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Genesis 38

(2019)

Bible House of Grace contains an easy to read New and Old Testament commentary full of spiritual treasures and pearls, complete with an insightful resource guide illuminating God's love and grace.



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Although I believe my aim is pure and God's will perfect this document is still the product of a human man, as to such I neither claim perfect knowledge or perfect understanding.

Genesis 38.

Topics.

- Judah by a Canaanite woman gives birth to Er, Onan and Shelah.
- God puts Er Judah's firstborn son to death because of his wickedness.
- Onan waste his semen rather than raise up offspring for his brother.
- Judah tells Tamar to remain a widow until Shelah his Son grew up.
- Judah's goes to Timnah, Tamar waits on the road for him to pass-by.
- Judah gives Tamar his signet and staff and she conceives by him.
- Hirah takes a goat to Tamar so she will return Judah's pledge.
- Let Tamar be burned, because she is pregnant by immorality.
- Tamar gives birth to twins named Perez and Zerah.

FOR INFORMATION: concerning people, places and the meaning of words see the title: "Map Locations and People of the Bible," and the title: "Bible Dictionary" on Website Menu.

The previous chapter: in chapter thirty-seven the focus was upon Joseph and his robe of many colours; his first dream of sheaves standing upright and bowing to him; his second dream of the sun, moon and eleven stars bowing to him; his brother's evil plan to him kill him and sell him and of them dipping his robe in goat's blood and deceiving Jacob their father into believing he had be torn by wild beasts.

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GENESIS 38:1-5

Judah by a Canaanite Woman Gives Birth to Er, Onan and Shelah.

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

The introductory words, "it happened at that time," refers to the time Jacob's sons sold Joseph and took his robe of many colours and dipped it in goats' blood to deceive Jacob into believing he had been torn by wild beasts and the time of Jacob's great mourning for his son Joseph. (Gen. 37:31-36).

Hirah: was a friend of Judah. It is also possible that while they spent time together Hirah may have spoken to Judah about the Canaanite woman dwelling at Chezib.

Shua: the following words, "In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died (v12) shows that Shua was not the name of Judah's wife, but the name of her father. He was most likely a notable man amongst the people of his country.

Judah leaves his brothers and travels to Adullam in the lowlands (Josh. 15:33-35) to spend some time with his friend Hirah (v12).

He then goes to Chezib (v5) where he is attracted to a Canaanite woman and takes her as his wife. This relationship is not an affair or fling since she by him gives birth to three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah and then in verse six we read of him choosing Tamar to be a wife for his first born son Er which means that he remained the husband of his son's mother for many years. Taking a Canaanite woman to wife was contrary to the will of God and for this reason some theologians attempt to remove the disgrace of Judah falling in love with and marrying a Canaanite woman, which was forbidden by Abraham and Isaac and which his father Jacob in obedience to his father and mother travelled to his mother's brother in Haran to avoid interpreting the word Canaanite to be merchant. However, this is unnecessary, since it is very easy to imagine him taking a Canaanite woman to wife when it is considered that it was Judah who said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites" (Gen. 37:26).

GENESIS 38:6-7

God puts Er to Death because of His Wickedness.

- **Genesis 38:6-7:** And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.
⁷But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death.

Judah now chooses a wife for Er his first-born son, but due to some great wickedness God brought his life to an end in the prime of his life. We are not told what his crime was, but we are safe to suppose it was extremely vile before the LORD.

GENESIS 38:8-10

Onan wastes His Semen Rather than Raise up Offspring.

- **Genesis 38:8-10:** 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." ⁹But 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. ¹⁰And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also.

The words, "Go in to your brother's wife," in this context means cohabit with her as his wife to bring forth children. It was at this time the custom for a brother next of age to do the duty of a husband for the wife of a brother who had died leaving his wife a widow and with no children. This custom was observed at this time amongst God's people, and later became part of the Levitical Law as the following verses show.

- If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. (Deut. 25:5-6).
- This is what the LORD commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad, 'Let them marry whom they think best, only they shall marry within the clan of the tribe of their father. ⁷The inheritance of the people of Israel shall not be transferred from one tribe to another, for every one of the people of Israel shall hold on to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers. (Num. 36:6-7).
- Moses said, "If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother." (Matt. 22:24).

From this story we learn that the Levitical law by which the brother of a dead husband was required to act as a husband to his deceased brother's widow to raise up an heir for her was practised long before the law of Moses.

It was a custom that was incorporated among the Levitical laws of Moses to serve the following five purposes:

1. Prevent the extinction of any line of descent which was a matter of great importance.
2. Keep the inheritance of land in the tribe of the deceased brother.
3. So, the deceased brothers' line would continue to multiply through his widow's wife.
4. Preserve of the family bloodline since the child born by the brother of the wives deceased husband would have the name and inheritance of her deceased husband.
5. Guarantee that the widowed wife would have an heir to her deceased husband's inheritance and in this way continued the father's family inheritance.

The Mosaic Law did not institute this custom, but confirmed and regulated it. It did allow the brother to refuse to act as a husband to his brothers widowed wife if he chose to do so, but the following verses show that it was considered a disgrace if he did refuse her.

- If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. ⁶And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. ⁷And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, 'My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel; he will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.' ⁸Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, 'I do not wish to take her,' ⁹then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, 'So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.' ¹⁰And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, 'The house of him who had his sandal pulled off.' (Deut. 25:5-10).

This practice and law was abolished in the New Testament.

Onan wasted his semen on ground: following are two the reasons Onan may have done this wickedness:

1. For some reason he envied and hated of his brother and therefore had no desire to honour him in this way.
2. Onan knowing that the child would not be counted as being his (v9), but his brothers may have wickedly thought if he did not give his brother's wife offspring he would have a greater part of his father's inheritance for himself and from this evil mindset and being motivated by covetousness, selfishness and greed determined to waste his semen on the ground rather than give his brother's wife a child so that he would get his hands on a greater portion of his father's estate.

However, these are simply speculation, and it is not important for us to know Onan's reasons, since the statement, "And he did what was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and He put him to death (v10) is enough for us to know that Onan's motivation whatever it may have been was grossly wicked before the LORD. One of the reasons it would have been so extremely displeasing to the LORD would have been because Onan took Tamar his brother's wife and used her for his own sexual gratification and pleasure, with no intention of giving her a child. He showed her no respect, but treated and used her in the same way a man treats a prostitute. In, fact his act was even worse, at least a prostitute gets paid for her services, whereas Onan gave his brother's wife nothing and yet to gratify his own lust used her time and again, is it any wonder God struck him dead.

NOTE: some religions use this story to support their teaching that it is a sin to use contraception, but this is not only reading far more into the story than what it is actually saying, but also a perfect example of forcing the Scriptures to fit a preconceived religious mindset.

Onan's sin was not that he wasted his semen on the ground, but that he had sex with Tamar with no intention of performing the duty required of him to give the widowed and childless wife of his brother a child. His sin and wickedness was that he used her for free sex to gratify his own sexual lust. If he did not want to raise up offspring to her he should never have used her body for his own sexual gain and pleasure, he should have simply told her, he will not do it rather than humiliate and defile her in the way he did.

GENESIS 38:11

Tamar Remains a Widow until Shelah's Son Grows Up.

- **Genesis 38:11:** Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house.

This verse shows that at this time it was understood even before any Levitical law was made that the next brother in line was required to act as a husband to his brothers childless widowed wife and that as long as any of the deceased brothers remained they were required to act as her husband for the purpose of giving her a child. It was sometime later that this custom became one of the laws of Moses.

- If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. (Deuteronomy 25:5).

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The Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection refer to this law when they asked Jesus the following question saying:

- Moses said, "If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother." ²⁵Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. ²⁶So too the second and third, down to the seventh. ²⁷After them all, the woman died. ²⁸In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her." (Matt. 22:23-26).

According to this custom of marriage Judah's third son Shelah was the next brother in line to act as a husband for Tamar so that she would give birth to a child. However, Judah feared Shelah might die as his brothers had so, he delayed giving Shelah to Tamar. Following are three reasons Judah may have had such a fear:

1. He thought marrying too young was the cause of Er and Onan's death.
2. He considered the death of Er and Onan to be Tamar's fault because of some sickness or sin in her.
3. He believed that God was against Tamar, rather than acknowledge his own son's wickedness.

Due to this fear and the fact that when Shelah was grown up Judah had not given him to Tamar to perform the duty of a husband in marriage (v14) some feel that Judah wished to evade the duty of giving his third son Shelah to Tamar and therefore was only pretending to give him to her by telling her he would delay it until Shelah was older and at an age of maturity, but actually had no intention to do so. But it seems more likely that Shelah at this time was simply too young to act as a husband to Tamar.

Tamar went and remained a widow in her father's house: (v11) Tamar had dwelt in Judah's house during the time of her two husbands, but now Judah advises her to go to her own father's house (which was probably in the same place) and remain a widow until Selah was older which she did. It is likely that Judah told Tamar to go to her father's house to remove any temptation of her and Selah getting together, before it was his will that they should do so or because it was not a good testimony to have a young widowed and childless woman dwelling in another man's house or good for her reputation.

GENESIS 38:12-14

Tamar waits on the Road for Judah to Pass-By.

- **Genesis 38:12-14:** In 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. ¹³And when Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," ¹⁴she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, (an open place in KJV) 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.

Judah's wife dies and after some time he plans to travel with his friend Hirah to visit his sheepshearers. Tamar seeing that Judah had not given Shelah to her in marriage and aware that he had grown up devises a plan to become pregnant by Judah. She removes her widows' clothes, covers herself with a veil and goes and sits either at the gate of the town of Enaim or at someplace on the side of the road that led to it where she would be easily seen by travelers passing by which was the same road that led to Timnah in the mountains of Judah and that Judah and Hirah were travelling on.

She covered her with a veil: (v14) it seems that it was the custom of harlots during these times to cover their faces not only so that they would not be recognised, by those that passed by, but also not be recognised by those who paid them for their services, had this not been so it is almost certain Judah would have recognised Tamar. Though the women who practise the trade of prostitution today do it with an open face it was not so in certain countries during these early ancient times. It was also common for many women in these countries to wear a veil when walking on the streets in public, however those who were in the business of prostitution would be easily discerned by their body language and the clothing they wore, especially if they were sitting on the side of a road for no apparent reason.

GENESIS 38:15-19

Judah gives Tamar His Signet and She Conceives by Him.

- **Genesis 38:15-19:** When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶He 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?" ¹⁷He answered, "I will send you a young goat from the flock." And she said, "If you give me a pledge, until you send it—" ¹⁸He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord (thy bracelets in KJV) and your staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her and went in to her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹Then she arose and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

Judah's signet: (v18) the word signet comes from the Hebrew word (*chatham*) it literally means a signature-ring that acts as a seal, it carries the idea of sealing up, closing up or to make an end of. Judah's signet most likely refers to a ring that was marked in some way that made it easy for those who knew him to identify it as belonging to him.

Judah's cord (thy bracelets in KJV): (v18) bracelets comes from the Hebrew word (*pathal*) it literally means to twine and can refer to a bracelet, to lace, to a ribbon or to a thread of cloth or of wire. Though bracelets of a masculine type including armlets were worn by Hebrew men (mostly on the upper muscle of the arm rather than the wrist) the Hebrew word in this verse translated bracelets, is in most other verses translated lace or ribbon; so it is also possible that this refers to a ribbon or cord or some type of cloth that was worn as an emblem that signified Judah's faith or that he was a son of Jacob and of the tribes of Israel.

Judah's staff: (v18) the word staff comes from the Hebrew word (*natah*) it literally means a branch (as extending). Figuratively it can refer to a tribe; a rod, for chastising and correction, or to a scepter for ruling, or walking staff for support of life. In ancient times a staff and sceptre were so elaborately adorned with magnificent carvings that they were worthy of being handed down as emblems of authority from father to son. In this context Judah's staff most likely refers to a walking staff or a shepherd's crook. Prior to the law being given it was the common practise for a man who met a prostitute on the street to negotiate a sum of money for her hire to lay with him that they both agreed to and then go to some private place. Judah, not recognizing Tamar and thinking her to be a prostitute was willing to part with anything simply to gratify the lust of his flesh. They negotiate prices for her services and he offers to send her a goat, she accepts the price, but now aware that she could not trust Judah to keep his word, she asks him to give her his signet, his cord and his staff as a pledge of security until he sends the goat to her as he promised to do and he agrees.

They then go to some private place and Judah unknowingly has sexual intercourse with his daughter in law. Some excuse Tamar behaviour by suggesting that she believed the promise made to Abraham and his seed that the Messiah would come from his line and therefore she desired to have a child by one of the descendants of Abraham that she might have a chance of having the honour of being the mother of the Messiah. Whatever her reason Judah later declares her to be more righteous than himself (v26). One of the beauties of the Bible is that it does not hide the sins of mankind even of God's own chosen people from the eyes of world. It tells the stories in open honesty revealing both the good and bad, the kindness and the horror of human nature. This sin of Judah and many other horrific sins of God's chosen people are left for all to see on the record of Israel's history. One of the primary reasons for this is that the reader might discover how great and deep the corruption of human nature is, even in the best of mankind and in this awareness come to a humble sense of their own inward corrupted nature that they might submit themselves to God, repent and seek His plan of salvation.

GENESIS 38:20-23

Hirah Takes a Goat to Tamar so She Will Return Judah's Pledge.

- **Genesis 38:20-23:** 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. ²¹And 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." ²²So he returned to Judah and said, "I have not found her. Also, the men of the place said, 'No cult prostitute has been here.'" ²³And 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."

Judah sends his friend Hirah to deliver the Goat to Tamar and bring back his signet, his bracelet and his staff, but after much searching Hirah could not find Tamar. He returns to Judah and informed him that the people of the surrounding area knew of no harlot or cult prostitute that dwelt in the region and after much searching, he could not find the harlot to whom he was sent to deliver the goat and receive the pledge. Judah, realising that he would become the butt of jokes amongst his brothers and those that

knew him decides to stop the search and let the woman keep them. It is certain that he had hoped this would be the last he would hear of the matter, but much to his shock the remainder of the story shows that God had no intention of keeping Judah's sin hidden.

GENESIS 38:24-26

Let Tamar be Burned, because She is Pregnant by Immorality.

- **Genesis 38:24-26:** 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." ²⁵As 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." ²⁶Then 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.

In patriarchal times fathers seem to have possessed the power of life and death over the members of their families. Here it is clear that Judah had the power to execute such a punishment upon the widow of his son. The following verse (there are many others) show that stoning was the common form of punishment by the law of Moses for such sins as harlotry and adultery:

- If the thing is true, that evidence of virginity was not found in the young woman, ²¹then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done an outrageous thing in Israel by whoring in her father's house. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deut. 22:20-21) (Deut. 22:22-24).

Burning applied only in intensified sins:

- If a man takes a woman and her mother also, it is depravity; he and they shall be burned with fire, that there may be no depravity among you. (Lev. 20:14).
- And the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire. (Lev. 21:9).

Here we see the double standard of men, Judah used a woman who he believed to be a prostitute to gratify his own lustful passion and considers himself free of any immorality, yet he pronounces the woman of being guilty of such tremendous immorality that she deserved to be burnt. It is a common trait amongst us all for the inward deceiving sinful nature to magnify the sin of others while all the time being blind to our own, this is a perfect example of such a sin. Judah not yet knowing he was the father to Tamar's child sends men to bring her out to be burned. She in turn sends messengers with his signet, his cord and his staff to him and tells them to ask him to identify them and then say, "She is pregnant by the man to who these belong," which was a very dramatic and at the same time modest way of revealing to him that he was the father of her child. Ponder for a moment Judah's instant shock and sudden surprise when he heard these words. But to his credit he did acknowledge that Tamar was more righteous than he had been.

Judah acknowledges that he was most to blame for the following two reasons:

1. The cause of Tamar's behaviour stemmed from his own failure to act justly by giving her Selah to perform the duty of a husband to give her a child as he had promised her, he would.
2. His act to commit fornication with her was solely motivated by his lustful passion, whereas Tamar though not completely without fault had no other motive driving her than the desire to give birth to a child of the same bloodline of her deceased husband.

In earlier chapters we saw Judah's harsh spirit and lack of compassion manifested when he along with his brothers was willing to murder Joseph their brother and eventually sold him to the Ishmaelite's and now in this story we see again his ruthless nature manifested in his harsh judgment of condemnation upon Tamar when he was guilty of the greater crime.

GENESIS 38:27-30

Tamar Gives Birth to Twins named Perez and Zerah.

- **Genesis 38:27-30:** When the time of her labor came, there were twins in her womb. ²⁸And 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." ²⁹But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out. And she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" (How hast thou broken forth? In KJV), therefore his name was called Perez (Pharez in KJV). ³⁰Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah.

Perez: (Pharez in KJV): comes from the Hebrew word (*perets*) it literally means to break (as in a breach) and carries the idea of breaking forth. When Tamar's was giving birth to her twin sons one child put out his hand and the midwife tied a scarlet thread onto his wrist and named him Zerah, because he came out first, but he withdrew his hand and the other brother came out first, so the midwife named him Perez (Pharez in KJV), because he had made a breach for himself and somehow had managed to come out before his brother. Immediately after his birth his brother Zerah came out with the scarlet coloured thread on his wrist. (Gen. 38:27-30). Perez (Pharez in KJV) is also the name of two Israelites.

Zerah: comes from the Hebrew word (*zerach*) it literally means a rising of light. It is also the name of three Israelites and of an Idumæan and an Ethiopian prince.

What a breach you have made for yourself! (How has thou broken forth? In KJV) implies that the midwife had probably never before seen such a birth and therefore when she saw a child come out first when another child lay in the way of him she was so amazed and astonished that she exclaimed "How could such a birth happen." Tamar, Perez (Pharez in KJV) and Zerah are mentioned in the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matt. 1:1-3) (Luke 3:33). This chapter (and others) give an account of the shameless, immoral and wicked behaviour of Judah and his family that it seems a wonder that out of all Jacob's sons it was from Judah that the Lord Jesus Christ would spring out of.

- It is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah. (Heb. 7:14).

This shines a light upon the truth that God's choice is of grace and not of merit.

As the founder of Bible House of Grace, I would like to thank the many Christian scholars, commentators and theologians who have gone before me, and the many today, who have freely made available their works to enhance the knowledge of the Bible to all people worldwide. It is only with the help of these faithful writers that much of Bible House of Grace exists as it does today.
