Genesis 38:  
Its Contribution to the Jacob Story

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THE STORY OF Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 has received an extraordinary amount of scholarly attention in recent years, more than making up for the neglect, not to say occasional disdain, of earlier scholarship toward this chapter. It is easy to see the reasons for the new interest. The chapter is a fertile ground for promising new approaches in biblical study—feminist, literary, and structuralist.¹ A consensus is building that the chapter is not a foreign body, as many had thought; rather, it contributes to the story of the sons of Jacob and is a good example of Hebrew narrative art. In this essay, I will support the emerging consensus that chap. 38

It is a pleasure to honor and thank Father Joseph Jensen, O.S.B., professor of biblical studies at the Catholic University of America, and, since 1970, Executive Secretary of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. His teaching and publications, all demonstrating a solid and discerning knowledge of the Bible, have elucidated the biblical text and helped the Catholic interpretive tradition to stay rooted in the Scriptures. In his position as Executive Secretary, Fr. Jensen has been tireless in serving the membership, supervising the New American Bible project, and making the Bible known to a wide audience.

belongs within chaps. 37-50 and will argue, further, that the chapter is indispensable for a proper understanding of the larger story; for Judah was the first of Jacob’s sons to recognize how God brought good out of evil in guiding the family (38:26), enabling him to give the speech (44:18-34) that led his brother Joseph to a similar recognition (45:4-8). To demonstrate this thesis, which will be the subject of the second section of the article, I must first, in section 1, reexamine some common assumptions about the chapter—its literary context, theme, and plot, and the matter of the sins of Judah—and retrieve a traditional view about its chronology.

I. A Reexamination of Assumptions about Genesis 38 and a Note about Its Chronology

A. Literary Context

Chapter 38 shifts abruptly away from Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph’s brothers to concentrate on Judah alone and the origin of the three principal clans deriving from him: Shelah, Perez, and Zerah (cf. Num 26:19-22). “About that time (בִּאֵ֤יתָן הָיוּ)”—the time of the selling of Joseph—Judah went down from his brothers living in Hebron to Adullam. There he married a Canaanite woman, begot three children, the first two of whom died after their marriages, was tricked by his daughter-in-law into having sex with her, and then recognized that she was righteous and that he was the father of the twins boys she bore. The entire chapter is traditionally ascribed to the J source, though some of the usual criteria for the attribution are lacking.

Most modern commentators presume that the Judah Tamar traditions have a different origin from the traditions about Joseph, and they underline the discontinuity between chap. 38 and its context. Claus Westermann, for example, believes

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2 Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from the NAB.
3 E.g., Hermann Gunkel (Genesis [trans. M. E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997] 395-96) and John Skinner (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis [2nd ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1930] 449-50) emphasize that the chapter comes from a totally different set of traditions than those about Joseph. According to Claus Westermann (Genesis 37-50: A Commentary [trans. J. J. Scullion, S.J.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986]), “The oral form had its origin within the circle of the descendants of Judah and Tamar as a narrative about the ancestors” (p. 50). J. A. Emerton (“Some Problems in Genesis XXXVIII,” VT 25 [1975] 338-61, here 347) thinks it is probable that the chapter “reflects the period of the Judges, when the tribe of Judah was settling down in Canaan and moving from the hill-country to the Shephelah” and that J may have believed that it described what happened to the patriarch Judah before he traveled to Egypt.”

4 The following list is only a sample of commentators who stress discontinuity: E. A. Speiser, Genesis: Introduction, translation, and notes (AB 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 299; Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 356-57; Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 49; Walter Brueggemann, Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
that it “is a self-contained individual narrative” and that “a redactor has inserted it into the Jacob story so as to preserve it like other individual narratives about the sons of Jacob,” such as Genesis 34 and 35:22-23. Yet, as Gordon Wenham notes, “If scholars had taken more seriously the editors title in 37:2, This is the family history of Jacob, they might not have been so wont to write off this chapter as irrelevant.”

Genesis 34-50 includes the origin and ranking of all the tribes in the person of their eponymous founders, and Judah’s story clearly fits that interest. Moreover, there are impressive thematic and linguistic connections to the main narrative, many long noted in traditional Jewish exegesis and increasingly taken seriously by modern scholars. Both Joseph and Judah “went down” (ירד) from their brothers (38:1; 39:1), were involved in deceptions involving a kid from the flock and an article of clothing (37:31-33; 38:15), married foreign women and fathered two sons who became rivals for firstborn status (38:27-30; 48:17-21). An especially impressive verbal parallel is between Tamar’s sending of Judah’s seal, cord, and staff to him with the request that he recognize them (38:25-26) and the brothers sending Joseph’s bloodied tunic to Jacob with a similar request (37:32-33):

ש分校ת ה основном הairy מסר ויימה
[Tamar] sent ... and said ... recognize, pray ... and [Judah] recognized and said ...
ש分校ת ה основном הairy מסר ויימה
[the brothers] sent ... and said ... recognize, pray ... and [Jacob] recognized it and said.

The two passages are the only instances of the phrase הairy in the Bible. Jacob’s and Judah’s recognitions point forward to recognitions in 42:7-8, 21 and 45:5-8. The element of deceit in the scenes points backward to chap. 27, where, in order to achieve a goal that turns out to be divinely intended, Rebekah and Jacob use a disguise (also involving a kid) so that Isaac will not “recognize” Jacob (היקר, 27:23).

One reason the chapter has been judged to be alien is the seemingly abrupt change of subject in 38:1, at a particularly exciting part of the Joseph story. Yet the change of subject is no more abrupt than, say, chap. 26 or chap. 34. Chapter


5 Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 49.
38 fits within the history of Jacob’s sons, showing how one son, despite his serious sins, retains God’s favor and establishes a major tribe in Israel. Judah, displacing his biologically older brothers Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, will come to speak and act authoritatively for the whole family (43:3, 8; 44:16-34; 46:28; 49:8-10). Like Joseph (and many another hero in literature), he too must leave home and undergo testing before he can return to lead his own people.

B. The Theme

A decision about whether or not chap. 38 belongs in the Joseph cycle depends on a prior judgment, explicit or implicit, about its theme. Though in a mimetic genre like that of chap. 38 a theme may be only implicit, one expects a clear theme in the morally serious stories of Genesis. What is the chapter about? Is it about Tamar or Judah?

Gerhard von Rad sees the theme in Tamar and her actions:
The real action in the Judah Tamar story begins at vs. 12ff. But for the reader to understand this extremely odd occurrence the narrator must first acquaint him with a few conditions, the coincidence of which prepared the ground for what occurred between Judah and his daughter-in-law. Verses 1-11 bear all the marks of an explanation that gives the reader the most necessary facts in a rather dry enumeration and without particular vividness.

Westermann similarly views vv. 1-11 as a preamble to the kernel in vv. 12-26. Such views echo Hermann Gunkel’s judgment that the first section of the chapter is a bare notice, whereas the second part is a “beautiful, extensive narrative.” Many commentators, including several feminist scholars, make that division their starting point. H. J. Boecker, for example, entitles chap. 38 “Die Geschichte Tamars” because, in his view, Tamar is more important than Judah; she sparks the narrative, and it is her initiative, not his, that propels the action forward and concludes it. This decision about the theme affects Boecker’s judgment about the structure, which he outlines as follows: “I. Prehistory (1-5, 6-11); II. Narrative Core (12-23, 24-26); and III. Aim and Conclusion of the Narrative: Birth of the twins (27-30).”


8 Von Rad, Genesis, 357.
9 Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 49: “The relative independence of vv. 1-11 and 27-30 is clear inasmuch as both parts provide details which are not necessary for the narrative in vv. 12-26 and so overload the function of the exposition and the conclusion.”
10 Gunkel, Genesis, 403.
If one decides that the theme is Tamar, one will probably conclude that vv. 1-11, where she plays a subsidiary role, are outside the narrative core. This judgment, however, goes against the dramatic logic of the piece. Judah, not Tamar, figures in every verse; the overriding theme is Judah’s propagation of males in his family. When an unmarried male leaves his family, he raises the expectation that he will start his own family. In fact, Judah quickly begets three sons (vv. 2-11) and, later and unwittingly, two more sons (vv. 12-30), who replace the sons who are killed in vv. 6-10. One must agree with Esther Marie Menn in her recent study of the chapter and its Jewish interpretations: “One may conclude that the central issue driving the biblical narrative consists of the transition from one generation of males to the next. Since the motifs of birth and naming appear earlier in the narrative as well (Gen 38:3-5), Genesis 38 may be viewed as a double tale of procreation, in which initial biological and social discontinuity is twice overcome, first in Gen 38:1-5 and next in Gen 38:6-30.”

Analysis of the plot sheds further light on the theme.

C. The Plot

The narrative of chap. 38 is told with economy and skill, every part contributing to the stunning conclusion. The story unfolds in three acts (vv. 1-11, 12-23, 24-30), each introduced by a notice of time. Each scene begins with a fresh action or perspective. Act I has two scenes: vv. 1-5 (ending with the mention of the place-name Chezib in v. 5) and vv. 6-11 (begun by a new action, Jacob’s choosing wives for his sons). Act II has three scenes: vv. 12-14, 15-19 (marked by the repetition of “she/he saw” in vv. 14b-15a), and 20-23. Act III has two scenes: vv. 24-27 and 28-30. The whole is framed by the accounts of the births of Judah’s children; the phrase הָנָלדָה =, lit., “when she bore,” occurs in vv. 5 and 28.

In the drama, vv. 1-11 introduce the characters and set up the tensions. The slaying of Judah’s two sons and his refusal to give Tamar to Shelah imperil the family line. Against scholars who regard vv. 1-11 as primarily informational and preliminary to the narrative core of vv. 12-30, one must insist that the section is inherently dramatic. The breathless pace and absence of dialogue in the verses are narratively significant. Judah is a one-man show, making all the decisions and showing little regard for others or for family customs. Even the divine slaying of his children does not slow him down. The rapid pace and terse tone of the narrative suggest Judah’s brusque and imperious style. At the end of Act I (v. 11), his unilateral actions have generated powerful dramatic tensions that will be resolved only by Tamar’s act, Judah’s recognition (v. 26), and the births of new sons (vv. 27-30).

Verses 12-23 push the plot forward: the death of Judah’s wife occasions mourning that concludes with sexual relations to gain descendants, as did Isaac’s mourning his mother (24:67) and as will David’s mourning his son (2 Sam 12:24).

12 Menn, Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis, 15.
In an ironic variation of this motif of mourning, Judah’s sexual relations are with a prostitute, the disguised Tamar. Made pregnant by her father-in-law, Tamar departs from the area with Judah’s pledges securely in her possession, leaving the reader wondering what she will do with such revealing tokens.

In v. 24, Tamar’s pregnancy becomes public knowledge, and she is in danger of being put to death for adultery. But before the outraged Judah can exact his harsh penalty, Tamar shows the tokens he had given her, proving that he is the father of her child. Immediately, Judah acknowledges that she, not he, has carried out the divine will. The story ends (vv. 27-30) with the birth of sons to Judah to replace the ones killed by Yhwh, an inclusio that ends the chapter.

D. The Sins of Judah

Some scholars believe that chap. 38 represents a tradition in which Judah’s actions are not blameworthy, but the larger narrative strongly suggests otherwise. Judah is not just impetuous; he is a sinner. He sinned in marrying a Canaanite, in visiting a prostitute, and in peremptorily ordering the burning of his daughter-in-law. He sinned by failing to ensure that the levirate law was observed to benefit his daughter-in-law Tamar.

In view of the insistence on endogamy elsewhere in Genesis, Judah’s marriage to a Canaanite woman must be judged a serious sin, even though chap. 38 does not explicitly condemn it. In Gen 24:2-8, Abraham forbade his servant to find a wife for Isaac among the Canaanites, sending him instead to his homeland for a wife. In Gen 28:1-2, 6-8 (cf. 27:46 and 36:2; all P), Isaac expressly forbade Jacob to marry a Canaanite. Judah’s own father, Jacob, made the long journey to Paddan-aram precisely to avoid exogamy. In striking contrast to these precedents, Judah “saw and took” a woman (38:1-2), the same sequence of verbs used of Eve seeing and taking the fruit in 3:6; of the sons of God seeing and taking mortal women in 6:2; and of Shechem seeing and taking Dinah in 34:2. Even if a “nonjudgmental” folkloric tradition lay behind chap. 38, why would an editor have incorporated a tradition approving exogamy into the Jacob story, which elsewhere so prizes endogamy? As Robert L. Cohn has pointed out, the ancestors had friendly relations with the Canaanites only to the extent that the promises of land and progeny were not compromised. For the narrator of the story, the ancestral family had to remain separate from the Canaanite natives in terms of land and marriage, even if individual family members did not always live up to

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13 According to Westermann (Genesis 37-50, 51), “The storyteller feels no embarrassment in narrating that the father of the tribe of Judah joins ranks with a Canaanite and marries the daughter of a Canaanite. This attests the early origin of the story; it arose at a time when nobody took scandal from it.”

the ideal. There are many examples in Genesis of ancestors carefully guarding their separateness: the three incidents of the heiress in danger (12:10-20; 20; 26:1-11); the purchase of the cave at Machpelah (chap. 23); the endogamy of Isaac (chap. 24) and Jacob (28:1-5); and the family’s refusal of intermarriage (chap. 34). These instances show clearly that Judah’s act of marrying Shua’s daughter, whom the narrator goes out of his way to identify as a Canaanite, should be viewed as a sin against God. The deaths of Judah’s sons Er and Onan by unprecedented divine action, before they could beget any children, surely imply that Judah’s marriage to a Canaanite was cursed by God. In short, it is clear from 38:11 that Judah has sinned seriously, and his attempt to found a family has come to a dead end.

Judah’s second sin was his failure to ensure that levirate law was observed to benefit his daughter-in-law Tamar. He acknowledges his sin in v. 26. Deut 25:5-10, concurring with customary law in the ancient Near East and elsewhere, stipulates that if a man dies leaving his widow childless, his brother is expected to marry the widow. This law was a means of continuing the deceased man’s line, keeping his landholdings within the family and affording his widow protection and an honored place as a married woman in the family. Deut 25:6 requires that only the first son bear the name of the deceased brother; otherwise, the living brother and his children would be disinherited. A brother could refuse the levirate marriage, but in such a case the widow had the right to take him before the elders, remove his shoe and spit in his face, shaming him for reducing her to the class of dependent persons (strangers, the fatherless, and widows). In effect, the widow’s gestures inflicted a bad name on the brother for not building up her name (her household).

15 Ancient witnesses were bothered by Judah’s marriage to a Canaanite. Tg. Onq. (some manuscripts) and Tg. Ps.-J. render MT חנה as “merchant” rather than the more common “Canaanite” to avoid saying that a patriarch acted wrongly. A few rabbinc texts do the same. For references, see Bernard Grossfeld, The Targum Onqelos to Genesis (Aramaic Bible 6; Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1988) 129.


17 George W. Coats (“Widow’s Rights: A Cruc in the Structure of Genesis 38,” CBQ 34 [1972] 461-66) asserts that originally the widow had only the right to a descendant, not to marriage with her brother-in-law (followed by Westermann, Genesis 37-50, 52). Yet, as Thomas Krüger points out (“Genesis 38: Ein Lehrstück alttestamentlicher Ethik,” in Konsequente Traditionsgeschichte: Festschrift für Klaus Baltzer zum 65. Geburstag [ed. Rüdiger Bartelms, Thomas Krüger, and Helmut Utschneider; OBO 126; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993] 205-26, here 211), this view is incompatible with Gen 38:14 (“she had not been given to him as a wife”) and v. 26 (“I did not give her to Shelah my son”). Furthermore, it is difficult to understand how a child could really protect a widow unless the widow lived as an honored wife within the family.

18 Whether the Book of Ruth is an example of levirate law is disputed; but that book at least shows a concern for ensuring the continuation of the family line and retention of family property.
Judah’s refusal to observe levirate law by giving Tamar to his son Shelah constitutes a serious failure to propagate the family and to care for his daughter-in-law. It removes her from his family and reduces her to the state of dependent widow in her father’s household. One measure of the seriousness of Judah’s offense is God’s later approval of Tamar’s extreme remedy.  

These two sins are not the only ones Judah committed. Though the text does not explicitly condemn his seeking out a prostitute, the narrative implies that he acted like a fool to pledge the symbols of his legal and social standing—his cord, seal, and staff—to a Canaanite, a woman, and a prostitute! Lastly, Judah, without any judicial inquiry, decreed a cruel and excessive sentence for his own daughter-in-law.

D. The Chronology of the Story

Although the chronology of the stories of Judah and Joseph is not a topic of interest in most modern commentaries, it is of considerable importance in the story. The opening phrase, “About that time [of the selling of Joseph]” (Gen 38:1), correlates Judah and Joseph and implies that the chronology of their stories is important. Traditional Jewish exegesis reckoned a twenty-two-year period between the descent of Judah to Egypt and the descent of Jacob and his family.  

Umberto Cassuto expands the traditional arguments for locating all the events recorded in Boaz, Naomi’s relative, eventually takes Ruth for his wife, but not until a closer relative (not identified) declines because marrying Ruth would require him to buy property that would go to a son counted to Mahlon, Ruth’s deceased husband (Ruth 4:6). The genealogy of Ruth continues the line of Judah: Ruth 4:17 links Ruth’s son Obed back to Tamar’s eldest, Perez, and forward to David, Obed being the grandfather of David.

19 In later law, Lev 18:15 and 20:12 forbid sexual relations between a man and his daughter-in-law, the latter law prohibiting it under pain of death. Deut 18:16 also forbids sexual relations with one’s brother’s wife, which, as has long been noted, stands in direct opposition to the levirate law. Rabbinic law resolved the opposition by viewing one as the law and the other as the exception.

20 The usual penalty in the later law for a woman’s committing fornication while under her father’s authority was stoning to death (Deut 22:21). Tamar seems to be charged with adultery on the grounds that she is betrothed to Shelah within Judah’s family (Deut 22:23-24). In the later law, burning alive was reserved for a daughter of a priest who committed fornication (Lev 21:9). Unless Judah is following a law different from that in the Bible, he interprets the law arbitrarily.

21 See Rashi’s commentary under 37:34 for the view that Judah’s “going down” preceded Jacob’s “going down” by twenty-two years (The Torah: With Rashi’s Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated [ed. Y. I. Z. Herczeg et al.; Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995] lb. 424). There is, however, another line of Jewish exegesis, represented by Ibn Ezra and Rabbag (Levi ben Gershon = Gersonides), that regards “about that time” in 39:1 as chronologically indefinite; Judah had to have gone down before the sale of Joseph because all the events of chap. 39 could not have happened within a twenty-two-year time frame (Meir Zlotowitz, Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources [2nd ed.; Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986] lb. 1667).
chap. 38 before the brothers met Joseph in Egypt (in 42:6). According to 37:2, Joseph was seventeen when he was sold into Egypt, and thirty (41:46) when he entered Pharaoh’s service, a difference of thirteen years. Gen 45:6 states that his brothers met him in the second of the famine years, which followed seven years of plenty. Thirteen plus seven plus two add up to twenty-two. Could the events narrated in chap. 38 have taken place over twenty-two years? It would be possible in the following scenario: Judah married and begot his three children in three years; when Er was eighteen he chose Tamar for him; within a few months of Er’s death, he gave her to the seventeen-year old Onan, withholding the sixteen-year old Shelah. When Shelah reached seventeen and then eighteen without her being given to him, Tamar took matters into her own hands, tricked Judah, and nine months later presented Judah with the twins Perez and Zerah.

The one problem with this chronology is, of course, the list in Gen 46:8-27 of the sons of Jacob who went to Egypt: “The sons of Judah: Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez, and Zerah—but Er and Onan had died in the land of Canaan; and the sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamul” (v. 12). The list seems to imply that Perez had begotten his two sons in Canaan, which would require an additional eighteen or nineteen years, the resulting forty years making the twenty-two-year chronology impossible. But, as Cassuto notes, the listing of Hezron and Hamul uses different language from that used in the genealogies of the other sons, suggesting that Hezron and Hamul were not yet born when Judah’s family moved to Egypt. The two sons appear in the list of seventy descendants as replacements for Er and Onan and in order to bring to five the number of Judah’s families.

Why is it dramatically important that all the events of chap. 38 have taken place before Judah meets Joseph in chap. 42? Because those events enabled Judah to come to the crucial insight that God is able to transform the brothers and their sin.

II. Judah’s Recognition and the Story of Jacob’s Sons

A. Dramatic Irony in Chapter 38

The irony of chap. 38 is pervasive and largely unrecognized. Paradoxically, the irony is largely responsible for the common judgment that the chapter is out of place in it present setting.

[Dramatic irony] is a plot device according to which (a) the spectators know more than the protagonist; (b) the characters react in a way contrary to that which is appropriate or wise; (c) characters or situations are compared or contrasted for ironic effects.

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23 In Hebrew, המנייהוות על צאצאי השלח זמר rather than ויהיו בני לוי הם זמר והملاب

24 Er and Onan are mentioned because the purpose of the levirate law was that the name of the deceased not be blotted out in Israel (Deut 25:6).
such as parody; or (d) there is a marked contrast in what the character understands about his
acts and what the play demonstrates about them. Foreshadowing is often ironic.25

I note only one item from chap. 38 under each of the above headings: (1) the reader
knows, but Judah does not, that Tamar is waiting for him at the roadside; (2) Judah, in
contrast to his predecessors, is trying to establish his family by exogamy rather than
endogamy; (3) Judah’s mourning, unlike that of his ancestor Isaac, leads him to sexual
relations with his own daughter-in-law; (4) Judah does not seem to understand why his
vigorous and commonsensical actions have not led to the birth of sons.

By the time chap. 38 begins, the reader is sufficiently aware of the main themes of
the ancestral stories to recognize new twists given to familiar themes. Several ancestral
themes reappear ironically in chap. 38, among them exogamy, difficulty in begetting
children (appearing elsewhere in the form of the barren wife), naming of the son, sons
contending for firstborn status, the divine requirement that the father “give up” his only
son, mourning that incites the bereaved man to procreation, and meeting one’s future
wife at a spring. Only gradually does the reader become aware that these characteristics
of a genuine ancestral drama appear in chap. 38.

Foreshadowing, it was noted above, is often full of irony. Events of Judah’s life are
repeated in Joseph’s life, suggesting that the divine plan continues to operate. Judah
marries a native, “the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua” (38:2); and Joseph
marries a native, Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of Heliopolis (41:45). Judah
has three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah, though only two play any role (and they will be
replaced by the two newborn sons in 38:27-30). According to the MT, Judah names Er,
and his wife names Onan and Shelah. Joseph fathers two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim,
and he names both (41:50-52). All three sets of sons engage in strife regarding firstborn
status, though this is immediately obvious only with Zerah and Perez (38:27-30). The
strife between Er and Onan must be inferred from Onan’s refusal to beget a descendant
for his brother Er. The reason for this is that the son would be firstborn and take prece-
dence over Onan and his sons, since the text twice calls Er “firstborn” (38:6, 7). Similarly
indirect is the portrayal of the rivalry of Joseph’s two sons. Their grand-father, Jacob,
reverses the order of their birth, preferring the younger by birth as the recipient of his
blessing (48:13-20). Judah and Joseph undergo major reversals of role within the family.
Judah will go from conspirator and self-willed parent to unselfish spokesman for the
family, and Joseph will go from spoiled child and slave to the family’s magnanimous
savior. Another ironic contrast between the brothers is found in Judah’s unchastity,
symbolized truly by items of apparel (cord,

(ed. Preminger), 635. For irony in the Joseph story, see D. B. Redford, A Study of the Biblical Story of
seal, and staff-38:18), versus the chastity of Joseph, symbolized falsely by an item of apparel (39:7-20).

Other features of ancestral narratives appear in ironic fashion. Judah’s failed efforts to beget a child through a Canaanite wife (Shua’s daughter) evoke Abraham’s failed attempt with the Egyptian maid Hagar.26 Judah’s unwillingness to surrender his only surviving son to Tamar contrasts with Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. According to Jon Levenson, Judah is

a kind of negative antipode to Abraham as the aqedah is interpreted in the second angelic oracle of Genesis 22 (vv 15-18). Abraham, it will be recalled, is there blessed with innumerable progeny precisely because he did not withhold his son, his only son, surrendering him to what seemed certain death. But Judah now confronts a childless future and a name blotted out in Israel because he refused to surrender Shelah to the woman with whom marriage has spelt death for two of his sons already. Here we once again confront the great paradox that lies at the heart of our inquiry: the son’s presence can be enjoyed and the family preserved only if the son is given up to death itself.27

One ancestral theme has already been briefly mentioned: Judah’s mourning his wife (v. 12), which leads to his begetting a child. Though unnoticed by all commentators, his mourning has the same effect as that of his ancestor Isaac and his descendant David: his sexual relations will continue the family line. The convention of begetting a descendant to assuage a loss was sufficiently well established to alert readers to the meaning of Judah’s actions. The verb for Judah’s observing the mourning period (יַנָּהַא, v. 12) is the same as that for Isaac’s mourning his mother in Gen 24:67 (“[Isaac] loved [Rebekah] and consoled himself after the death of his mother Sarah”) and for David’s mourning his son in 2 Sam 12:24 (“David consoled himself with Bathsheba his wife; he had sexual relations with her and lay with her. She gave birth to a son and called his name Solomon, and Yhwh loved him”).28 Another ironic touch is Judah’s meeting Tamar at Enaim (אֶנֶֽיאִם, Gen 38:14, 21), if, as seems probable from its etymology, Enaim means “spring” or “double spring.” Robert Alter has explored the biblical type-scene of finding a bride by a well or spring, and the reversal thereof (in Ruth). In Gen 24:11-31, Abraham’s servant, acting on behalf of Isaac, meets Rebekah; in 29:1-14, Jacob meets Rachel; and in Exod 2:15b-22, Moses meets Zipporah.29 In Genesis 38, the type-scene functions to show that Tamar, no less than Rebekah and Rachel, is a fruitful “wife” of an ancestor.

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26 The text calls Hagar “an Egyptian” four times: 16:1, 3; 21:9; and 25:12.
28 My translation.
29 Robert Alter, “Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention;” in idem, Art of Biblical Narrative, 47-62. Though Alter does not mention 38:14 as an instance of the type-scene, Menn (Judah and Tamar [Genesis 38] in Ancient Jewish Exegesis, 37 n. 33) raises that possibility.
For the purposes of this article, however, the most significant foreshadowing is Judah’s recognition of God’s strange and previously hidden activity in propagating the family. To Judah’s recognition, “She [Tamar] is the righteous one, not I, seeing that I did not give her to Shelah my son” (38:26, my translation), corresponds Joseph’s recognition, “God, therefore, sent me on ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not really you but God who had me come here” (45:7-8). Both sons recognize divine action previously hidden from their eyes.

B. The Meaning of Judah’s Recognition in Genesis 38:26

It has been necessary to reexamine common assumptions about chap. 38 and to point out its many ironies before addressing the main point of the article: the pivotal role of Judah’s confession (v. 26) in the story of Jacob’s sons. What is the meaning of Judah’s exclamation in v. 26, יְנָמַם הָנָּדֶד, uttered after he recognized that Tamar was pregnant by him? Scholars have given different answers. Though it is generally translated as “she is more righteous than I” (KJV, RSV, and NIV) or “more in the right than I” (NRSV, NAB, and NJPSV), a more exact rendering is “she is righteous, not I.” As B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor note, יְנָמַם introduces “a comparison of exclusion,” where “the subject alone possesses the quality connoted by the adjective or stative verb, to the exclusion of the thing compared.” They correctly render “She is in the right, not I” and adduce as the closest analogue Hos 6:6, “For I desire acknowledgment of God, not`ōlôt.”

What is the sense of “righteous” here? Commentaries are less explicit than one might expect for so important a verse. Wenham interprets the exchange between Judah and Tamar in strictly judicial terms: “Her prosecutor acknowledges that he is the guilty party, not she.... In judicial contexts [the verb] often has the sense of innocence (e.g., Exod 23:7; Deut 25:1), so here Judah declares her innocence and admits his own guilt. The scene is not a trial, however; Judah does not stand accused, and there is no legal questioning. Judah has acted as paterfamilias, not as judge, in deciding that Tamar should be burned. In my view, the traditional translation “righteous” is correct, because Judah recognizes that Tamar, however strange her deed, has carried out the will of God while he has not: “She is the righteous one, not I.”

30 Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 265-66. The authors adduce the parallels Gen 29:30; Ps 52:5; Hos 6:6; Job 7:15; Prov 17:1. Wenham (Genesis 16-50, 362-63) similarly renders, “She is in the right, not I.” GKC §133b n. 2 also rejects a comparative sense, translating, “She is in the right as against me,” and adduces Ps 139:12; Job 4:17; and 32:2. So also Skinner, Critical and Exegetical Commentary, 455.

31 Wenham, Genesis 16-50, 369.
(“Go into the ark, with all your household, for you alone have I found righteous before me in this generation” [Gen 7:1]). ידאם דממה, “she is the righteous one, not I,” is a recognition by Judah that Tamar carried out the divine purpose of propagating Judah’s family. At the same time, it is a humble acknowledgment of his sin, especially of his refusal to give Tamar to Shelah in levirate marriage. Although refusing to give Tamar to Shelah was only one of Judah’s sinful actions, it is mentioned as the most serious one because it prevented the growth of the family. Unlike Abraham, Judah was unwilling to surrender his only son so that the divine will might be done.

Verse 26 marks a turning point in Judah’s attitude. After his courageous acknowledgment, he rises to a level of moral behavior from which he will never deviate. Gone forever is the Judah who conspired against his brother, scorned endogamy, neglected a widow, associated with a prostitute, and recklessly condemned a family member. The transformed Judah appears in 43:8-9, saying to his father: “Send the boy with me so that we can be up and going. Let us live and not die, we and you and our children. I will stand surety for him. You can hold me responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I shall bear the guilt before you for my whole life.” (my translation) He becomes the unselfish and loving family speaker in the great oration in 44:18-34. The man who coldly used the bloody tunic to trick Jacob into thinking that Joseph was dead now says, “How could I go back to my father if the boy were not with me? I could not bear to see the anguish that would overcome my father” (44:34). In short, in 38:26 Judah recognizes a divine power enlarging and healing the family, nullifying stupid and cowardly acts and transforming selfish men into heroes; and he embraces it.

What about Joseph? The parallel between Judah and Joseph has already been pointed out. Of Jacob’s sons, only Judah and Joseph have scenes of recognition. Judah recognized that God brought good out of his own evil and Tamar’s strange act (38:26). Joseph recognized the same thing in 45:5-8: “It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you. . . . God, therefore, sent me on ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not really you but God who had me come here.” It must be emphasized that Joseph has been engaged in a genuine struggle since he met his brothers again after a twenty-two year absence (42:6-7). He is profoundly bitter about his brothers’ betrayal of him and deeply alienated from his family. His deep feelings appear in the names he gives his children: ‘He named his firstborn Manasseh, meaning, ‘God has made me forget entirely the sufferings I endured at the hands of my family’; and the second he named Ephraim, meaning, ‘God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction’” (41:51-52). Another glimpse is found in 43:30, “Joseph had to hurry out, for he was so overcome with affection for his brother [singular!] that he was on the verge of tears.” Joseph genuinely cares only about his full brother, Benjamin.
Scholarly emphasis on Joseph as a wise man testing his brothers to see if they have changed has obscured Joseph’s need to change. In family affairs, no one is a cool sage. Judah’s speech in chap. 44, the longest in the Book of Genesis, demonstrates only one brother’s change of heart. The reader knows only that Joseph loves his father and his only full brother; the reader is not told about Joseph’s attitude toward the other ten. One must assume that he is truly undecided. The outcome of the story hangs in the balance: will Joseph elect to stay in Egypt with Benjamin, his innocent full brother? What makes him hesitate is his love for his father Jacob: how can he see him? To see Jacob he must come to some kind of settlement with his brothers. Can he forgive the brothers who tried to kill him and then sold him into slavery? Joseph wavers until he hears Judah offer to take Benjamin’s place lest his father be destroyed. Joseph then recognizes that God has indeed brought good out of evil: his envious and murderous brothers have truly changed and become sons of Israel, willing to give up their own lives that the family might survive.

In conclusion, Judah’s conversion is a paradigm, told quickly and completely before the Joseph story unfolds at its more leisurely pace, so that readers might learn at the very outset that it is possible for the sons to change just possible. One must wait until the completion of the story to find out if the others, including Joseph himself, actually change. Judah is transformed first, raising hopes that others can be also, and the family can be saved. As might happen with the larger-than-life characters in a Flannery O’Connor story, the outlandish Tamar and her bizarre deed shock Judah into seeing divine purpose at work in the world and enable him to become an example to his brothers.

32 For a recent assessment of “wisdom” in the Joseph story and a critique of the view that Joseph is a model sage, see M. V. Fox, “Wisdom in the Joseph Story,” VT 21 (2001) 26-41. Von Rad seems to have been the first to propose that Joseph was a sage and that Genesis 37—50 was heavily influenced by the wisdom tradition; see “Josephgeschichte und ältere Chokma,” in Congress Volume: Copenhagen, 1953 (VTSup 1; Leiden: Brill, 1953) 121-27 (Eng. trans., “The Joseph Narrative and Ancient Wisdom,” in Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom [ed. J. L. Crenshaw; New York: Ktav, 1976] 439-47). Initially adopted by many scholars, the view has since come under severe criticism; one of the most trenchant is that of Redford, Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph, 100-105.