

**OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE ASSIGNMENT**

GENESIS 38

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## INTRODUCTION

The Judah/Tamar narrative plays a very strategic role in the Joseph narrative in that it repeats themes common to the Joseph narrative and demonstrates the transformation of Joseph's brother Judah.

## TEMPORAL REFERENCES

The narrative is broken into three parts or acts. The author marks each of these parts with a temporal reference.<sup>1</sup> The first temporal reference in this narrative is the vague "It came about at that time,"<sup>2</sup> which provides almost no specific information to the reader, just the idea that the events of Genesis 38 occurred approximately around the time that Joseph was sold into slavery.<sup>3</sup> This temporal reference signals the beginning of the first act, which spans 11 verses. In this act Judah marries and has sons, and then chooses a wife for his son. His eldest son displeases God, and he dies.<sup>4</sup> The author marks the second act by the temporal reference, "Now after a considerable time," in verse 12.<sup>5</sup> In the second act, we see Tamar being wronged. First, her brother-in-law secretly refuses her levirate marriage, and her father-in-law sends her back to her father's house. After realizing that Judah will not be giving Shelah to Tamar as a husband, she carries out a scheme to preserve her husband's name but conceiving through Judah. The third act with the temporal reference, "And it came to pass about three months later" in verse 24.<sup>6</sup> This temporal reference, in contrast to the previous two is specific. Three months after sleeping with Judah, Tamar is exposed as being pregnant, and reveals to Judah that he is the father.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Clifford, "Genesis 38: it's contribution to the Jacob story." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 no 4 (October 2004): 523

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 38: 1 NASB

<sup>3</sup> Judah Goldin. "The youngest son or where does Genesis 38 belong." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, no 1 (March 1977): 29.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford, "Genesis 38," 523.

<sup>5</sup> Gen 38:12 NASB

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 38:24 NASB

## VOICES

There are at least six voices present in narrative: Judah, Tamar, Hirah, the people living near the gateway of Enaim, an unidentified informant (or perhaps more likely, more than one informant), and the midwife who delivers Perez and Zerah. However, only Judah speaks in the first act. He is an independent agent and lone decision maker and showing little concern for the good of his family.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, during the third act, Judah only speaks once to confess Tamar's superior righteousness. When his sons are born, it is the midwife, not Tamar or Judah, who names the children.

## SIN WORTHY OF IMMEDIATE MORTAL JUDGMENT

In verse 7, we are told "Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD took his life."<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that even though Er's name means "watchful" or "watcher,"<sup>9</sup> the word "evil" is Er spelled inversely.<sup>10</sup> We do not know what his sin was, but his death is clearly consequences of his own actions, and not Tamar's fault as Judah speculates in verse 11. Since the text does not reveal the specifics of Er's sin, it can be assumed that it is not a focus of the story, but we can assume that it was severe in order to warrant God's immediate mortal judgment, a judgment God had not carried out since Noah or Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact, Er is the first *individual* to receive God's immediate mortal judgment.<sup>11</sup>

The text *does* reveal that God killed Onan for his practice of *coitus interruptus*, which gives the reader a clue as to what displeases God to the point of immediate mortal judgment. Onan's sin was multifold. First, he intentionally thwarted the fulfillment of God's promise to

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<sup>7</sup> Clifford, "Genesis 38," 523.

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 38:7 NASB

<sup>9</sup> Victor P. Hamilton. The book of Genesis: chapters 18-50. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 433.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, World Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 365.

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton. The book of Genesis. 434.

give Abraham many descendents.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, Onan committed this sin continually and frequently.<sup>13</sup> Third, Onan's refusal to give his sister-in-law children was especially heinous that he did so privately, without the public humiliation and disgrace associated with a brother-in-law's right to decline the levirate marriage, which further demonstrates his selfish self-interest over Tamar.<sup>14</sup> From this study of the extensiveness of Onan's sin, we can infer the similar magnitude of Er's sin.

### HARLOT VS. TEMPLE PROSTITUTE

When Judah meets Tamar in the gateway of Enaim, the text says that he thought she was a harlot, that is a common prostitute. Later, when Judah sends Hirah to pay Tamar for her services and retrieve his seal and cord, Hirah asks the men near the gateway of Enaim where he can find the "temple prostitute." Sex with a temple prostitute was less shameful than a street prostitute, and in that sense, referring to Tamar as a temple prostitute was a kind of euphemism.<sup>15</sup> Judah, however, did not perceive Tamar to be a temple prostitute (as is stated in verse 15), and it is doubtful that Tamar attempted to be perceived as a temple prostitute.<sup>16</sup> Rather, this change of term was comes from Hirah's retelling of the story which makes sense given Judah's concern with his reputation (sex with a temple prostitute would warrant no ridicule).<sup>17</sup>

### LARGER NARRATIVE CONTEXT

#### *Rhetorical Features*

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<sup>12</sup> Wenham, World Biblical Commentary. 364.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton. The book of Genesis. 435-6.

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton. The book of Genesis. 447.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

## *Repeated Images*

### Recognition

Several of the motifs within the Judah/Tamar narrative parallel strongly with other motifs outside the immediate narrative, but within the larger narrative context. One of these images is the demand for recognition. Just as Jacob's sons present him with Joseph's coat dipped in blood and asked to identify or recognize it, Tamar presents Judah with his own seal and cord and asks him if he can identify or recognize them.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Joseph's coat is dipped in the blood of a goat, and Judah promises Tamar a goat in payment for her sexual favors.<sup>19</sup>

This motif of recognition works hand in hand with the repeated theme of righteous indignation found both in Judah's narrative and David's narrative. The moment in which Tamar produces Judah's seal and cord is artfully reminiscent of Nathan's response to David in 2 Samuel 12: "You are the man!" Both David and Judah take part in an inappropriate sexual encounter that results in a child, and both appear unaware of their own guilt when they show righteous indignation about someone else. Judah condemns his daughter-in-law to be burned to death and David is burning with anger when he hears Nathan's parable. And both Judah and David unintentionally condemn themselves with their responses.<sup>20</sup>

### Veils

Another repeated image is the veil that Tamar uses to disguise herself from Judah. This veil could be compared to the one Rebekah uses to cover herself before meeting Isaac. In this case, however, Rebekah was not attempting to disguise herself, but was instead preparing as a

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<sup>18</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*. 431.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*. 448.

bride does to meet her groom.<sup>21</sup> The contrast between the two images highlights the tragedy in Tamar's life. When conceiving her sons, she is not perceived as a bride, but as a prostitute.

### Garments

The garment motif is prominent throughout the Joseph narrative (or the account of the generations of Jacob). In Genesis 37, Jacob gives his son Joseph a special garment to show his favoritism, and it is this garment that Joseph's brothers (including Judah) present to their father to explain Joseph's disappearance. Later, when Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph, he runs to escape, but leaves his garment in her hands. She then uses the garment to frame Joseph and deceive her husband. In Genesis 41, the Pharaoh gives Joseph a garment to signify Joseph's authority in the kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

This motif is clearly present in the Judah/Tamar narrative as well. In fact, "ch. 38 is arguably more concerned with garments or objects of one's wardrobe than any in the Joseph story."<sup>23</sup> The Judah/Tamar narrative, placed between the coat of Joseph in Genesis 37 and the robe of Joseph in Genesis 39, features Tamar's veil and garments, and Judah's insignia.<sup>24</sup>

Wilfried Warning argues that it is significant to note that the word translated "garment" in Genesis 38:19 makes its seventh occurrence in the Pentateuch in this narrative. The word translated "name" in vs. 29, "turn aside; take of" in vs. 14, and "cover" in vs. 14 make their seventh appearance in Genesis 38. Warning asserts that this remarkable pattern is not

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<sup>21</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*. 442.

<sup>22</sup> Victor H. Matthews. "The anthropology of clothing in the Joseph narrative." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 65 (March 1995) : 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> John R. Huddleston, "Divestiture, deception, and demotion: the garment motif in Genesis 37-39" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98 (2002): 48.

<sup>24</sup> Huddleston, "Divestiture, deception, and demotion" 53.

coincidence, and supports literary unity between the Judah/Tamar narrative and the rest of Genesis.<sup>25</sup>

Each of these images is instrumental in a deception. Deception is a theme surrounding all of Jacob's life, and this extends to the lives of his sons. Jacob's sons deceive him with a coat covered in goat's blood.<sup>26</sup> Potiphar's wife deceives Potiphar with a garment placed strategically to frame Joseph.<sup>27</sup> Beyond the Joseph narrative, Rebekah deceives Isaac by dressing Jacob in Esau's garment.<sup>28</sup> And, in Genesis 38, we see Judah being deceived by Tamar when she takes off her widow's garments and disguises herself with a veil.<sup>29</sup>

Huddleston argues that these garments are symbolic of larger transformations at stake. Tamar is able to have children because she no longer is (dressed like) a widow. Judah no longer has authority because he does not have the status (symbols, such as his insignia). Joseph loses job when he loses his coat.<sup>30</sup>

### *Repeated Themes*

#### Promised Seed in Jeopardy

Another repeated theme is similar to the patriarchal narratives that feature the "promised seed" being threatened, and the head of the family showing little concern (such as in kinsman-redeemer's deferment of Ruth to Boaz).<sup>31</sup>

#### Seductresses

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<sup>25</sup> Wilfried Warning, "Terminological Patterns and Genesis 38" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 38 no 2 (August 2000) : 293-98.

<sup>26</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis: chapters 18-50*. 432.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Victor H. Matthews. "The anthropology of clothing in the Joseph Narrative." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 65 (March 1995) : 33.

<sup>29</sup> Huddleston, "Divestiture, deception, and demotion" 59.

<sup>30</sup> Huddleston, "Divestiture, deception, and demotion" 61.

<sup>31</sup> John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as narrative: a biblical-theological commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 209.

Tamar's seduction of Judah is especially powerful when contrasted with Potiphar's wife's attempted seduction of Joseph in the text's next narrative.<sup>32</sup> The author holds Judah's inability to resist sexual temptation in powerful contrast with his younger brother's chastity. In a similarly intriguing contrast, consider the comparison of Tamar to Potiphar's wife. Potiphar's wife is married, seeking to commit adultery for pleasure, and verbally demands that Joseph give her what she wants. Tamar, in contrast, is seeking to preserve her husband's line, and only responds to Judah's initiating request.<sup>33</sup>

Tamar's seduction takes advantage of Judah's sexual vulnerability,<sup>34</sup> Niditch argues that Tamar's forwardness is comparable to Ruth's sociological situation. "Like Tamar, Ruth risks an accusation of harlotry. Yet Ruth's radical approach to her problem is viewed as positive by the author as was Tamar's."<sup>35</sup>

### Grieving Fathers

Jacob's intense grief over what he thought was the death of his youngest son in the preceding narrative highlights Judah's lack of grief for the death of his sons Er and Onan.<sup>36</sup> The stark contrast "underscores Jacob excesses,"<sup>37</sup> that communicate the intensity of the relationship between Jacob and his son, Joseph. This also leads the reader to understand that Judah's relationship lacks this intensity.

### Sibling Rivalry

Just as Jacob fought Esau for his birthright, and Joseph spites his brothers with dreams depicting future superiority, the Judah/Tamar narrative also features sibling rivalry. Onan refuses

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*. 432.

<sup>33</sup> Aaron Widavsky, "Survival must not be gained through sin: the moral of the Joseph stories prefigured through Judah and Tamar." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no 62 (1994) : 47.

<sup>34</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*. 439.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Niditch, "The wronged woman righted: an analysis of Genesis 38." *Harvard Theological Review* 72 no 1-2 (January-April 1979) : 148.

<sup>36</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*, 432.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Alter. *The art of biblical narrative*. (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1981.) 7.

to continue his brother's name in order to not sacrifice his inheritance.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the similarity between the birth of Tamar's sons Perez and Zerah and Rebekah's sons Jacob and Esau is immediately apparent. The twins fight in the womb, until the birthing moment. Zerah, the "older" son, emerges first, and his hand has a red string tied around it, which may to Esau's red hair. Zerah's hand withdraws back into his mother as Perez is born, pushing Zerah aside.

#### Childless Wives Get Children

Tamar joins the list of childless wives who eventually get children by seeking Yahweh and not cultic practices: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel. Though, as Emerton points out in his article, "Judah and Tamar," Tamar does not seek children from Yahweh the same way that her predecessors do.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the reader can still see the repetitious fulfillment of God's promise to give descendants through giving Judah two sons in replace of Er and Onan, and blessing Tamar with twins after years of being childless.

#### *Inclusion in the Larger Narrative*

At first glance, the Judah/Tamar narrative seems out of place in the midst of the larger Joseph narrative.<sup>40</sup> This feeling of misplacement should inspire greater research as to the author's "special purpose" for placing the narrative here.<sup>41</sup>

Genesis 37:2 introduces the Genesis 37-50 narrative as the "records of the generations of Jacob,"<sup>42</sup> which includes all of Jacob's sons, not just Joseph. With this in mind, the transformation of Joseph's relationship with his brothers, rather than his personal development,

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<sup>38</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*. 432.

<sup>39</sup> J.A. Emerton, "Judah and Tamar," *Vetus Testamentum*, 29 no 4 (October 1979): 407.

<sup>40</sup> Hamilton. *The book of Genesis*. 431.

<sup>41</sup> Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as narrative*. 209.

<sup>42</sup> Clifford, "Genesis 38: it's contribution to the Jacob story." 521

becomes far more central to the narrative. The Judah/Tamar narrative fits well within the master theme of the Joseph narrative: God working in through and in spite of Joseph and his brothers.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, the placement of the Judah/Tamar narrative increases the dramatic intensity in the larger Joseph narrative in two ways. First, the placement of the Judah/Tamar narrative develops suspense within the narrative.<sup>44</sup> The last thing the reader knows when starting the Judah/Tamar narrative is that Joseph's brothers have sold him into slavery. When the author begins discussing the activities of Judah, the reader would really rather hear about what is happening to Joseph. The delay in the Joseph story adds dramatic intensity, and draws the reader's attention to the lives of the brothers after selling Joseph into slavery. Another way the placement of the Judah/Tamar narrative increases the dramatic intensity of the larger narrative context is that it communicates the great length of time in which distance separated Joseph from his father and brothers. Judah's sons are born and married during the time of Joseph's separation from his family.<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Tamar's plan in retaliation to Judah's refusal to keep his promise that Shelah would father a child through her. Tamar decides to take matters into her own hands when she realizes that Shelah is no longer a youth and Judah has still not given him to her. Tamar's deception is not an initiative action, rather a retaliatory one.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Steven D. Matthewson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 no 584 (October-December, 1989): 390.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *World Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 363.

<sup>45</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *World Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 363.

<sup>46</sup> Victor P. Hamilton. *The book of Genesis: chapters 18-50.* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 441.

Through the experience with Tamar, Judah is transformed. The man that suggested selling his brother into slavery, and who seemed to show little control over his family, and falls prey to sexual seduction, finally learns to take responsibility. Later in the narrative, it is Judah who speaks up for the rest of his brothers and assumes responsibility for Benjamin in Genesis 43:2.<sup>47</sup> And later, when confronted with Benjamin's apparent theft, it is Judah who appeals to Joseph on Benjamin's behalf.<sup>48</sup>

Through the Tamar experience, Judah is redeemed. His name is preserved through the birth of Perez and Zerah, and is provided with the opportunity of being an ancestor of David, and eventually, Jesus.

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<sup>47</sup> Goldin, "The Youngest Son," 41

<sup>48</sup> Goldin, "The Youngest Son," 42

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