

An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38

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Introduction

Although Benno Jacob has called the Judah-Tamar story “the crown of the book of Genesis and Tamar one of the most admirable women,”¹ Genesis 38 has generated more frustration than enthusiasm among its interpreters. This frustration has ensued from the story’s position amidst the Joseph narrative. Many commentators describe the positioning of Genesis 38 by terms such as “unconnected, independent, interruption.”² Von Rad asserts, “Every attentive reader can see that the story of Judah and Tamar has no connection at all with the strictly organized Joseph story at whose beginning it is now inserted.”³ Similarly Brueggemann alleges, “This peculiar chapter stands alone, without connection to its context. It is isolated in every way and is most enigmatic.”⁴ Bowie says that Genesis 38 “is like an alien element, suddenly and arbitrarily thrust into a record which it serves only to disturb. Certainly few people would choose this chapter as a basis for teaching or preaching.”⁵

This is not merely the sentiment of recent writers. As far back as the second century B.C., the writer of the pseudepigraphal Book of Jubilees repositioned the Judah-Tamar account later in the Joseph story after the events of Genesis 41.1-49.⁶ Moreover, Josephus, in the second book of his *Antiquities of the Jews*, gave considerable attention to the Joseph story and omitted Genesis 38 in the process. The concern of his second book was “the descent of the Israelites into Egypt and their eventual liberation therefrom.”⁷ Apparently Josephus did not consider Genesis 38 germane to this theme. Furthermore, as Goldin has

York: Abingdon Press, 1952), 1.757. H. C. Leupold even concluded that Genesis 38 remains “entirely unsuited to homiletical use, much as the devout Bible student may glean from the chapter” (*Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols. [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960], 2.990).

¹ Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, trans. and ed. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974), p. 261.

² George R. H. Wright, “The Positioning of Genesis 38,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982): 523.

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. John H. Marks (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 351.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 307.

⁵ Walter Russell Bowie, “The Book of Genesis: Exposition,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, 12 vols. (New

⁶ James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1985), 2.128-32. Chapters 39-45 of Jubilees feature the author’s condensation of the Joseph stories. The opening verses of Jubilees 39 briefly mention Joseph’s sale to Potiphar as recorded in Genesis 37.36 and move immediately to Joseph’s elevation as recorded in Genesis 39.1-6. The remainder of Jubilees 39 recounts the advances of Potiphar’s wife and the imprisonment of Joseph as recorded in Genesis 39-40. Jubilees 40 then relates the interpretation of Pharaoh’s dreams by Joseph, Joseph’s elevation as a ruler in Egypt, and his leadership efforts in preparing for the famine-events described in Genesis 41.1-49. At this point the author inserted the Judah-Tamar story of Genesis 38 as chapter 41 in Jubilees. In Jubilees 42, the author continued the story of Joseph, picking up with the arrival of the famine as described in Genesis 41.53-57.

⁷ Thomas W. Franxman, *Genesis and the “Jewish Antiquities” of Flavius Josephus* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1979), p. 215.

observed, even the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi wondered why Genesis 38 was "placed here to interrupt the account about Joseph."⁸ Indeed the location of the Judah-Tamar story has a long history of being considered problematic.⁹ Unfortunately the "views of the function and purpose of Genesis 38 have remained relatively static through the years."¹⁰ Recently there has been a renewed interest in Genesis 38 and its related is-

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sues.¹¹ Yet this has come almost exclusively from scholars whose critical approach to the text colors the conclusions they offer. On the other hand conservative writers have given scant attention, at least in written form, to the Genesis 38 problem.

The purpose of this article is to examine the interconnection between Genesis 38 and its context. The present writer seeks to demonstrate that Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, carefully interwove the Judah-Tamar story with the Joseph narrative for the purpose¹² of further developing his

⁸ Judah Goldin, "Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (March 1977): 27.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of this point, see Steven D. Mathewson, "The Relationship of Genesis 38 to the Joseph Story" (MA thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1986), pp. 1-10.

¹⁰ Susan Niditch, "The Wrong Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *Harvard Theological Review* 72 (January-April 1979), 143. One exception to this trend is Umberto Cassuto's fine study, first published in 1929, which considered the problem of Genesis 38's location in the Joseph story. He too noted that scholars of his day paid much attention to the origin and construction of Genesis 38 but "have not dealt at all, or only superficially, with the problem of the relationship between this section and its context" (*Biblical and Oriental Studies*, vol. 1 [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973], pp. 29-40).

¹¹ In addition to the aforementioned articles by Goldin, Niditch, and Wright, see the following: M. C. Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigial Motifs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (June 1966), 185-96; G. W. Coats, "Widow's Rights: A Crux in the Structure of Genesis 38," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (October 1972): 461-66; John A. Emerton, "Some Problems in Genesis 38," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (May 1975): 338-61; idem, "Examination of a Recent Structuralist Interpretation of Genesis 38," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (January 1976): 79-98; idem, "Judah and Tamar," *Vetus Testamentum* 29 (October 1979): 403-15; Ira Robinson, "Bepetah 'enayim in Genesis 38.14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (December 1977): 569.

¹² This writer uses "purpose" here as defined by John A. Martin: "the reason the author wrote his material for his original readers and for those who would enter into the original readers' experi-

theme in Genesis. This will be accomplished by examining the chronological, literary, and theological relationships between Genesis 38 and its context.

An Exegetical Overview of Genesis 38

Any such discussion of the relationship between Genesis 38 and its context must build on an understanding of the chapter itself. Thus the following overview of the Judah-Tamar story is offered.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

The Judah-Tamar story takes the form of a comedy, a type of story characterized by a "U-shaped" plot that moves from tragedy to a happy ending.¹³ Of the plot devices familiar to comic structure, this story contains at least the following: disguise, mistaken identity, surprise, sudden reversal of misfortune, rescue from disaster, and reversal of conventional expectations (specifically, the younger over the older). Furthermore its ending with the birth of two sons is simi-

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lar to the types of endings usually found in a comic plot.¹⁴

THE FUTURE OF JUDAH'S LINE

ence down through the ages. The purpose includes the desired effect the material would have on the original readers. The purpose is to be inferred from the text itself and should not be imposed on the text from the outside ("The Structure of 1 and 2 Samuel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 [January-March 1984]: 42, n. 12).

[One should note, however, that the notion that "Moses" wrote this passage (or indeed any of Genesis), and that he wrote "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" is entirely gratuitous and unwarranted from the Text itself, nor does the author of this paper actually set out to demonstrate either point. He does show, however, that the Judah-Tamar story is carefully interwoven with the Joseph narrative as a whole, and that it plays a significant part in the development of its plot and themes, and indeed that it's well-integrated with the rest of the book.— ed.]

¹³ Leland Ryken suggests four major types of stories: the heroic narrative, the epic, the comedy, and the tragedy. For further discussion and explanation, see his work *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985) pp. 75-86.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 82.

IN JEOPARDY (38.1-11)

General introduction (38.1). The opening verse informs the reader that Judah went down (יָרַד) from his brothers and turned aside (סָבָא) to an Adullamite man named Hirah.¹⁵ Stigers calculates that Judah was about 20 years of age at this time.¹⁶

The establishment of Judah's family (38.2-5). The plot heightens as Judah, who had already associated himself with a Canaanite man,¹⁷ took a Canaanite wife.¹⁸ The subsequent births of three sons are "recorded in breathless pace," indicating the subordinate role of these events as they establish the context for what is to come.¹⁹

The tragedy in Judah's family (38.6-11). The account now jumps from the birth of the sons to the

marriage of the first. At this point in the narrative, Tamar, the second main character, is introduced. After Judah took Tamar to be a wife for his son Er, tragedy struck. Because Er was evil in the sight of Yahweh, He took Er's life.²⁰

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After Er's death Judah commanded Onan to go to Tamar and "do your duty as a brother-in-law" (וַיִּבֶן) to her with the intent of raising up offspring for Er (v. 8).²¹ Behind this verse lies the plight of a childless widow and the resulting custom of levirate marriage.²² But as 38.9-10 reveals, Onan refused to perform this duty, knowing that the offspring would be considered his dead brother's and not his. Driver has pointed out that the construction כִּי־בִּיָּאָרַם should be understood as a frequentative use of the perfect and translated "whenever he went in" instead of "when he went in."²³ Thus the action by Onan was done re-

¹⁵ Assuming that the events of Genesis 38 began transpiring soon after Joseph was sold into slavery, the story would have occurred around 1898 B.C. For a helpful chart on the chronology from Solomon back to Joseph, cf. Allen P. Ross, "Genesis," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983, 1985), 1.89. This sets the story near the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age 11 A (ca. 1900-1750 B.C.), a period that witnessed a movement toward a semi-nomadic and even a sedentary lifestyle. Urban centers began to develop in Palestine, and the culture was in a state of flux, being influenced from the north and the east (G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974], p. 16; Keith N. Schoville, *Biblical Archaeologic in Focus* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978], p. 40).

¹⁶ Harold G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 278.

¹⁷ The designation "Hirah the Adullamite" in Genesis 38.1 identifies Hirah as a resident of Adullam, a Canaanite city mentioned in Joshua 12.15 and 15.35. The location of this site appears to be at the western edge of the hill country about 16 kilometers northwest of Hebron (Emerton, "Some Problems in Genesis 38," p. 343; L. H. Grollenberg, *Atlas of the Bible*, trans. and ed. Joyce M. Reid and H. H. Rowley [London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957], pp. 29, 60).

¹⁸ Mixed marriage with the Canaanites was understood by the patriarchs to be a threat to the Abrahamic promise. In both Genesis 24.3-4 and 28.1,6, the warnings by Abraham and Isaac not to take a Canaanite wife were expressed by לֹא with the imperfect (of לָקַח), which denotes permanent prohibition. See Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 114.

¹⁹ Robert Alter notes, "Here, as at other points in the episode, nothing is allowed to detract our focused attention from the primary, problematic subject of the proper channel for the seed" (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981], p. 6).

²⁰ H. Freedman suggests that Er's wickedness may be "deduced" from the wickedness and death of Onan mentioned in 38.10. He bases his argument on the terns "also," taking it to mean "for the same reason" ("The Book of Genesis," in *The Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth*, ed. A. Cohen [London: Soncino Press, 1947], p. 237). However, even if the term "also" in 38.10 means "for the same reason," the emphasis is still clearly on the similar magnitude of both sins—not that they were necessarily identical. Perhaps, as Leupold notes, the sin may have been some sexual perversity, since it is mentioned in connection with Er's marriage (Genesis, 2.980). But for whatever reason, description of Er's sin did not advance the story line, and thus it was not specified.

²¹ According to Ralph Alexander, the primary meaning of the verbal root = ' is "to assume the responsibility to marry one's widowed sister-in-law in order to raise up a male heir to the deceased brother." He notes that "it developed its specific nuance from the brother-in-law's function in the law of levirate marriage" ("Cn" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, 2 vols. [Chicago: Moody Press, 1980], 1.359). For support of the existence of the levirate custom outside Israel, see Donald A. Leggett, *The Levirate and Gael Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 12-27.

²² Niditch describes the awkward position of a childless widow during this time: "She is no longer a virgin and does not belong in her father's home. Yet she can no longer bear children in the patriarchal line; her link with that line, the husband, has died. The woman who has never had children before her husband's death finds herself in a particularly anomalous and uncomfortable situation: Where is she to go?" ("The Wrong Woman Righted," p. 146).

²³ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (New York: Edwin S. Gorham,

peatedly and was not just a one-time event.²⁴ Because this was evil in the eyes of Yahweh, He took Onan's life.

Genesis 38.11 draws to a close this sad chapter in Judah's family. Judah instructed Tamar to go back to her father's house until Shelah, the third son, grew up. Judah feared that Shelah would die as had his two older brothers.²⁵ Stigers suggests that Judah was

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quite "spiritually unperceptive" at this point, refusing "to connect the evil conduct of his sons with their early demise."²⁶

The groundwork has been laid for the real drama to unfold in Genesis 38.12-30. Moving at a rapid pace, the author has for the most part presented the facts without reference to causes or motives.²⁷

THE CONTINUATION OF JUDAH'S LINE THROUGH TAMAR (38.12-30)

Tamar's deception of Judah (38.12-23). This section records the bold actions of Tamar, who deceived her father-in-law Judah into unknowingly performing the levirate duty. Disguise, an element common to comic structure, dominates this part of the narrative. Also the plot now unfolds at a slower

1905), p. 328; Ronald L. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*, 2d ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), p. 85; E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, rev. ed. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 336.

²⁴ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 188.

²⁵ Perhaps, as suggested by W. Gunther Plaut, Judah thought that by removing her from the house, the duty of Shelah to marry her might become less pressing with the passing of time. This seems to be the explanation given in the latter part of Genesis 38.11 for this unusual action (*Genesis* [New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974], p. 372). Furthermore C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch comment: "The sudden death of his two sons so soon after their marriage with Thamar [sic] made Judah hesitate to give her the third as a husband also, thinking, very likely, according to a superstition which we find in Tobit iii. 7 sqq., that either she herself, or marriage with her, had been the cause of her husbands' deaths" (*Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1: The Pentateuch [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949], p. 340).

²⁶ Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis*, p. 279.

²⁷ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 352.

pace here in the heart of the story.²⁸ Verses 12-15 describe Tamar's cunning move when circumstances in Judah's life afforded her an opportunity to act. Judah, whose wife had died, had finished his time of mourning and was preparing to join his sheep shearers. The hard and dirty work of shearing sheep was accompanied by a festival that was noted for hilarity and much wine-drinking.²⁹ No doubt Tamar calculated that the flavor of this festival and the sexual unfulfillment that resulted from being a widower would make Judah quite susceptible to sexual temptation.³⁰ So Tamar removed her widow's garments, veiled her face, enwrapped herself in disguise, and proceeded to wait at the entrance of Enaim.³¹ The latter part of 38.14 indicates Tamar's motive for this action: She had not been given in marriage to Shelah even though he had grown up. She was being deprived of conception through the law of levirate duty, so she decided to take matters into her own hands.³²

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Judah was fooled by Tamar's disguise (38.15), considering her to be a prostitute.³³ So he had sexual

²⁸ Von Rad views *Genesis* 38.12-30 as the "real story" which is set against the "necessary facts" provided by 38.1-11 (*Genesis*, p. 352).

²⁹ See 1 Samuel 25.4, 8, 18,36; 2 Samuel 13.23, 28; cf. Madeleine S. and J. Lane Miller, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life*, ed. Boyce M. Bennett, Jr. and David F. Scott, 3d ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978), p. 131.

³⁰ Leupold, *Genesis*, 2.982-83. Kidner notes that sexual temptation would be sharpened- during this festive time by the "Canaanite cult, which encouraged ritual fornication as fertility magic (*Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 188).

³¹ The term (38.14) has been problematic and subject to many suggestions. From the context of 38.21, it is apparent that: alone was sufficient to identify a place of meeting known to the characters of the story.

³² Middle Assyrian Law number 33 and Hittite Law number 193 suggest inclusion of the father in the line of levirate responsibility. While the extant copies of these laws are dated a few hundred years later than the time of the Judah-Tamar story, they at least suggest that Tamar's action of seeking conception by Judah may have been in accord with a similar custom existing during her time. A translation of these laws appears in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 182, 196.

³³ Though Judah recognizes her as a זונה (38.15), Hirah refers to her as קדשה (38.21). The verb זנה is used regularly in the Old

relations with her (v. 16). Then in lieu of payment Judah left a pledge which would become an important piece of identification later in the story. This pledge consisted of Judah's cylinder seal and his staff. Vawter explains, "What Judah does is surrender his ID card, which he expects to be quickly redeemed, but which Tamar retains for her own purposes."³⁴ As a result Judah attempted to honor his pledge to a prostitute who seemingly had vanished (vv. 20-23).

Judah's discovery about Tamar (38.24-26). In these verses the story's descent into tragedy is brought to a climax as Judah, still reckoning the pregnant Tamar to be part of his family, sentences her to burning.³⁵ But precisely at this point enters

the surprise that

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changes the course of the story. Tamar produced her evidence, revealing that the one who impregnated her was none other than Judah! The participle *תִּזְנֶה* expresses simultaneous action with the Qal perfect form *שָׁלַחְהָ*³⁶ Tamar sent her telling items to Judah even as she was being brought out to receive her death sentence.³⁷ Judah in turn was forced to admit that "she is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (v. 26) Though the root *צדק* ("righteous") often has moral connotations when applied to God's standards, its basic meaning is conformity to a standard, whether ethical or moral.³⁸ The standard in this case would be the accepted social custom and duty of levirate marriage.³⁹ The verdict from Judah in verse 26 is the normative (authoritative) viewpoint of the story. That is, Judah's statement is the "key utterance," which "we intuitively recognize as summing up what the story as a whole is asserting."⁴⁰

Testament for the activity of a prostitute and refers to illicit heterosexual intercourse. Primarily it denotes a sexual relationship outside a formal union or outside the marriage bond (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907], p. 275; S. Erlandsson, "זנה," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980], 4.99-100). On the other hand the term *זונה* denotes a "temple prostitute" who functioned in association with the fertility cult in Canaanite religion (Thomas E. McComiskey, "זונה," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2.788). While Judah was certainly out of fellowship with Yahweh, it is not necessary to suppose that he was actively practicing Canaanite religion in this situation. He was simply seeking sexual gratification. Though he certainly assumed the disguised Tamar to be a temple prostitute, the less technical term *זונה* in 38.15 emphasizes that he recognized her as a prostitute with whom he could fulfill his sexual desires. See also Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), pp. 60-61.

adultery. He suggests, though, that "we should see here 'a reflection of his [Judah's] patriarchal predecessors or of their own ancestral culture. Here is a clear case of adultery, and the penalty is but one. There seems to be no reason to seek others. Judah's judgment was the correct one. More final conclusions probably will have to wait for further archaeological discoveries" (*A Commentary on Genesis*, p. 281).

³⁴ Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1977), p. 398. Cylinder seals were usually between one and two inches in length and were made of hematite or else basalt, marble, ivory, or even wood. The outer face of the seal was engraved with a design which would make an impression when it was rolled on damp clay, thus creating marks of identification. They were often attached to a cord which was strung around the owner's neck. See D. J. Wiseman and A. R. Millard, "Seal, Sealing in the Old Testament," in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 3.1407; "Seal, Seals in the Ancient Period," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971), 14.1972-74.

³⁵ Later, in the Mosaic Law, burning was prescribed only in the case of a man who married both a woman and her mother (Lv 20.14) or a priest's daughter involved in harlotry (Lv 21.9). Stoning was the usual punishment for adultery (Dt 22.20-24). Stigers points out that the Code of Hammurabi, as well as the Hittite and Middle Assyrian laws, never prescribes burning for

³⁶ For classification and examples of simultaneous action expressed by the participle and the perfect tense, see sections 220 and 237 in Williams, *Hebrew Syntax*, pp. 40, 43.

³⁷ This verse itself, through the two statements of Tamar, creates suspense for the reader. In her first statement, her items of proof are simply identified by the term. Then her second statement brings her shocking revelation to a climax as the items referred to by *אֵלֶּה* are revealed to be Judah's cylinder seal and staff which Tamar had in her keeping.

³⁸ Harold G. Stigers, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2.752-54.

³⁹ E. Jacob understands this standard to be that of prostitution, the rules and customs of which Judah has not respected (*Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. Arthur W. Heathcoate and Philip 1. Allcock [New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958], p. 95) .. However, one wonders in what way Judah did not respect the rules and customs of prostitution. Jacob's view does not adequately account for Judah's confession "inasmuch as I did not give her to Shelah my son." This confession hardly refers to any customs associated with prostitution, but has reference to the custom of levirate marriage.

⁴⁰ This terminology is borrowed from Ryken, *How to Read the Bible*

Tamar's delivery of twin sons (38.27-30). The story concludes with the birth of twin sons by Tamar. Because of the bursting out of the second boy over the first one, he was named "Perez" (פֶּרֶץ), which means "an outburst, bursting forth, a breach."⁴¹ The name given to the boy with the scarlet thread tied on his hand was "Zerah" (זָרַח), a name meaning "dawning, shining, brightness" and perhaps alluding to the bright-colored thread.⁴²

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For von Rad, the conclusion to this story is "somewhat unsatisfactory." He asks, "Is v. 30 its conclusion at all? Strangely it concludes without telling whose wife Tamar finally became. According to v. 26b, in any case, she was not Judah's. Was she then Shehlah's? Should that not have been said?"⁴³ However, as Ross points out, this conclusion "provides the significance of the whole account. God gave Tamar twins, and the line of Judah continued in her."⁴⁴ This significance continued to blossom as God's revelation progressed.⁴⁵

The Chronological Relationship

THE CHRONOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

Two alleged chronological problems have led some scholars to suggest that Genesis 38 was inserted into its present location by a later redactor or editor. Despite the chronological problems this insertion would pose, the editor who wanted to include the Judah-Tamar story could find no better place to do so without causing even more difficulty.

As to the first alleged problem, it is often argued that the time between the sale of Joseph (Gn 37.25-36) and the migration of Jacob's clan into Egypt (46.1-7), which included Judah and his twin sons, would have been insufficient for the events of Genesis 38 to have transpired. In the space of 22

years, Judah would have had to marry, father three sons, see them grow old enough to be married, and then father the twin sons born to Tamar.⁴⁶

The second problem stems from Genesis 46.12, which mentions two grandsons of Judah, sons of Perez, among the sons of Israel who

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migrated to Egypt. If Perez and Zerah were born near the end of the 22-year period, as Genesis 38 implies, it would have been impossible for Perez to produce the offspring mentioned in 46.12 before or during the migration to Egypt. In reference to these alleged problems of the events in Genesis 38 and 46.12 taking place in a 22-year period, Bush's comments represent the opinion of many critical scholars: "This period is evidently too short for the occurrence of all these events, and we are therefore necessitated to refer the commencement of them at least as far back as to about the time of Jacob's coming to Shechem, Gn 33.18; but the incidents are related here because there was no more convenient place for them."⁴⁷

as *Literature*, p. 62. Brueggemann also recognizes the importance of this verdict, proposing that it "constitutes the main turn in the narrative" (*Genesis*, p. 309).

⁴¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 839.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁴³ Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 356.

⁴⁴ Ross, "Genesis," p. 89.

⁴⁵ Ruth 4.18-22; 1 Chronicles 2.3-15; and Matthew 1.3-6.

⁴⁶ That a space of 22 years occurred between Joseph's sale and the family of Jacob's migration into Egypt can be established from references to the age of Joseph at various points in his life. Genesis 37.2 indicates that Joseph was 17 years old when he was sold by his brothers to the Midianites and subsequently taken to Egypt. In 41.46, Joseph's appointment by Pharaoh came when Joseph was 30 years of age. Thus 13 years had elapsed. Genesis 41.46-49 then describes the seven years of abundance at the end of which 20 years would have passed since Joseph was sold by his brothers. Genesis 45.6-7 indicates that Joseph's revelation of himself to his brothers and the subsequent move of Jacob's family into Egypt came two years into the famine. This brings the total to 22 years which had elapsed between Joseph's sale and Jacob's move to Egypt.

⁴⁷ George Bush, *Notes on Genesis*, 2 vols. (New York: Ivison, Phinney & Co., 1860; reprint, Minneapolis: James Family Christian publishers, 1979), 2.238. Bruce Vawter concurs: "The [Judah-Tamar] story concerns an adult Judah who is separated from the rest of his brothers and leads a life apart in the south of Palestine. This combination of circumstances hardly allows for a positioning of the story anywhere earlier in the saga, when Judah was too young, or is presumed still part of the common family, or in any case is in the wrong part of the country. Neither could it be put immediately before the Joseph story, for in the Yahwist's version of that story Judah must be on hand with the rest of his brothers to get the thing launched, as we have just seen. Once the story of Joseph in Egypt is well begun with chapter 39 there is no longer any opportunity to interrupt it without inflicting literary violence to revolt a less sensitive artist than the Yah-

THE CHRONOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS

On further examination, however, these two supposed chronological difficulties may be satisfactorily resolved.

In response to the first problem, it would not have been impossible for the events of Genesis 38 to have taken place during the 22-year span between the end of Genesis 37 and the commencement of Genesis 39. Judah could have married within six months or so after Joseph's sale into Egypt and could have had three sons within three years.⁴⁸ Or Judah could have married before Joseph was sold into Egypt. Since young people married at early ages in comparison with today,⁴⁹ Er, the first son, could have married Tamar when he was about 15 or 16. He may have died a short time later, at which point Onan was commanded to perform the levirate duty for Tamar. Onan's sin and death may have occurred between 16 and 18 years after Joseph's exile. This leaves a couple of years for Shelah to reach marriageable age and to be withheld from Tamar. Time is still left

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for Tamar's deception, her pregnancy, her delivery of two sons, and Judah's two trips into Egypt with his brothers to buy corn. No doubt the coming of the famine forced Judah to rejoin his father's clan.⁵⁰ So it is possible for the events of Genesis 38 to have taken place in such a time frame. In fact, Cassuto has further observed that the opening words of Genesis

wist" (*On Genesis*, p. 390).

⁴⁸ G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis*, trans. William Heynen, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 2.190.

⁴⁹ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, trans. John Hugh, 2 vols. (New York: McGrawHill Book Co., 1965), 1.29.

⁵⁰ If Cassuto is right in suggesting that Er did not marry Tamar until he was 18, the chronology becomes even tighter. Er's marriage and subsequent death would have been in the sixth year of plenty when Joseph was 36. Onan, at 17 years of age, could have then married Tamar and died in the same year. Meanwhile Shelah would have only been 16. Two years could then pass by until Shelah was 18, convincing Tamar that Judah would not give her to Shelah. This would have been Joseph's 38th year and the first year of the period of famine. Then in the second year of the famine Tamar would have given birth to the twins. Later that year, when the twins were a few months old, the family of Jacob would have migrated to Egypt (D. Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, pp. 39-40).

38, גַּיְהִי בְּעֵת הַהוּא, reflect an awareness on the part of the author of the short time in which the events of the chapter must occur. He comments:

From the opening words of the section we immediately note that the author was not unaware that the period of time, with which he was dealing, was short and that the happenings that occurred therein were many, and that he must consequently bring them into the closest possible harmony. Hence he did not begin with the formula commonly found in . . . Genesis, "And it came to pass after these things," nor does he write simply "And Judah went down from his brethren," but he uses the expression "And it came to pass at that time," as though he wished to emphasize that immediately after the selling of Joseph, at that very time, Judah went down from his brothers and married the daughter of Shua.⁵¹

The second chronological difficulty concerns the mention of Judah's grandsons in Genesis 46.12. Obviously Judah's sons Perez and Zerah were quite young, perhaps just a few months old, when they traveled to Egypt. Therefore it would have been impossible for Perez to have fathered Hezron and Hamul, his two sons mentioned in Genesis 46.12, before the journey into Egypt.⁵²

A close look, however, at Genesis 46.12 reveals a variation in the mention of Hezron and Hamul. The end of the verse reads: "And the sons of Perez were (וַיְהִי) Hezron and Hamul." Yet throughout Genesis 46, the listing of descendants was done without the use of a verbal form. For example, verse 12a reads, "And the sons of Judah: Er and Onan and Shelah and Perez and Zerah."

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Cassuto comments on the "special phraseology" employed in the mention of Hezron and Hamul: "This external variation creates the impression that the Bible wished to give us here some special information that was different from what it desired to

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁵² Even if the events in Genesis 38 began to take place shortly after Jacob's return from Shechem (which could not have been more than six years before Joseph's sale), Perez could not have been any older than 11 when Jacob's family went to Egypt (Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, p. 371).

impart relative to the other descendants of Israel.⁵³ Cassuto then explains the intention behind this special phraseology:

It intended to inform us thereby that the sons of Perez were not among those who went down to Egypt, but are mentioned here for some other reason. This is corroborated by the fact that Joseph's sons were also not of those who immigrated into Egypt, and they, too, are mentioned by a different formula.⁵⁴

While the author considered it necessary to mention Hezron and Hamul in the list of Jacob's family, it was done in such a way as to distinguish them from the descendants who actually migrated to Egypt with Jacob.

The Literary Relationship

THE LITERARY DIFFICULTIES

Scholars who consider Genesis 38 as having no literary connection with the Joseph story whatsoever generally assume it to be a later intrusion. Speiser, for example, asserts, "The narrative is a completely independent unit. It has no connection with the drama of Joseph, which it interrupts at the conclusion of Act I."⁵⁵ With similar sentiment, Vawter writes:

Scarcely has the distinctive Joseph story been begun when it is interrupted by a chapter that apparently has nothing to do with it. . . . There can hardly be any doubt that this chapter did, as a matter of fact, originally have no connection with the Story of Joseph and that it is, therefore, in some sense an intrusion here.⁵⁶

THE LITERARY INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Though Genesis 38 obviously interrupts the sequence in the Joseph story, it possesses a literary interconnectedness with its context.⁵⁷ While Genesis 37–50 is often identified as the "Joseph story," 37.2 identifies this section as "the generations (תַּלְדוֹת) of Jacob."⁵⁸ So while the "focal element" of these chapters is the Joseph story, the basic unit of narration in Genesis 37–50 is "unified around Jacob and his sons."⁵⁹ Genesis 38 "shows a very definite angle of Jacob's history."⁶⁰ Therefore it is wrong to deny categorically any connection or relationship between Genesis 38 and the Joseph story as a whole.

Furthermore in response to the charge that Genesis 38 breaks a bond between Genesis 37.36 and 39.1, the language of 37.36 and 39.1 allows for a gap into which Genesis 38 nicely fits.⁶¹ Delitzsch suggests that

⁵³ Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, p. 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35. Cassuto has also treated at length the reason for the mention of these sons. He finds the rationale for the inclusion of their names in the purpose of levirate marriage. Usually the brother of the deceased provides a son for the deceased. But when the father of the deceased provides a son, the son ranks with the deceased himself and not with his sons. According to Cassuto, Judah had five sons, each of whom had the right to establish a family of his own in Israel. Perez and Zerah, as his sons, clearly possessed this right. In other words they did not merely replace Er and Onan, but stood alongside them. If they had replaced Er and Onan, the families of the sons of Judah would have numbered only three. So two special families were needed to succeed the name of the dead. Hezron and Hamul, who would have ranked equally with the sons of Er and Onan, took their uncles' place. Cassuto finds support for this hypothesis in Numbers 26.19-21 which mentions the Perezites, the Hezronites, and the Hamulites. He explains, "This means that each of the first two sons of Perez founded a separate family of its own, and that only the children that lie begot after then established a third family, which was called by his [Perez's] name" (*ibid.*, p. 38; the entire argument is given on pp. 36-38).

⁵⁵ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1981), p. 299. However, in attributing the insertion of this chapter to

the Yahwist, Speiser does admit that "the place of the present account was chosen with keen literary sensitivity" (*ibid.*).

⁵⁶ Vawter, *On Genesis*, p. 389. Furthermore, G. W. Coats, in discussing the "redactional unity" in Genesis 37–50, contends that the "bond" between Genesis 37 and 39 is "cemented" by 37.36. This verse, he suggests, must be viewed as "an anticipation of the introductory sentence in Genesis 39, similar to the recapitulation as a redactional method for cementing a distinct narrative into a larger context" ("Redactional Unity in Genesis 37–50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 [March 1974]:16).

⁵⁷ Conservative scholars do not deny that there is a sense in which the Judah-Tamar story "interrupts" the Joseph narrative. Even Derek Kidner labels Genesis 38 "a rude interruption" (*Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 187).

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the structure of Genesis based on the i. i formula, see Ross, "Genesis," pp. 22-26.

⁵⁹ Coats, "Redactional Unity," p. 15.

⁶⁰ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2.970.

⁶¹ Genesis 39.1 reiterates the information given in 37.36, explaining that Joseph had been taken into Egypt and sold to Potiphar. Though restatement is common in Hebrew narrative, such a specific rehearsal by 39.1 of the details given in 37.36 would not be expected if the former followed right on the heels of the

this was done as a literary convention by the author:

It is historiographic art to break off in the history of Joseph at xxxvii. 36. We thus get to experience with him the comfortless darkness of the two decades, during which hopeless and sorrowful longing was gnawing at the heart of the aged father, and the secret curse of deadly sin deceitfully concealed was weighing on the souls of his children.⁶²

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Even Wright acknowledges, "Of course it must be conceded that there is a sense of the dramatic in the positioning: it provides an interlude for the Joseph story to incubate and develop after the manner and function of a Shakespearian sub-plot."⁶³ Moreover, a logical time gap between Genesis 37.36 and 39.1 is quite appropriate in light of the fact that "the scene is about to be shifted from Canaan to Egypt."⁶⁴ The Judah-Tamar story quite masterfully prepares the reader for this shift.⁶⁵ Another strong argument for the interconnectedness of Genesis 38 with its context is what Cassuto calls "a kind of internal nexus between the story of Tamar and Judah and the selling of Joseph."⁶⁶ This relationship between chapters 38 and 37 is "reflected in the correspondence of certain details in the two sections and is clearly manifested in the parallel expressions that denote these details."⁶⁷ In particular there is a strong literary paral-

latter.

⁶² Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1889), pp. 266-67.

⁶³ See Wright, "The Positioning of Genesis 38," p. 523, n. 3. With similar sentiment Leupold says, "We are struck ... by the rhetorical skill of the author who snakes this chapter serve the purpose of letting us feel the lapse of time after the sale of Joseph" (*Exposition of Genesis*, 2.976).

⁶⁴ Robert S. Candlish, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1868; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 2.128.

⁶⁵ According to Aalders, "it was these events [i.e., Genesis 38] that especially bring to light the critical danger that threatened the 'chosen seed' if they remained in Canaan at this time. Mixed marriages with the Canaanites could lead only to the people of Israel losing their identity among the Canaanites and eventually being absorbed by them. This chapter clearly indicates that Jacob's descendants had to leave Canaan if they were to develop as a separate and distinctive people" (Genesis, 2.191).

⁶⁶ Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, p. 30.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

lel between 37.32-33 and 38.25-26. This can be seen in the following layout which lifts out the key corresponding terms and shows the structure of the verses:

"And they sent ... and they said Please examine Then he examined it and said" (37.32-33).

"And she sent ... saying Please examine Then Judah examined and said" (38.25-26).

As Cassuto remarks, "It is difficult to suppose that such a parallel is merely fortuitous; it was undoubtedly intended by the author of the section."⁶⁸ Likewise, Alter concludes:

This precise recurrence of the verb [נכר] in identical forms at the ends of Genesis 37 and 38 respectively is manifestly the result not of some automatic mechanism of interpolating traditional materials but of careful splicing of sources by a brilliant literary artist. The first use of

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the formula was for an act of deception; the second use is for an act of unmasking. Judah with Tamar after Judah with his brothers is an exemplary narrative instance of the deceiver deceived.⁶⁹

Alter points out one more literary pattern linking chapters 38 and 37 of Genesis. "In the most artful of contrivances, the narrator shows him [Judah] exposed through the symbols of his legal self given in a pledge for a kid (*gedi 'izim*), as before Jacob had been tricked by the garment emblematic of his love for Joseph which had been dipped in the blood of a goat (*se'ir 'izim*)."⁷⁰

Also Genesis 38 has at least two notable parallels with chapter 39. The first, as explained by Alter, is a contrast: "Finally, when we return from Judah to the Joseph story (Genesis 39), we move in pointed contrast from a tale of exposure through sexual incontinence to a tale of seeming defeat and ultimate triumph through sexual continence— Joseph and Potiphar's wife."⁷¹

The second connection between chapters 38 and 39

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 31.

⁶⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

of Genesis is the verbal root ירד in both 38.1 and 39.1. Alter observes:

The story begins with Judah parting from his brothers, an act conveyed with a rather odd locution, *vayered m'et*, literally "he went down from," and which undoubtedly has the purpose of connecting this separation of one brother from the rest with Joseph's, transmitted with the same verb-root (see, for example, the very beginning of the next chapter: "Joseph was brought down [*hurad*] to Egypt").⁷²

In summary, what many view as an intrusion was actually an account carefully, logically, and purposefully interwoven into the Joseph story.

The Theological Relationship

In considering the theological relationship between Genesis 38 and its context, the question may be asked, What was the writer's purpose in including this account, especially in its location in the Joseph story?

VARIOUS PROPOSALS FOR THE PURPOSE OF GENESIS 38

Regarding the purpose of Genesis 38, some scholars have offered proposals colored by their adherence to the "clan theory." This approach understands the patriarchal narratives in Genesis to relate to

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tribal history. The patriarchs are not necessarily historical individuals but are seen as representing tribes.⁷³ Applied to Genesis 38, this theory considers the story's purpose to be the recording of the tribal history of Judah in which two clans disappear and two others appear. According to McKane, Er and Onan "represent older clans which no longer retain their independence," while Shelah, Perez, and Zerah comprise "the chief Judaeen clans at the time of the origin of the narrative."⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid., p. 6.

⁷³ Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), p. 40; Herman Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), pp. 18-21.

⁷⁴ William McKane, *Studies in the Patriarchal Narratives* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1979), p. 142; cf. Gunkel, *Legends of Gene-*

However, as Kidner has pointed out, "the narrative [Genesis 38] has a coherence and a precision of detail which argue strongly for the actuality of its persons and events."⁷⁵ Aalders also argues that Genesis 38 is "actually history dealing with real persons," since Judah is portrayed in an unfavorable light.⁷⁶ "If this was a matter of Jewish myth or nationalistic fantasy, the later Israelites certainly would have lauded out such tales."⁷⁷

Some have proposed a secondary purpose. Dillmann, for example, writes, "A secondary purpose of the narrative is found in the desire it exhibits of impressing the duty of marriage with a deceased brother's wife."⁷⁸ However, Emerton, while observing that this suggestion cannot be disproved, responds that "there is not much in the story to suggest the didactic intention of inculcating such a general principle."⁷⁹

Other scholars have proposed that the purpose of Genesis 38 is to influence in some way the "moral fabric of society."⁸⁰ According to Coats, "to present a helpless widow whose just claim eventually receives a hearing from a judge who has the power of life and death over her casts a model for any audience."⁸¹

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It should be noted that none of the above proposals as to the purpose of Genesis 38 builds on or depends on the chapter's position in the Joseph story. That is, in these proposals the placement of Genesis 38 in the Joseph story has no direct bearing on the purpose of the chapter.

THE PURPOSE OF GENESIS 38 IN LIGHT OF

sis, p. 21; cf. A. S. Herbert, *Genesis 12-50* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 125.

⁷⁵ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 187.

⁷⁶ Aalders, *Genesis*, 2.191

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ August Dillmann, *Genesis: Critically and Exegetically Expounded*, trans. Wm. B. Stevenson, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), 2.343; cf. also S. R. Driver, *Genesis*, p. 326.

⁷⁹ Emerton, "Judah and Tamar," p. 404.

⁸⁰ George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), p. 276; Niditch, "The Wrong Woman Righted," p. 149.

⁸¹ Coats, "Genesis," p. 276.

THE THEOLOGY OF GENESIS

However, in the view of this writer, Genesis 38 possesses a theological purpose that harmonizes with and contributes to the developing theology in Genesis and in the Joseph story.⁸²

An overview of the theology of Genesis

The central theme of Genesis is the sovereignty of Yahweh in His establishment of a nation through which to bless all the peoples of the world.⁸³ This is borne out in the literary structure of Genesis. As Ross has pointed out, Genesis is structured by an initial section and then 11 sections headed by the term תְּלֻדוֹת ("generations").⁸⁴ This term, he argues, introduces the "historical result" of an ancestor rather than merely introducing a genealogy. Each תְּלֻדוֹת explains what became of a line, all the while narrowing down and following the line through which God would bring blessing. In addition, each תְּלֻדוֹת shows a marked deterioration. Up to Genesis 12, the deterioration ends in judgment by God. After chapter 12, there is a continual deterioration among those striving for a place of blessing.⁸⁵

Genesis 12 is a pivotal chapter, for it reveals Yahweh's choice of one man to found a nation through which He will bless all the peoples of the earth. Gen-

esis 1–11 forms the prologue, giving the

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background out of which the story in Genesis 12–50 arises.⁸⁶

The final section in Genesis, the תְּלֻדוֹת of Jacob in 37.2–50.26, continues the emphasis on the sovereignty of Yahweh. According to Brueggemann, the theme of this section is "God is working out his purpose through and in spite of Egypt, through and in spite of Joseph and his brothers."⁸⁷ Though the theology in this section is somewhat "subdued and mostly implicit," Brueggemann emphasizes that "nonetheless, the narrative [Genesis 37–50] has an identifiable and singular intention. It urges that in the contingencies of history, the purposes of God are at work in hidden and unnoticed ways. But the ways of God are nonetheless reliable and will come to fruition."⁸⁸

The theology of Genesis 38

Yet despite Brueggemann's magnificent treatment of the purpose of Genesis 37–50, he misses the point of Genesis 38 entirely, failing to see its contribution to that purpose. He writes, "It is not evident that it [Gn 38] provides any significant theological resource. It is difficult to know in what context it might be of value for theological exposition."⁸⁹

However, in the viewpoint of the present writer, Genesis 38 fits beautifully within the theme and purpose Brueggemann described for Genesis 37–50. It further develops and contributes to the theology being unfolded in Genesis.

First, this chapter teaches that Yahweh would accomplish His purpose, even if He had to use a Canaanite woman to do it. Surprisingly, Plaut is one of the few commentators to pick up on this emphasis. Even though he approaches the text from a critical perspective, he has noted the theological import of Genesis 38. Stressing that "God in His wisdom turned fate to His own design," Plaut concludes:

⁸² Here Genesis 38 is being approached from the discipline of "biblical theology," which focuses on what the texts of Scripture reveal about the person and work of God—especially in relationship to mankind. In contrast to systematic theology, which begins with topics (externally imposed categories of study), biblical theology begins with the text, observing what topics are considered and how they are developed by the biblical text. John A. Martin describes biblical theology as "a study of the text of Scripture for the purpose of discovering and describing what the text meant as well as what it means. It attempts to draw out universal theological principles. The biblical theologian draws his categories from the biblical text itself and not from any outside philosophical system or other sources" ("The Theology of Samuel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 [October-December 1984]: 313, n. 1). For a helpful overview of the development and methodology of biblical theology, with particular attention to its attending issues, see Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 3d rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 15-183.

⁸³ Ross, "Genesis," p. 26.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-26.

⁸⁶ Ronald B. Allen, "Theology of the Pentateuch," unpublished class notes, 548, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1985.

⁸⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, p. 293.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 307-8.

The Judah-Tamar interlude is, therefore, not merely an old tribal tale but an important link in the main theme: to show the steady, though not always readily visible, guiding hand of God who never forgets His people and their destiny.

In this story, Tamar is His unlikely tool. She is a Canaanite, a daughter of the very people against whom Abraham had warned and whom the children of Israel would later displace. Tamar is treated with respect; her desperate deed draws no condemnation from the Torah. What she did fulfilled the requirements of Hebrew law and, in addition, appeared to serve the higher purposes of God.⁹⁰

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The closing verses of Genesis 38 confirm that Yahweh's purpose was being carried out. Here the recurring motif of the elder serving the younger is worked out in the birth of Tamar's twin sons. God's designs cannot be thwarted.⁹¹ The full significance of God's continuation of the line of Judah through Tamar is revealed later in Scripture. The genealogy in Ruth 4.18-22 indicates that the Davidic line was introduced by Tamar's son Perez.⁹² And into the Davidic line, Jesus the Messiah was eventually born.

Second, Genesis 38 develops the theology of Genesis by emphasizing the need for Yahweh to remove His people to Egypt. The events in this chapter "especially bring to light the critical danger that threatened the 'chosen seed' if they remained in Canaan at this time."⁹³ Eventually they would be absorbed into the culture of the Canaanites and their identity would be lost. Thus Genesis 38 provides an important link between Genesis 15.13-16, the promise to Abraham of his descendants' sojourn in a foreign land, and Genesis 46, which records the removal to Egypt. The Judah-Tamar story brings to light the reason behind the promise given in Genesis 15.13-16. Because of the growing deterioration among the progenitors of the nation Israel, Yahweh would have to remove His people from the land of blessing for a time.

⁹⁰ Plaut, *Genesis*, p. 376.

⁹¹ Ross, "Genesis, pp. 89-90.

⁹² See Eugene H. Merrill, "The Roots of Ruth: Narration and Shared Themes," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (April-June 1985):130-41.

⁹³ Aalders, *Genesis*, 2.191.

Along this line the contrast between Judah and Joseph cannot go unnoticed. "Parallel to Joseph's spiritual ingenuousness, patience, hopeful trust in the future, appears Judah's strong and daring self-dependence, fulness of life, sensuality combined with strong abstinence."⁹⁴ Through the triumph over temptation, Joseph was eventually placed in a strategic position that enabled him to be God's instrument in bringing his father's clan down to Egypt. Judah's lifestyle, in contrast, revealed the need for the family to be removed in the first place.

To summarize, Genesis 38 describes Yahweh's accomplishment of His purpose (in the continuation of the Abrahamic line) despite the unfaithfulness of Judah—the fourth link in that line. The continuation of Abraham's line, and its narrowing by the introduction of the Davidic line through Perez, was accomplished by using a most unlikely person—a Canaanite woman.

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Therefore the normative meaning⁹⁵ of this story may be stated as follows: Yahweh will carry out His purpose(s) despite His people's unfaithfulness and its tragic consequences on their lives. His purposes will not be frustrated, even if He has to use means other than His people to accomplish them. But at the same time, His people will experience a loss of joy and blessing in their relationship with Him.

Conclusion

Rather than relating to its context as "a dog among ninepins,"⁹⁶ as Bentzen has suggested, Genesis 38 bears distinct chronological, literary, and theological relationships to its context. It bears all the marks of being purposely included at its present location in the Joseph story by the writer of Genesis. Its theological message, a further development of the theology of Genesis, has relevance for God's people

⁹⁴ John Peter Lange, *Genesis, or The First Book of Moses*, trans. Tayler Lewis and A. Gosman (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1869), p. 591.

⁹⁵ Biblical theology has a twofold task. Its "descriptive" task is "to discover and describe what the text meant," while its "normative" task is "to explicate what it means for today" (Hasel, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 169).

⁹⁶ Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1948), 2.12.

today.