostitutes; therefore, her single appearance at the gate did not bring enough attention for her to be remembered by anyone who was there that day. They knew the prostitutes who frequented the gate; she was not one of them.

Judah was not guilty of failing to pay his debt to the prostitute and for that he would not have been a laughingstock. He tried to pay his debt. His problem was that he had given his ring, cord and staff. No clear thinking man would have ever given up those three important credentials essential to his work and life.

## **Tamar's Pregnancy and Sentence**

**Genesis 38:24** Now it was about three months later that Judah was informed, " Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot, and behold, she is also with child by harlotry." Then Judah said, "Bring her out and let her be burned!" <sup>25</sup> It was while she was being brought out that she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "I am with child by the man to whom these things belong." And she said, "Please examine and see, whose signet ring and cords and staff are these?"

About 90 days later, Tamar's pregnancy began to show and word spread to Judah that she had "played the harlot" with a man. Judah had directed Tamar to live in her father's house until Shelah was mature enough to fulfill his "brother-in-law" duties. Therefore, Judah still considered Tamar his daughter-in-law, married to his dead son and waiting for Shelah's ability to have a relationship with her to produce an heir. Judah was therefore the patriarch of his family and had the authority to act as judge over all actions of his family members. She was to be put to death by burning. Judah must have called for her and on her way, she sent the ring, cord and staff ahead for his review.

## **Tamar's Vindication**

**Genesis 38:26** And Judah recognized *them*, and said, " She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not have relations with her again.

Was Tamar vindicated by her action with Judah? Was she in the right and he in the wrong? We do not know what Tamar was thinking but we know what Judah thought. He had wronged Tamar by not sending Shelah to her at the proper time and that had long passed. Both were wrong in their actions but Judah, the head of the family, had to take full responsibility for Tamar. She was his daughter-in-law, entitled to the kinsman redeemer action of a "brother-in-law." Judah should not have sent her to her father's house to be a widow. He was responsible for her and he had failed her in many ways.

Evidently a relationship with a father and daughter-in-law must have carried with it some stigma because Judah never had a sexual relationship with Tamar again. He was the father of the children in her womb, but he was not going to be her husband.

## **Twins – Perez and Zerah**

**Genesis 38:27** And it came about at the time she was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb. <sup>28</sup> Moreover, it took place while she was giving birth, 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 it came about as he drew back his hand, that behold, his brother came out. Then she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" So he was named Perez. <sup>30</sup> And afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet *thread* on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

Six months later, Tamar gave birth to twins. One made an entry into the world with his hand and then wound up being the second to be born. The first was named Perez with mean “breach.” It was not that he was born breach; rather, it means that he breached the natural order of the birth by being born before his brother who had stuck his hand out of Tamar’s womb and then drew it back in. The second born was Zerah which means “rising” or “sprung up.” He should have risen to be the firstborn because his hand entered the world first but his brother breached that design and took his place.

We must ask the question, “Why did Moses include this story in Genesis?” How did it help the purpose and context of the Scripture? Why did he not tell the stories of Reuben, Issachar and all the rest of the brothers? The answer is simple; through Judah, Tamar and Perez, the Savior of the world will come – Jesus. The story is here so we will know the circumstances of the lives of Jesus’ lineage.