

Several episodes in the lives of Jacob's sons have already highlighted some unsavory aspects of their character. For example, Jacob's son Reuben once engaged in an illicit sexual relationship [with one of Jacob's wives](#). Two of Jacob's other sons exterminated the entire male population of a city in a [revenge killing](#).

These men later [devised a scheme](#) to dispose of their younger brother Joseph by casting him into an empty well, intending to leave him to die. Later, they reversed that decision and sold him to a group of traveling merchants as a slave. Then they led their father into the cruel (and deceptive) belief that Joseph was dead.

So Jacob's sons had clearly grown to become a group of ruthless and violent men of questionable moral character. Those character qualities will play an important role as we progress toward the latter portions of this book.

Here in Genesis chapter thirty-eight, our focus will now shift to Jacob's son, Judah. If this chapter were to form the basis of a detective mystery, a fitting title might be "*The Case Of The Vanishing Prostitute*."

"It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers, and visited a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah" (Genesis 38:1).

Genesis 38:1 opens by saying, "*at that time...*" This alludes to a detail from the closing moments of the preceding chapter: "*All of Jacob's children came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. 'No,' he said, 'I will go to my grave, mourning for my son.' So Jacob kept on grieving*" (Genesis 37:35 CEV). It was during that period when Judah elected to leave. But what prompted that decision?

While we might assume that Judah sought to distance himself from his father's sorrow concerning Joseph's apparent demise, a closer look at Genesis 38:1 tells us something different. That verse tells us that Judah did not depart from his *father*; instead, we're told that he departed from his *brothers*.

If Judah was feeling guilty over the effect of Joseph's disappearance, the presence of his brothers would serve as a constant reminder of what he had done. So Judah may have departed from his brothers in the hope that it might ease his conscience.

It's also possible that Judah wanted to escape the environment of fraud and hypocrisy that surrounded Joseph's loss. Whatever the case, Judah decided it was time to leave home and find another place to live.

Judah's new address was the home of a man named Hirah the Adullamite, a place that was about fifteen miles (24 km) away. Although he will later be identified as Judah's friend, it seems unlikely that Hirah followed the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Judah's friendship with Hirah was also unlikely to produce the kind of beneficial influence that might help him fulfill God's purpose for his life- and neither was what happened next...

"There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man whose name was Shua. He married her and slept with her" (Genesis 38:2 GW).

The Canaanites were a people group that inhabited the region that God had earlier promised to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Canaanites worshiped many false deities, and their reputation was so poor that Judah's [grandfather Isaac](#) and [great-grandfather Abraham](#) each forbid their sons to marry a woman from that area. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear that Judah took those factors into consideration when he decided to enter that marriage relationship.

Be that as it may, Judah and his new wife soon began having children...

“So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. And she conceived yet again and bore a son, and called his name Shelah. He was at Chezib when she bore him” (Genesis 38:3-5).

The following verse advances our narrative to a point where Judah's eldest son had grown to become a man...

“Then Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord killed him” (Genesis 38:6-7).

The Scriptures are silent regarding Er’s offenses, other than to say that God elected to end his life because of his wickedness. That brings us to the account of Onan, Judah's second oldest son...

“And Judah said to Onan, ‘Go in to your brother’s wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother’” (Genesis 38:8).

If a man died childless during that period, the oldest surviving brother was responsible to marry his widow and have children with her in order to preserve his brother’s lineage. A child who was born from that relationship would then serve as an heir of the deceased. Unfortunately, Judah's second son proved to be as wicked as his first son...

”But Onan knew that the heir would not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in to his brother’s wife, that he emitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother” (Genesis 38:9).

So Onan was willing to use Tamar for his sexual pleasure, but had little interest in fulfilling the responsibility that accompanied that relationship. However, there is another explanation that might shed light on his actions.

As the first-born son, Onan's brother held certain rights within that culture. Those rights included a larger portion of the family inheritance. If Onan's elder brother died without a legal heir, his rights would fall to the next oldest son- Onan himself. This may explain why Onan was unwilling to father an heir for his brother; it meant a larger share of the family estate for him.

Unfortunately for him, Onan lost that inheritance along with his life...

“And the thing which he did displeased the Lord; therefore He killed him also” (Genesis 38:10).

So two of Judah’s three sons had married the same woman, and both met their demise because of their wickedness. That left Judah’s youngest son, Shelah as the sole remaining son. While Judah professed his willingness to allow Shelah to marry Tamar, his consent masked a different agenda...

“Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, ‘Remain a widow in your father’s house till my son Shelah is grown.’ For he said, ‘Lest he also die like his brothers.’ And Tamar went and dwelt in her father’s house” (Genesis 38:11).

Apparently, Judah’s third son was too young to marry, so Judah advised Tamar to return to her parent's home until he grew old enough to wed. But in reality, Judah was actually thinking something else: *“I’m down to my last son- what if he marries Tamar and subsequently dies as well?”*

Thus, Judah made a promise to Tamar that he never intended to keep. But while Judah went about the business of getting on with his life, he was about to discover that Tamar’s resourcefulness surpassed his expectations.

“Now in the process of time the daughter of Shua, Judah’s wife, died; and Judah was comforted, and went up to his sheepshearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite” (Genesis 38:12).

This must have been an emotionally difficult period for Judah. He had already suffered the loss of his eldest sons and now his wife had passed as well. Thus, the idea of a road trip with his friend Hirah must have seemed very appealing.

This journey to Timnah took place during the annual sheep-shearing season that occurred in the spring of each year. The laborious work of sheep-shearing was typically followed by a great celebration, and that was where Judah wanted to be.

But word of Judah's departure reached his daughter-in-law Tamar- and that's when she undertook a journey of her own...

“And it was told Tamar, saying, 'Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.' So she took off her widow's garments, covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which was on the way to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife” (Genesis 38:13-14).

It's important to remember that there were very few forms of assistance available to those in need during that era. A woman without a husband or children faced a near complete loss of support and was destined to live out her days in poverty.

Although Judah asked Tamar to return to her father's home on a temporary basis following the deaths of her husbands, it was now apparent that he had no intention of honoring his commitment to give her his youngest son in marriage. Thus, Judah had consigned her to a future of poverty, hardship, and destitution.

However, Tamar must have noticed something in Judah's character that led her to conclude that he might fall prey to a strategy that would enable her to bear a child. That strategy involved adopting the guise of a prostitute while masking her true identity.

And sure enough, Judah fell into the trap that was set before him...

“When Judah saw her, he thought she was a harlot, because she had covered her face. Then he turned to her by the way, and said, 'Please let me come in to you'; for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law...” (Genesis 38:15-16a).

Judging from passage, it seems that Judah may have had some previous engagements with prostitutes who loitered in that area. In fact, Judah seemed to treat this proposition like any other business transaction: ***“Come now, let me sleep with you...” (NIV).***

So it appears that Tamar knew Judah well enough to know that he wasn't a particularly moral individual. It also seems she knew Judah might approach her if she was able to convincingly look and act like a prostitute.

And now that Judah had demonstrated his interest, it was time to negotiate the agreement...

“...So she said, 'What will you give me, that you may come in to me?' And he said, 'I will send a young goat from the flock.' So she said, 'Will you give me a pledge till you send it?' Then he said, 'What pledge shall I give you?'....” (Genesis 38:16b-18a).

So Judah requested credit from this “prostitute” in exchange for her services. In return, she wisely requested some very specific pieces of collateral.....

“She answered, ‘Leave me your identification seal and its cord and the walking stick you are carrying.’ So Judah gave them to her. Then he had intercourse with her, and she became pregnant” (Genesis 38:18b NLT).

So Judah provided his personal seal, its cord, and his staff as collateral to fulfill Tamar's request. This seal was typically fashioned as a ring that bore the personal identifying mark of its owner. A staff, or walking stick, was often unique to each individual as well. These items were directly traceable to Judah, an element that will take on added significance as we continue our narrative.

“So she arose and went away, and laid aside her veil and put on the garments of her widowhood” (Genesis 38:19).

Thus, Judah and Tamar consummated their arrangement, and each went their separate ways. But it soon came time for Judah to settle his debt...

“And Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand, but he did not find her. Then he asked the men of that place, saying, 'Where is the harlot who was openly by the roadside?' And they said, 'There was no harlot in this place'” (Genesis 38:20-21).

There is a small but important detail that emerges in other translations of this passage. The English Standard Version (ESV) offers one such example...

“And [Hirah] 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’” (Genesis 38:21 ESV).

While Judah may have viewed Tamar as a common prostitute, it seems that his friend Hirah was better informed. When Hirah questioned the local inhabitants in search of this “harlot,” he specifically inquired about the whereabouts of the ***“shrine prostitute” (NIV)***, or ***“temple prostitute” (NASB)***.

As mentioned in the opening verse of this chapter, Hirah was a resident of Adullam, a city of the Canaanites. (1) As such, Hirah was undoubtedly familiar with Canaanite culture and the pagan religious practices of that region. Those practices included the worship of a fertility god who was served by temple prostitutes.

So when Hirah arrived to settle Judah's debt, he naturally asked to see the “shrine” prostitute. Unfortunately, it appears that Judah was so spiritually and morally insensitive that he either didn't know about these pagan sexual practices or didn't care. Judah was thus involved in an immoral activity, but might have been involved in an idolatrous one as well.

“So he returned to Judah and said, 'I cannot find her. Also, the men of the place said there was no harlot in this place.' Then Judah said, 'Let her take them for herself, lest we be shamed; for I sent this young goat and you have not found her’” (Genesis 38:22-23).

It's easy to understand Judah's apprehension, for he could hardly approach the city authorities and lodge a complaint regarding a prostitute who had disappeared with his belongings. Instead, it was far better to say, ***“...let her keep them... We tried our best. We'd be the laughingstock of the town to go back again” (Genesis 38:23 TLB).***

But Judah's personal items were far from lost. In fact, they were safely hidden in a place where he would never think to look for them. And even though Judah will eventually recover his property, it will return to him from an unexpected source in a very unusual manner.

“And it came to pass, about three months after, that Judah was told, saying, 'Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot; furthermore she is with child by harlotry.' So Judah said, 'Bring her out and let her be burned!’” (Genesis 38:24).

(1) "Adullam" *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, Ccel.org, 2025, www.ccel.org/e/easton/ebd/ebd/T0000100.html#T0000107. Accessed 17 May 2025.

So three months elapsed and Tamar's pregnancy had become increasingly evident. That evidence also brought two cultural repercussions. The first involved her indisputably immoral behavior. The second involved her commitment to marry Judah's son Shelah, even though Judah had no intention of allowing them to wed.

From Judah's perspective, Tamar had committed two offenses. First, she was guilty of harlotry. But she was also guilty of adultery against his son as well.

Nevertheless, we should note Judah's obvious double standard in this area. While it was seemingly permissible for him to engage in a sexual relationship with a prostitute, he responded to the news of his daughter-in-law's pregnancy by saying, ***"Drag her out of town and burn her to death!"*** (CEV).

However, Tamar was well prepared for that response...

"When she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, 'By the man to whom these belong, I am with child.' And she said, 'Please determine whose these are—the signet and cord, and staff'" (Genesis 38:25).

While Tamar could have called attention to the fact that she was in possession of Judah's property, she declined to do so. Instead, she simply responded by saying, ***"The man who owns this identification seal and walking stick is the father of my child. Do you recognize them?"*** (TLB).

And with that, *The Case Of The Vanishing Prostitute* was solved.

"So Judah acknowledged them and said, 'She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah my son.' And he never knew her again" (Genesis 38:26).

So, while Judah reversed Tamar's death sentence, he never took her as a marriage partner. It also seems likely that he prohibited his son Shelah from marrying her as well.

"Now it came to pass, at the time for giving birth, that behold, twins were in her womb. And so it was, when she was giving birth, that the one put out his hand; and the midwife took a scarlet thread and bound it on his hand, saying, 'This one came out first.'"

Then it happened, as he drew back his hand, that his brother came out unexpectedly; and she said, 'How did you break through? This breach be upon you!' Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out who had the scarlet thread on his hand. And his name was called Zerah" (Genesis 38:27-30).

As mentioned earlier, the firstborn son typically held a privileged position in the Old Testament era. For instance, the eldest son was entitled to a double portion of the family inheritance, along with a patriarchal leadership position when his father passed away. But in Tamar's case, it almost seems as if one of her children was attempting to secure that status during the birth process.

The midwife assisting Tamar saw this and exclaimed, ***"So this is how you break your way out!"*** (GNB), or, ***"Where did you come from?"*** This explains why the child was called "Perez," a name that means "breaking forth." The New Testament Scriptures also tell us that Perez would later grow to become an ancestor of Jesus Himself (see [Matthew 1:3](#) and [Luke 3:33](#)).

As we close our look at this chapter, we might question the presence of these deeply flawed individuals in Jesus' family lineage. In response, we can say that Judah and Tamar's example reveals a profound truth: God may use imperfect people, with all their flaws and shortcomings, to fulfill His divine plan. The same is true of us today.