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The Story of Judah, the Hero: An Analysis of Genesis 38

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Chapter 38 of Genesis, which relates the story of Judah and Tamar, seems at first irrelevant and unlinked with the chapters before and after it. Most Bible critics view it as “an independent story that has no connection with the story of Joseph.” On the other hand, Robert Alter explains that this chapter serves to connect Judah’s deception of his father with the deception practiced on him by his daughter-in-law. It is an example of the deceiver being deceived.¹ In addition, this chapter apparently serves to emphasize Judah’s negative character, adding the neglect of his daughter-in-law to his previous transgressions, betraying his brother and deceiving his father. Mieke Bal argues that chapter 38 serves as a “mirror,” a contrast to Joseph’s experiences and fate. Moreover, adopting the perspective of feminist criticism, she emphasizes the role of the female character, Tamar. In her opinion, it was Tamar’s behavior that helped Judah

to become aware of his mistakes, resolve to mend his ways, and assume his proper household responsibilities.²

These approaches indicate that chapter 38 has a narrative function within the wider Joseph narrative, but far more is involved. A neglected aspect of the chapter is its opening verse, which states that Judah *went down from his brothers*. Why did he leave his brothers and go south, and why does the Bible specifically mention this fact? The rabbis explain that *Judah went down* means that he was demoted from his previous high rank as leader of the brothers, either because he failed to prevail on them to rescue Joseph (*Midrash Tanhuma*, Vayeshev 12) or because his own rescue attempt was incomplete (TB *Sotah* 13b). The theme of these explanations is that while Judah acted commendably by persuading his brothers to sell Joseph rather than leave him to die in a pit, more was expected of him. He did not live up to his potential ability as a leader and positive influence. R. Abraham, Saba (1440-1508), in his *Tzeror ha-Mor* commentary, maintains that Judah was behaving like a penitent: he

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981) p. 10.

² N. Meifang, “On Chapter 38 of the Book of Genesis,” *Foreign Literature* 2 (2011) pp. 132-136.

moved away from his brothers so as to distance himself from their negative influence, or else he could not bear to see his father's agony over the loss of Joseph,

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knowing that he was to blame. Kimḥi (Radak) notes that Adullam, where Judah camped, is geographically south of Dothan, where the brothers were pasturing their flock in the previous chapter (Gen 37.17), thus *Judah went down* means that he traveled south. On that basis, I think it is possible that Judah followed the Ishmaelites' path and headed south, endeavoring to track them down in the hope of finding Joseph and bringing him back to his father.³

Note that while Judah's brethren did not treat Joseph as a brother, due to the favoritism, shown him by Jacob and probably because they had different mothers, Judah explicitly called Joseph *our brother, our own flesh* (Gn 37.27).

Chapters 37–50 of the Book of Genesis are generally viewed as "the story of Joseph," but this narrative actually has a dual significance. It is also "the story of Judah," of which chapter 38 forms part. The narrative framework presents two concurrent stories of growth and change, featuring both Joseph and Judah.

Throughout chapters 37–50, "the story of Joseph" and "the story of Judah" are skillfully intermingled to form a harmonious, integrated narrative framework. There are two storylines, one focusing on Joseph's behavior and the other on Judah's development as a leader. Of these, the storyline about Joseph is more prominent and explicit, while the one concerning Judah is mainly implied.

Joseph obviously hated his brothers for what they did to him, which explains why he made no attempt to contact

³ [This is sheer fantasy, for which there is no basis in the text, but fortunately the writer attempts to prove nothing with it.— ed.] Y. Zhao, *Legends and Commentaries on the Jewish Bible* (Beijing: China Religious Culture Publishers, 2013) pp. 46-7. According to Genesis 37.21-22, however, it was Reuben who intended to save Joseph and restore him to his father.

his family after becoming viceroy of Egypt.⁴ Yet Jacob, his father, never did him any harm—on the contrary, Jacob loved Joseph and set him above his brothers. Jacob was heart-stricken when he learned of Joseph's supposed death (Gn 37.34-35), constantly bewailed him, and suffered misery and torment ever after. Joseph's failure to contact Jacob, who was innocent of any wrongdoing, may be seen as a rejection of filial responsibility.

The names Joseph gave his two sons reveal what was on his mind. Manasseh was so named because *God has made me completely forget my hardship and my parental home* (41.51), and Ephraim because *God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction* (v. 52). Together, these names point to a repudiation of his family and past and to the joy of his well-being in Egypt.

Joseph had little regard for the plight of his kinsfolk during the time of re-

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gional famine. When God allowed Joseph to foresee the seven years of abundance and the seven years of scarcity, he collected all the food of those abundant years on Pharaoh's behalf, but gave no thought to his own father and brothers. When the good years had passed and the years of famine arrived, he opened all the storehouses and sold grain to the Egyptians, but evidently showed no concern for his family in Canaan. Joseph may conceivably have expected their arrival in Egypt to purchase food, this being part of some master plan he had devised, but there is nevertheless an element of callousness in his behavior. Even after Joseph encountered his

⁴ See also the discussion of this point in the Hebrew journal *Megadim*: Y. Bin-Nun, "Division and Unity: Why Did Joseph Not Send a Message to his Father?," *Megadim* 1, pp. 20-31; the response of Y. Medan in *Megadim* 2, pp. 54-78, and Bin-Nun's reply on pp. 109-110; together with the response of Y. Spiegel in *Megadim* 5, pp. 93-94, where an early source for this approach is presented. See also Moshe Soller, "Why No Message From Joseph to His Father?," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 26/3 (July-Sept. 1998) pp. 158-167, and Hayim Granot, "Observations on the Character of Joseph in Egypt," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39/4 (October-December 2011) pp. 263-267.

brothers, he hid his true identity from them and seemed only to concern himself with the fate of Benjamin. His original idea, it appears, was only to make sure that Benjamin, his brother by blood, would enjoy the good life with him in Egypt.

On a moral and religious level, Joseph behaves most commendably, refusing the advances of Potiphar's wife (Gn 39.7ff) and consistently naming God as the source of his ability to interpret dreams (40.8, 41.16ff). However when it comes to his family in Canaan, Joseph seems apathetic, narrow-minded and selfish, as in his youth. While it is true that Joseph allows his brothers to take food home with them, he seems to be doing the absolute minimum that human decency prescribes. Although he weeps in private when he hears his brothers discussing their guilt (Gn 42.24) and when he meets Benjamin (43.30), Joseph always manages to overcome his softer side of his nature and continues harassing his brothers until he hears Judah's heartrending plea (Gn 45.1).

While Joseph is intent on subjecting his brothers to a series of tests and trials, it is Judah who brings a positive denouement to the story. He thus maintains his role of savior as in previous critical situations. When Joseph's life was in danger, it was Judah who saved him. The brothers plotted to kill Joseph and Reuben suggested that they throw him into an empty pit. Since it was too deep for him to climb out, Joseph would be exposed to the burning sun by day and to the freezing cold by night. He would probably die there, but (as Reuben explained to his brothers) they would not have his blood on their hands (Gn 37.22). Although they witnessed Joseph's anguish and heard him plead for his life, none of them paid heed (42.21) except for Reuben— who meant to release him from the pit

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when no one else was around (37.21-22, 29-30)— and Judah, who spotted an Ishmaelite caravan heading for Egypt, then thought of a way to save Joseph's life (37.26-27) and so, accidentally, made him, destined for

greatness. Judah could have done more to rescue Joseph, but his own career as a leader now began.

Later, when the whole family was starving and the brothers could find no way to obtain food other than by renouncing to Egypt with Benjamin, it was Judah who saved the day. Although Reuben offered his two sons' lives as collateral for Benjamin's safe return, Jacob still refused to have Benjamin taken to Egypt (Gn 42.37-38). They had thus reached an impasse. It was Judah who solved the problem by persuading Jacob to agree. Unlike Reuben, who offered his two sons' lives as security, Judah made *himself* responsible for Benjamin's safety, a more ethical proposal, and this touched Jacob's heartstrings (Gn 43.9-11).

Finally, when Benjamin was taken to Egypt and detained there as an alleged thief, it was again Judah who saved him. Judah's emotional but well-argued appeal to Joseph (44.18-34) stressed the fact that Joseph and Benjamin were Jacob's favorites (44.27) and that his own life was bound up with Benjamin's (44.20-31). On hearing this, Joseph could no longer control himself; he wept aloud and then made himself known to his dumbfounded brothers (45.1-3). Joseph now realized how greatly Jacob cherished Benjamin and himself, and how sincerely Judah loved Benjamin and their aged father. Judah's moving speech, his self-sacrificing readiness to free Benjamin, and his exemplary courage made a deep impression on Joseph and his brethren. The hatred he felt for them was at last dispelled, giving way to affectionate reconciliation, and Joseph brought his family to live in Egypt.

Chapters 37–50 of Genesis show that the fate of Joseph and his family was changed by Judah. He, rather than Joseph, is the true hero of this story. It was Judah who saved Joseph's life, who secured grain for his family by persuading Jacob to send Benjamin with him to Egypt, who volunteered to sacrifice himself for Benjamin, and who brought about the reconciliation through his impassioned plea. Joseph responded by supplying wagons to bring his family from the hardships of Canaan to the comforts of Egypt.

How did Judah transform himself from the failed rescuer of chapter 37 into the selfless leader of chapter 44? That is explained in chapter 38, which fits

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organically into the whole scenario, allowing us to observe Judah's developing sense of leadership and responsibility. He at first ignores his daughter-in-law's plight, but by the end of the episode he admits that he was wrong and had not lived up to his responsibilities (Gn 38.26). When his shameful behavior is exposed and he is thoroughly discredited, Judah makes no attempt to obscure or deny his culpability. Instead, he bravely acknowledges it and repents.⁵ Having learned the lesson of his earlier failure to save Joseph, he must now assume the mantle of a responsible leader and do what is right, even when it is hard for him. This chapter marks a turning point in Judah's life, after which the narrative shows him leading his brothers in a proper and successful way.

Later, when Jacob gathers his sons together before his death, giving each of them his evaluation and prediction (49.8-12), Judah receives an accolade higher than those awarded to Joseph and his other brothers, for Judah will become their leader and rule Israel (49.8). An interesting

and dramatic feature here is Jacob's prediction: *Your father's sons shall bow down before you* (49.8). An omen in Joseph's dreams (37.6-9) is now attached to Judah. Jacob chooses it for Judah when he blesses to his sons, even though Joseph, not Judah, is viceroy of Egypt at the time. It signifies that authority will be transferred from Joseph to Judah.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet so that tribute shall come to him and the homage of peoples be his (49.10). The Chosen People have two designations: Israel and the Jews. The name "Jew" comes from Jacob's fourth son, Judah, rather than Reuben, Joseph or the other sons. As history has shown, Judah and his heirs played a leading role in the development of the Israelites. Judah's tribe headed all the others and his descendants, from King David onwards, were the nation's rulers.

Chapters 37-47 of Genesis are widely regarded as the "Joseph Narrative," and Joseph does appear in them as the leading figure. However, the person who undergoes a real transformation and development of character, emerging as the active hero of those chapters, is in fact Judah.

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⁵ Judah is sometimes criticized for being cold-blooded and ruthless in his judgment of Tamar (38.24). In fact, this is a misinterpretation of the procedure dealing with women who had committed adultery (Lv 20.10). Although such punishment may seem cruel to the modern reader, Judah passed this sentence because he was faithful to the religious laws that would later be promulgated in Leviticus.