

TAMAR AS THE UNSUNG HERO OF GENESIS 38

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the character of Tamar in Gen 38. By tracing her positive characterization throughout the passage, it is argued that she is the hero of the story. Despite her powerless status, Tamar courageously risks her life and honour for the good of the community, overcoming major social limitations and procuring the enviable position of matriarch of the tribe. After presenting Narrative Criticism, this methodology is applied to a detailed narrative analysis of Gen 38. Next, the characterization of Judah and Tamar and examined individually. Judah emerges in a rather negative light and serves to further highlight Tamar’s positive characterization. Tamar’s traits are presented one-by-one and it becomes evident that indeed, she achieves heroic status.

To Dr. Mark Boda
for his unrelenting dedication and encouragement until my completion,

To Dad (Walter), Mom (Wendy), Elea and Larissa
for being a wonderful and supportive family,

And to my dearest, best friend.

Thank you.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible Commentary
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
BCOT	Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
CC	A Continental Commentary
CEC	A Critical and Exegetical Commentary
CTM	Currents in Theology and Mission
DBI	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation</i> . Edited by R. G. Coggins and J. L. Houlden. Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990.
DBL	<i>Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew</i> . Edited by James Swanson. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997.
DTI	<i>Dictionary of Theological Interpretation</i> . Edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
EBC	The Expositor's Bible Commentary
EHS	Expositions of Holy Scripture
IBD	<i>The Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by J. D. Douglas and N. Hillyer. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
ILB	Indiana Literary Biblical Series
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
LT	Literature and Theology
NIC	New International Commentary – Old Testament Series
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OBS	Oxford Bible Series
PBC	People's Bible Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

INTRODUCTION

Genesis 38 is an ancient Hebrew story about Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-law. Tamar is a worthy character to research. Despite her powerless status, she courageously risks her life and honour for the good of the community, overcoming major social limitations and achieving heroic status, thus procuring the enviable position of matriarch of the tribe.

This thesis argues that Tamar is the hero of Gen 38. Recognizing Tamar as a biblical hero is relevant, as her story demonstrates that a Gentile woman can achieve heroic status and secure a place of power, significance and dignity in the Hebrew patriarchal society. Particularly, she is used to save the line of Judah, from which the royal line would emerge. Tamar's heroic status indicates that YHWH uses Gentile women to fulfil his plan for humanity. Theologically the inclusion of such "outsiders" in the fulfilment of God's plan is a theme developed further in the New Testament. Thus, the study of the character of Tamar in this story is an important contribution to biblical studies.

To argue that Tamar is the hero of Gen 38, this thesis begins by establishing Narrative Criticism as the most appropriate methodology. Part I details this methodology and describes its various components. It also establishes the need for this study by illuminating the limited biblical scholarship that focuses on a narrative perspective of Gen 38. Having established the methodology and past scholarly work on the present area of research, Part I concludes with presenting the thesis statement.

In Part II, Gen 38 is examined in a verse-by-verse analysis that illuminates the various narrative components of the passage. After this analysis, the characterization of

Judah and Tamar is studied in detail. After considering the definition of a literary hero, Tamar is presented as the hero of Gen 38.

PART 1: METHODOLOGY

This first of two parts presents the methodology used to study the Judah-Tamar story in this thesis: Narrative Criticism.¹ Chapter one traces the history and development of Narrative Criticism. Chapter two provides a close examination of the major components of Narrative Criticism, emphasizing characterization. Finally, chapter three presents my particular methodology in a systematic procedure. The conclusion provides a summary of Part I.

¹ My description of Narrative Criticism follows Berlin (*Poetics*, 16) by “limiting the range of texts to narratives in biblical Hebrew from a circumscribed time period and preserved in the form in which they appear in the Massoretic Text.” The Hebrew narratives are primarily the collection of stories that extend from Genesis through to 2 Kings (*ABD*, 4:1023).

Chapter 1: History of Biblical Interpretation and Narrative Criticism

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the various biblical approaches that have led to Narrative Criticism over the past century. It then discusses the arrival of Narrative Criticism and its main distinctives.

Literary study of the narrative texts of the Bible has developed significantly over time. Traditionally, this study was dominantly diachronic, whereas now it is dominantly synchronic.² The diachronic approach “examines the historical development of literature and is concerned with changes over time.”³ The synchronic approach focuses “on one stage (usually the final form of the text), regardless of its prehistory.”⁴ Until recent times, biblical scholarship has held an “almost exclusive preoccupation with the sources (literary and oral) and historical events behind biblical stories.”⁵

A major shift away from the focus on source and historical criticism occurred in the past century. Early signs of this shift are found in redaction criticism, where supposed changes made by the editor were studied and the attempt was made to examine the intent of the text produced by the editors. Nevertheless, as major approaches to the Bible, source, form and redaction criticism all functioned on the assumption that the meaning of the text was to be found “outside of the text itself in its origin or background.”⁶ In this sense, the new literary approach would represent a revolutionary change.

In the 1940s and into the 1950s New Criticism arose, a literary theory that accepted the literary text as “self-sufficient.”⁷ It distinguished itself by evaluating the text by itself, aside from external outside information. Meaning was not to be determined by

² Longman, *Foundations*, 22.

³ Longman, *Foundations*, 22.

⁴ Longman, *Foundations*, 22.

⁵ Parry, “Narrative Criticism,” 528.

authorial intent, but by form and structure.⁸ New Criticism was a significant move away from traditional critical methods in that it did not require extra-textual information; the text-in-itself was elevated to the primary concern of scholars.⁹ Other text-centered approaches such as Russian formalism placed increased emphasis on structure and form. However, as Amit observes, “although these scholars noted the close association between content and form, their work still lacked a comprehensive view of the biblical story and did not deal with the subject systematically.”¹⁰

Soon after New Criticism, Structuralism arose as an attempt to introduce a scientific element into literary studies.¹¹ Structuralism was concerned “about the way in which meaning is perceived through the structures of human cultural systems.”¹² It sought to “provide literature a method of analysis that could be demonstrated and repeated.”¹³ Early structuralists were concerned with the underlying structure of syntax that governs the narrative.¹⁴ In Structuralism, “the meaning of the work [was] found in the convention rather than the intention of the author.”¹⁵ How various levels of meaning were connected and how the text itself revealed the meaning were foundational.¹⁶ It was the task of the reader to decode the text, to decipher its inherent meaning.¹⁷ Structuralism declined after the 1970s, but it had advanced biblical studies toward the contemporary

⁶ Longman, *Foundations*, 24.

⁷ Longman, *Foundations*, 26.

⁸ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 7.

⁹ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 9.

¹⁰ Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 11. Sternberg (*Poetics*, 7) comments that current proponents of a literary approach are “for the most part children of the New Criticism, inheriting its emphasis on the direct encounter with the text.”

¹¹ Longman, *Foundations*, 30.

¹² Barton, “Structuralism,” 214.

¹³ Longman, *Foundations*, 30.

¹⁴ Longman, *Foundations*, 31.

¹⁵ Longman, *Foundations*, 32.

¹⁶ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 9.

¹⁷ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 10.

narrative approach by an even greater focus on the text as final and whole and on the intricate structure of the text.

Reader-centered literary approaches also had their due influence on Narrative Criticism. Rhetorical criticism, used as far back as Aristotle, “seeks to understand the means through which literary works achieve particular effects on their readers.”¹⁸ Narrative scholars may read the text from the perspective of a supposed implied reader, such as the Israelite exiles.¹⁹ Its elucidation of rhetorical devices and methods of literary persuasion is very beneficial to Narrative Criticism. Unlike rhetorical criticism, however, Narrative Criticism denies that “the meaning of a work of literature... should be understood primarily in terms of the persuasive effect that its rhetorical strategies are expected to have on its intended audience.”²⁰

Other forms of reader-centered approaches have arisen, such as that of Gunn and Fewell.²¹ Reader-centered approaches to biblical studies emphasize the role of the reader in creating the meaning of the text, contrary to a fixed meaning established by the narrator.²² Thus, an inevitable variety of interpretations is held as equally valid. Yet, interesting perspectives of the text can emerge, such as a feminist perspective.²³

Thus, a variety of influences led to the development of Narrative Criticism and continues to shape its contemporary application. While Narrative Criticism is not a new

¹⁸ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 10.

¹⁹ Green (*How Are the Mighty Fallen?*) discusses the concept of the Hebrew narratives being written for a specific audience (implied readers) in her book.

²⁰ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 11.

²¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*.

²² Barton, “Structuralism,” 215.

²³ Lategan, “Reader Response Theory,” 627.

approach to Scripture, in recent times a narrative approach has been reintroduced.²⁴ At this point, we will examine the distinctives of Narrative Criticism.

Arrival of Contemporary Narrative Criticism

The modern form of Narrative Criticism distinguishes itself from past scholarship in a variety of ways. Unlike previous methodologies that focused on the literary aspects of the biblical text, Narrative Criticism is the first real *systematic* application “of the new science of literature.”²⁵ Although scholars have been interested in literary aspects of the biblical text for centuries, until recent times “they have not been primarily interested in the Bible’s literary qualities *per se*.”²⁶ Through Narrative Criticism, Jewish and Christian scholars are able to use literary means to find theological meaning and significance and secular scholars are able to focus on the text as literature.²⁷ Indeed, Narrative Criticism helped evangelical exegetes fulfil both theological and literary aims.

In a presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1968, entitled “Form Criticism and Beyond,” James Muilenburg drew attention to the importance of a literary perspective of Scripture and for scholars to move beyond form criticism.²⁸ Scholars gradually began to respond to Muilenburg’s appeal, although more work was accomplished in New Testament studies than Hebrew Scriptures. Of note is a study in the art of storytelling by Jacob Licht in 1978. One of the landmark introductory books often referenced as such is Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative* in 1981. In this book, he emphasized several aspects of biblical narrative, most notably, type scenes. Soon after, Meir Sternberg wrote *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985). In the years that

²⁴ Muilenburg (“Form Criticism and Beyond,” 8) specified that Narrative Criticism is “an activity that extends... from the time of Jerome and before and continuing on with the rabbis and until modern times.”

²⁵ Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 12.

²⁶ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 3.

followed, many more scholars produced books on narrative methodology, such as Leland Ryken's book, *How to Read the Bible*, in 1984. Scholarly work kept expanding to include an increasing number of elements of narrative theory and demonstrated the approach through direct application to the text.²⁹

Beyond Historical Approaches

The narrative critical approach presents a clear break from other historical biblical approaches in three distinct ways. To begin with, Narrative Criticism denies the pre-eminence of some of the main tenets of traditional biblical scholarship. First, Narrative Criticism denies the concern to establish the sources of passages within the text.

Sternberg writes, "The sad truth is that we know practically nothing about biblical writers—even less than about the processes of writing and transmission—and it looks as though we never will."³⁰ The vast amount of scholarship that has contributed to the effort of source criticism has not produced a great amount of biblical insight.³¹

Narrative Criticism also denies the importance of studying the historical accuracy of the biblical text. A historical-based reading of the text focuses on the text as a resource for understanding ancient events by employing critical methods, including source, form and redaction criticism. This approach to the text finds fault with discrepancies within parallel biblical passages or with non-biblical historical accounts. In contrast, Narrative Criticism is concerned with *how* a text presents material, not just *what* the text states.³²

Furthermore, Narrative Criticism denies that the text is incoherent. For a long time, biblical scholarship has considered portions of the text to be problematic,

²⁷ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 3.

²⁸ This address was published as: Muilenburg, James. "Form Criticism and Beyond." *JBL* 88 1 (1969) 1-18.

²⁹ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 3.

³⁰ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 64.

repetitious or apparently out of place because the passages were difficult to understand. Narrative Criticism regards such passages as complex. There is an underlying assumption that repetitive lines, duplicate accounts and differences in parallel passages are intentional and so an effort is made to understand their importance and significance, rather than assume they arose from a scribal error or later editor's unwarranted insertion.³³ Thus, Narrative Criticism suggests methods of resolving "problems" in complex and difficult passages.

Distinctives

There are three main distinctives of Narrative Criticism. First, it emphasizes text-centered and reader-centered perspectives of the text.³⁴ Second, Narrative Criticism studies the biblical text in its final form, focusing on a synchronic study of the text and not its developmental process or sources.³⁵ Rather than dividing the text according to the assumption that it has emerged from several distinct sources (e.g., the J, E, D, P source discussion) and should be viewed "as a patchwork of fragments," Narrative Criticism approaches the text as a unified whole.³⁶ Another landmark advantage of Narrative Criticism is how it has illuminated the artistic value of the text, presenting it as "an art form, characterized by beauty, craftsmanship and technique."³⁷ Through Narrative

³¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 5.

³² Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 23. Also, Berlin, *Poetics*, 17.

³³ Provin, *1 & 2 Kings*, 35.

³⁴ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 14.

³⁵ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 9. Longman (*Foundations*, 5) suggests that this tenet is "the center of the claim that literary criticism is an entirely new approach to interpretation."

³⁶ Berlin, *Poetics*, 121; Longman, *Foundations*, 76; Provin, *1 & 2 Kings*, 35; Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 11; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 127.

³⁷ Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 23. This view is revolutionary, as the majority of commentary produced by biblical scholarship tends to overlook the aesthetic elements of the text.

Criticism, the reader is enriched not only by its content, but also its medium—its power to engage and entertain the reader.³⁸

Potential Weakness of Narrative Criticism

There are several potential weaknesses of Narrative Criticism. There is the possibility of overemphasizing the literary aspect of the Bible at the expense of its historical element.³⁹ A scholar may misuse or manipulate the text to justify a particular agenda.⁴⁰ Narrative Criticism may also be accused of arrogant disregard for past scholarship.⁴¹

Summary

This chapter has traced the history of biblical scholarship in the last century. Past methodologies have dealt inadequately with Hebrew narratives. In the last 25 years, Narrative Criticism has developed, partially due to advances in scholarship and partially in response to weaknesses in other approaches. Narrative Criticism has distinct features that address the specific needs of the Hebrew narratives, beyond the capability of other biblical approaches. Since the aim of this thesis is to focus on characterization, Narrative Criticism is the methodology best suited for this study. Having established that Narrative Criticism is the most appropriate methodology, we will study the components of Narrative Criticism in detail.

³⁸ Provin, *1 & 2 Kings*, 21. Longman (*Foundations*, 68) notes six important functions of a text: historical, theological, doxological, didactic, aesthetic and entertainment.

³⁹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 8.

⁴⁰ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie (*Mark*, 5) note such scholars can also enlighten the world of biblical scholarship with a fresh perspective or biblical themes traditionally overlooked.

⁴¹ Berlin, *Poetics*, 19; Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 102.

Chapter 2: Narrative Criticism

This thesis will now examine the components of Narrative Criticism as they pertain to ancient Hebrew narratives, emphasizing characterization. There are four main sections: Perspective, Structure, Narrative Technique and Characterization. These components are examined individually, although they are certainly interrelated. The section on perspective describes the role of the narrator and the reader. Structure includes the setting (time and place), plot (organization) and unity of the passage. Narrative technique describes linguistic elements of the text, the narrator's control over details and narrative gaps, and the use of repetition, parallelism and irony. The final section presents the aspect of character and characterization. This addresses the heart of biblical Hebrew narrative, namely, humanity's relationship to each other and YHWH.

A. Perspective

The first element of Narrative Criticism to be considered is perspective. Hebrew narratives were written by authors and further developed by editors. However, we have no access to these original individuals who authored and edited the text, except that these "real," or literal, authors and editors formed the perspective of the narrator. The narrator is considered to be the "implied," or literary, author. Narrative Criticism is more concerned with the implied author (similar to the narrator) than the real authors and the editors. Indeed, the narrator is the most important influence on the text. All former and present readers of the text also interact with the text, deciphering—even creating—its meaning.

Authors and Editors

The author and editors were the individuals who literally wrote the text that was passed on to further generations. Although it is assumed that the text underwent a redactional process, we have no sure method of deciphering where the original author's or authors' work begins and where significant editing has taken place.¹ For this reason, it is beneficial to distinguish between the real author and the implied author of the text. The real author is the individual(s) who actually wrote the text, while the implied author is "the textual manifestation of the real author."² The real authors formed the perspective of the implied author and while we know almost nothing about the real authors, the implied author acts predominantly as the narrator whose perspective is an important and dominant influence on the narratives. In Hebrew narratives, the difference between the real author and implied author is of little significance, since we rarely encounter the real author.³ The role of the real authors and editors, then, was to construct carefully the implied author's perspective to communicate their desired message to the readership. Narrative criticism focuses on the implied author and the narrative perspective that is provided.

Narrator

In biblical studies, the implied author and narrator are most often considered one. It is important to note that the narrator is not the implied author, but is "only one of the elements created by the implied author."⁴ Generally the narrator assumes the voice of the implied author, yet statements such as "...as it is said today, 'in the mount of the LORD'" (Gen 22:14) remind the reader that the implied author has a voice of his own that he

¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 5; Sternberg, *Poetics*, 64.

² Longman (*Foundations*, 84) defines the implied author: the "author as he or she would be construed, based on inference from the text."

occasionally inserts into the text. Thus, the narrator speaks for the implied author, but is not “identical with the implied image of the artist.”⁵ Since Narrative Criticism is concerned more with the narrator than the individuals who influenced, wrote or compiled the text, the analysis of the narrator is more important than the influence and individual contributions of the authors or the editors. From this point forward, therefore, we will refer to the efforts, aims and work of the narrator, assuming that behind the narrator, of course, are the efforts, aims and work of the authors and that the narrator is only an element of and not synonymous with the implied author.

The personal identity of the narrator is usually unknown.⁶ For the sake of convenience and based on the sociological assumption that ancient writers were likely male, we refer to the narrator as male. In addition, it is assumed that the narrator is from the ancient world and writes within this framework. Despite the lack of personal information, Narrative Criticism establishes several principles for evaluating the perspective of the narrator.

We can assume that the words of the narrator are always trustworthy.⁷ The world of science, history and even theology may contest the facts that the narrator presents, but in the biblical context in which he communicates, the perspective of the narrator must be taken as the “truth.”⁸ The narrator should be trusted to inform the reader of what has truly

³ Culpepper (*Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 7) states that there is no difference between the point of view of the narrator and the perspective of the implied author.

⁴ Booth, *Rhetoric*, 73.

⁵ Booth, *Rhetoric*, 73.

⁶ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie (*Mark*, 40) note that the narrator is “not a character in the story [and] there is no identity, social location, or place in time and space” that directly provide us with any explicit knowledge about him.

⁷ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 51. This is a general principle in the Hebrew narratives. (In the book of Ecclesiastes, for example, there are passages that suggest competing narrators.) Some may contest this assertion, but I accept this as a principle, following most Jewish scholars.

⁸ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 51.

happened, despite any retelling of the event from the perspective of the characters. The narrator tells the audience the true words of the LORD, despite how a prophet may present them.⁹ In this sense, the perspective of the narrator provides a standard by which we may weigh the events, dialogue and action of the narrative.

Throughout Hebrew narrative, it is evident that the narrator is usually an omniscient member outside of the story.¹⁰ Without the boundaries of space and time, the narrator is able to communicate a great deal of privileged knowledge.¹¹ He provides details of simultaneous events occurring in different locations. He also has knowledge of the past, present and future and often refers to each without hesitation. The omniscience of the narrator is most blatantly revealed in his knowledge of the thoughts, feelings, sensory experiences, emotions, will and motivations of various characters.¹² These are often provided through “asides” in the narration, “explaining a custom, translating a word or commenting on the story.”¹³ The omniscience of the narrator is a powerful and insightful force in the text.

A key element of the role of the narrator is to give shape to the text. This ensures that the desired theological message is communicated. Although the narrator is reliable and omniscient, he certainly does not disclose the whole truth, carefully selecting only those events that have some function in his narrative. Sternberg makes an important statement on the purpose of this selective process: “As the voice of the one and indivisible truth, in short, the narrator formally disavows not just all reconciliation but also, all knowledge of narratives at odds with his own, since even a distant nod at them

⁹ Amit, “Whom To Believe?” 101.

¹⁰ At times, though, the reader is provided with a limited perspective, as in Ezra, Nehemiah and Ecclesiastes.

¹¹ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 36, 40.

would saddle him with the unwelcome title of maker rather than shaper of plot.”¹⁴ On the other hand, at times, the narrator insinuates that a great deal of significant activity occurs outside of what is written. In this, “his statements about the world—character, plot, the march of history—are rarely complete, falling much short of what his elliptical text suggests between the lines.”¹⁵ The narrator has crafted the form, structure and linguistic elements of the text such that the final presentation of the text is an outstanding masterpiece that effectively communicates many messages within a relatively small space.

The narrator “guides the reader’s interpretation of the text by providing an ideological evaluation of events.”¹⁶ Textual clues prompt the reader to extract the often subtle message of the narrator. Rather than outright judgement, the narrator will subtly give his opinion by the way he presents the events, using an array of literary devices and terms that “are not neutral but are imbued with a powerful positive or negative charge and thus, while giving what appears to be a factual account of events, the narrator’s attitude is transmitted.”¹⁷ It may be noted that the control that the narrator maintains “is artistic (over his text and reader) but not existential (over the represented world and characters);” the narrator faithfully remains the most reliable source.¹⁸

Finally, the narrator is not by any means a neutral storyteller.¹⁹ The narrator has an overarching ideological point of view.²⁰ The text bears the mark of an ideology and a

¹² Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 36. Also, Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 20-21.

¹³ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 36.

¹⁴ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 128.

¹⁵ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 51.

¹⁶ Longman, *Foundations*, 88.

¹⁷ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 34.

¹⁸ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 125.

¹⁹ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 43.

theology. The narrator not only aims to record events, but also desires to communicate a message to the readership using literary devices to persuade the reader of his view. If the narrator approves of a character, the reader is usually persuaded to agree, for the reader sees the character through the narrator's "eyes."²¹ Realizing that the narrator is functioning within a specific framework helps the reader to discern the message that the narrator tries to convey.²²

Implied Readers

In response to the text, the perspective of the implied reader is of primary interest. Any individual who reads the text is a "real" reader, but the real author of the text had a particular audience in mind when the narratives were formed. The audience that the text was immediately intended to be read by forms the "implied" readership. An effort should be made to identify the rhetorical situation that the literary text addresses, and thereby understand the situation of the implied readership.²³ The reader "must examine the persons, events, objects, and relations that have called for the response."²⁴ Gradually, the perspective of the implied reader is constructed. For example, the implied reader is always situated in the culture and society of the ancient world. Usually the implied reader is a member of the patriarchal Hebrew society and has a sense of belonging to the chosen "people of God." The implied reader accepts the Scriptures as sacred and, in general, understands activities of human life and the events of history to be a part of YHWH's

²⁰ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 36. Culpepper (*Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 32) states: "no narrator can be absolutely impartial; inevitably a narrator...will prejudice the reader toward or away from certain characters, claims, or events and their implications."

²¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 16. For example, the narrator believes that the great YHWH is a good Creator God who redeems humanity, caring and providing for the outcast and disadvantaged and bestowing special blessing on Israel. Thus, the narrator is always attempting to place YHWH in a positive and powerful light.

²² These are just two of the biases of the narrator, not an exhaustive list.

²³ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 11.

²⁴ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 11.

divine plan. Uncovering the perspective of the implied reader leads the observer to an appropriate interpretation and application of the text and thus, it provides a control on contemporary readers.

Contemporary Readers

In all of this, the contemporary reader has the important role of applying the meaning of the text to modern day situations. Contemporary readers can greatly benefit from a narrative approach because it is quite simple in many respects. The reader benefits from knowledge of the ancient Hebrew language because it allows for a closer reading of the text. As Berlin states, Narrative Criticism “seeks its rules and principles from within literature itself, without recourse to sciences outside of literature, such as psychology, sociology, etc.”²⁵ A contemporary reading of the text must always follow the implied reading.

All readers of the biblical narrative texts have a responsibility. One of these is to understand the conventions of Hebrew narrative and to see their significance for the meaning of the text.²⁶ The reader deciphers the meaning of the text and may construct its particular significance and application.²⁷ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie rightly state, “given the nature of stories and the limitations of reader perspectives, it is not possible to provide one correct and objective understanding of a story,” and add, “The goal is to be as faithful as possible and to learn from other interpretations as well.”²⁸ The literary elements of the text should be the dominant indications of meaning, for the narrator guides the reader to

²⁵ Berlin, *Poetics*, 16.

²⁶ Amit, “Whom To Believe?” 93-102. For example, the reader has a responsibility to believe the narrator over and above other characters.

²⁷ Longman, *Foundations*, 19.

²⁸ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 148.

properly interpret the text by leaving clues to his meaning of events through the various narrative elements discussed in the following chapter.

This section on perspective has focused on the roles of the narrator and reader. Although we do not know the personal identity of the narrator, in general Narrative Criticism assumes that the narrator is trustworthy, omniscient, gives shape to the text, is biased, writes in a variety of narrative types and has various aims. This concept of the narrator enables the reader to assume a particular approach to the perspective of the text, one that accepts the narrator as a reliable source. The contemporary reader also has the important role to decipher the meaning of the text and responding appropriately. The next section of this chapter closely examines the conventions of the text.

B. Structure

The structure of the narrative is its overall organization. This section will focus on the setting, plot and unifying elements of the Hebrew narratives. Structure is important in that it provides the context of the story, ordering of events and details within the story and grounds the passage within the greater framework of the book and genre. Narrative Technique and Characterization are discussed afterward.

1. Setting

Every narrative is written with a particular setting. The setting provides a time and space within which the story occurs. Also, the setting presents certain cultural, sociological and historical assumptions and a context that has influence on the events and characters.²⁹ The text itself may not provide all of this information, but an important aspect of Narrative Criticism is the context that *is* provided by the time and space of the setting.

Time is an essential component of the setting. Amit declares, “[time] is a central value in biblical literature as a whole,” emphasizing its “calculated and deliberate nature.”³⁰ As Bar-Efrat states, “a narrative cannot exist without time.”³¹ Textual indications through verb shifts and temporal expressions mark time and denote its various relations.³² The narrator is very intentional about the element of time; he “chooses the words, builds the sentences and constructs the paragraphs, paying careful attention to their size so as to create a dynamic rhythm, which is also a function of time.”³³

There are two kinds of time within a narrative: “objective time outside it (narration time) and literary time inside it (narrated time).”³⁴ Events described in the text are presented as happening at a certain literal time—narration time. From a Narrative Criticism perspective, the exact historical time is usually of less importance than the narrated time, which is the point and time of the event in the text. It is key to observe that “since the narrative is revealed to the reader gradually, the [narrator] can exploit the reader’s temporary ignorance in order to heighten interest and tension.”³⁵ Thus, the narrator not only creates, but also, intentionally uses and manipulates time. Characters often enter the scene and leave at crucial moments, sometimes “just in time” and sometimes a minute too late.³⁶ The timing of a particular event, especially that of a prophetic word, can occur at a pivotal moment for a character.³⁷ Observing the speed that

²⁹ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 60.

³⁰ Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 114.

³¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 141.

³² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 144.

³³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 142.

³⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 143. Berlin (*Poetics*, 96) terms these as “the time of the action and the time of its telling.”

³⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 141.

³⁶ A prime example of the potential importance of timing occurs at 1 Sam 13:10, where Samuel shows up just after Saul finishing making a burnt offering.

³⁷ The timing of Micaiah’s declaration that Ahab would not safely return is located just before Ahab receives an arrow of death (1 Kgs 22:28, 35). The random arrow that hits Ahab is not just a coincidence or

events are told within a passage is often an indication of the important and most meaningful moments of the passage. When the text slows down and provides detail or dialogue it is usually an indication that the narrator is drawing attention to the particular section. Other details are important, but they will often be given in quick succession and communicated using few words. Two events occurring simultaneously in narration time may have an important connection or may create irony.³⁸ Finally, the narrator uses time gaps in narration for a variety of functions, discussed below in the section on plot.

Space is the second major element of setting. Space is important because, again, like time, events occur and people exist within space. Narration space is the physical location where the event takes place. Descriptions of place and objects that occupy space are usually not provided, so when descriptions are included in the text, they serve a function. Physical dimensions of an object may be given and the specifics of the dimensions may bear significance. Geographic locations and descriptions can add to the dynamics of the story. Place can serve a variety of functions and have symbolic importance.³⁹ Names of places often characterize the locations or events that occur there.⁴⁰ Place creates atmosphere, such as the nighttime, with its darkness and connection to sinful, secretive deeds.⁴¹ Though identifying the precise role of space within a narrative may be difficult, according to several scholars, “place is so significant that

simply “bad luck.” It is the timely fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken through Micaiah—regardless of how Ahab responded to the oracle, it was fulfilled.

³⁸ First Kings 18:4 is a prime example of this. While Jezebel is killing the prophets of the LORD, Obadiah is saving them. Not only are Jezebel and Obadiah working toward opposite ends, but Obadiah is the palace supervisor, subverting the efforts of the queen!

³⁹ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 60. A prevailing place-symbol is that of the Promised Land and the good life and hope that is entailed in its mention.

⁴⁰ Amit, “Whom To Believe?” 122.

⁴¹ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 59.

entire stories revolve around particular places... [and] may even be the leading figure of the story.”⁴²

Observing these shifts allows the reader to structurally divide the plot into scenes. The functions of time and space within the ancient Hebrew texts are interrelated. Bar-Efrat states that space “remains vague and undefined in biblical narrative” because it is never described in full. The narrator is interested in keeping the pace of the narrative moving forward, omitting elaborate descriptions of space that break the flow of the text by pausing narration time.⁴³ Relevant to structure, the shifts in time and space create “scenes” within the story. In summary, narration time and space are used to create an intentional background and context and this contributes to the setting, which in turn establishes a foundation upon which the plot will be developed. When the setting of time or space change, the shift establishes a new scene in the story.

2. Plot

Plot is a large and dominant aspect of narrative structure. The element of plot distinguishes narrative from every other biblical genre.⁴⁴ Aristotle claimed that plot is “the main organizing principle of a story” and should contain a beginning, middle and end, with some conflict arising that requires a resolution.⁴⁵ Within the introduction, the narrator often presents “all the important elements for the unfolding story,”⁴⁶ often with an exposition, providing the reader with important background information.⁴⁷ The introduction may also present a specific narrative perspective of the characters, plot and

⁴² Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 123, 125.

⁴³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 195-196.

⁴⁴ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 2.

⁴⁵ Fokkeman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 76.

⁴⁶ Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 34.

⁴⁷ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 360.

events.⁴⁸ The beginning or ending sometimes “contains different kinds of details from those that appear in the body of the story”⁴⁹ and this may be key to understanding the message of the narrative. Because there are rarely physical descriptions in Hebrew narrative, much of the middle of the plot is dialogue. Indeed, dialogue is very important; as Alter observes, “narration is often relegated to the role of confirming assertions made in dialogue.”⁵⁰ The narrator contributes to the plot by his own commentary, reporting events or providing necessary additional information. The ending of the plot will often bring meaning or fulfillment to the story and create a sense of completion or closure.⁵¹

More than simply a movement from beginning to middle to end, the plot traces tension within the story, creating a moment of contention and then working toward its resolution. Throughout the story, the tension builds until it is resolved at the end. The plot often incorporates a starting condition, complication, change, resolution and conclusion, represented by the formula ABXBA.⁵² Ryken presents a more complex analysis of plot by stating that a well-made plot is

a plot that unfolds according to the following pattern: exposition (background information), inciting moment (or inciting force), rising action, turning point (the point from which, at least in retrospect, the reader can begin to see how the plot conflict will be resolved), further complication, climax and denouement.⁵³

The element of dialogue and speech has a major role in Hebrew narrative. At a basic level, speech reports events, which move the plot forward. This has such a major

⁴⁸ First Kings 2:12 begins by stating that Solomon’s rule was firmly established. There will be threats to his kingship within the passage, but the introductory remarks assure the audience that the kingdom is under the control of King Solomon.

⁴⁹ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 36.

⁵⁰ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 65.

⁵¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 105.

⁵² Amit, “Whom To Believe?” 62.

⁵³ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 363. An example of a complex narrative is Josh 6-8, where a second conflict develops before the first one is resolved.

influence that Hebrew narrative is often “narration-through-dialogue.”⁵⁴ The narrator uses dialogue to slow down “the pace of the plot, at times delaying the advancement of the action and/or focusing on a particular character to accentuate the narrative moment or character.”⁵⁵ By slowing down the pace of the story, the dialogue highlights the focus of the story and indicates “key turning points or climaxes in the structural framework of a narrative.”⁵⁶ Speeches often explain or justify the particular actions of a character or why a character is acted upon or against.⁵⁷ Importantly, “speeches express the ideological message of the narrator.”⁵⁸ Sometimes the speech of a character contrasts the narrator’s perspective, providing another point of view. As will be discussed more fully below, speech provides characterization. A character’s words reveal thoughts, motives, desires and beliefs. Boda writes, “Through a speech the narrator is able to convey with simplicity the inner psychology and ideology of a character.”⁵⁹ Finally, the narrator uses speeches to contribute to the drama and liveliness of the passage and to provide information in a creative manner.⁶⁰

In narrative texts, there are different modes for presenting text. Here we consider four major narrative types.⁶¹ Direct narrative is a “simple reporting of the events, usually in third person” and often introduces and concludes a story.⁶² Dramatic narrative uses speech and dialogue to report the actions of the characters and present the plot.⁶³ Most

⁵⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 69.

⁵⁵ Boda, “Prayer,” 6.

⁵⁶ Boda, “Prayer,” 6.

⁵⁷ Boda, “Prayer,” 6.

⁵⁸ Boda, “Prayer,” 6.

⁵⁹ Boda, “Prayer,” 6.

⁶⁰ Boda, “Prayer,” 6.

⁶¹ Alter (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 81) presents three categories of narrative mode: exposition, narration proper and dialogue. Licht (*Storytelling in the Bible*, 29-33) presents similar categories to ones described here, but with slightly different terminology: straight, scenic, descriptive and comment narrative.

⁶² Boda, “Prayer,” 3; Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 43.

⁶³ Boda, “Prayer,” 3; Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 44.

Hebrew narratives are a combination of multiple narrative types, with the plot continually moving forward. Descriptive narrative is a pause in the flow of the story to describe something, often a place or garment.⁶⁴ Declarative narrative is another type of pause to give the reader an “inside” perspective or commentary on a situation or character.⁶⁵ The narrative types are intermingled in every story and serve a variety of purposes. Boda notes, “the narrative types have each been associated with specific functions, with direct narrative used to advance the plot, dramatic and descriptive narrative to draw rhetorical focus by reducing the story’s pace and sparking the imagination, and declarative narrative to offer clarification for the interpretation of the story.”⁶⁶

There are several major types of plot in narrative. Most ancient Hebrew narratives are concentric. A concentric plot occurs when the characters are in more or less the same situation at the end as they were at the beginning, yet they have been influenced or changed by the events of the chapter and “the reality to which they return is not the same as it was.”⁶⁷ Other types of plot may also be at work. A comedy is “a story with a U-shaped plot in which the action begins in prosperity, descends into potentially tragic events, and rises to a happy ending.”⁶⁸ Many Hebrew narratives may be classified as epic, “a long narrative having a number of conventional characteristics,” such as the journey of a heroic figure, often protected by a supernatural Being.⁶⁹ Tragedy is a narrative passage that highlights the failing journey of a protagonist who encounters a misfortune resulting from poor choices of his or her part. A hero narrative is that which is formed “around the

⁶⁴ Boda, “Prayer,” 3; Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 45.

⁶⁵ Boda, “Prayer,” 3; Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 45.

⁶⁶ Boda, “Prayer,” 3.

⁶⁷ Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 36. This occurs in the passage contained within 1 Kgs 2:12-46; although several events occur, the kingdom is under Solomon’s rule at both the beginning and the end of the passage.

⁶⁸ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 360.

character and exploits of a protagonist who is exemplary and representative of a whole community.”⁷⁰ The ancient Hebrew text is so complex, however, that in most instances, several types of plot are interwoven into the story.

The plot of the narrative provides organization and structure. Studying the type of plot is helpful in guiding the expectations of the reader and understanding the character roles at work within the story. Laying out the structure of the plot often indicates the emphasis and climax of the story. The third element of structure is the unifying elements within the text that connect the stories together and to these we now turn.

3. Textual Unity

Unity occurs at all levels of the text. Small units of the overarching plot are connected through a variety of methods. Certain keywords, phrases or ideas may be repeated. The plot may simply be held together by the same main character appearing in each scene. In many instances, the narrator holds two passages together through contrast, emphasizing one passage or highlighting the “rightness” of one aspect of the passage over and above another.⁷¹ Broadly speaking, a given text is also related to the surrounding passages, and by extension, the book or genre.⁷² A common theological or didactic theme or message may work to unify a text on a large scale.⁷³ The unity present within Hebrew narratives provides the reader with the option to view, understand and interpret one passage in light of another passage.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 360.

⁷⁰ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 360.

⁷¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 109.

⁷² Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 36.

⁷³ Two stories unified by the theme of God’s provision are Elijah and the provisions of ravens and the widow and the provision of food (1 Kgs 17-18).

⁷⁴ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 363.

The setting, plot and unifying elements of the narrative provide organization and structure. Setting establishes a context for the story, plot is helpful in guiding the expectations of the reader and understanding the character roles at work within the story and unifying elements connect the story to surrounding narratives. This chapter will now address the issue of narrative technique in ancient Hebrew narratives.

C. Narrative Technique

The narrator uses several particular narrative techniques in ancient Hebrew narratives. One particular technique involves the usage of the Hebrew language. Another is the use of repetition. The final major technique presented in this section is narrative details and gaps.

1. Language

In Narrative Criticism, the study of the usage of language is essential and careful attention is given to the words employed within the text.⁷⁵ Not only is language a dominant feature of the structure of the text, but it also provides many insights that setting, plot and characterization do not encapsulate. In this, language usage produces “All sorts of meanings and messages... in the network of a text.”⁷⁶

The arrangement and pattern of words and phrases, including word order and choice, repetition and parallelism is often key. The order of words usually follows the standard grammatical structure, but inversion is often used for emphasis. In many instances, the Hebrew language offers several optional terms to communicate an idea, thus the choice of vocabulary is important.⁷⁷ The frequency of a word is significant when

⁷⁵ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 16.

⁷⁶ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 147.

⁷⁷ Alter, “Reading Biblical Narrative,” 19. An example of this is Bethsheba’s reply to Adonijah. First Kings 2:18b is rendered by the KJV as, “Well, I will speak for thee unto the king.” The NET translates, “That’s

a term is rarely or repeatedly used within a short passage. Word association is a key method that the narrator uses to deepen the significance of one passage by subtly referring to another similar situation with a potentially similar didactic value.⁷⁸ The way a narrator arranges the terms can be very illuminating.⁷⁹

Many ancient Hebrew terms have multiple meanings and at times, the narrator may use such a term to endow the text with multiple potential readings.⁸⁰ The function of the ambiguity it creates has both interpretive value and stimulates “curiosity, suspense [and] surprise.”⁸¹ Many amusing word plays are created by the use of terms with multiple meanings, each meaning providing a different perspective on the statement and often contributing to characterization; “an attentive and imaginative reader may recognize the interplay of both (or several) meanings, while the characters may perceive only one.”⁸² Symbolic language is applied through a variety of literary techniques, such as metaphor and allusion.⁸³

Finally, phonetics, the sound of the Hebrew language, is also sometimes used as a literary device. When the text is read aloud, word plays are created through homophone

fine. I'll speak to the king on your behalf.” A more literal reading of the MT would be: “Good. I will speak _____ you to the king,” with the blank being filled with either “for,” as it is often translated here, or equally “against.” If the translation “against” is employed, the whole direction of the plot is changed! In the previous chapter, the text reveals Bathsheba as an active mother whose interests are in the securing of Solomon's throne. It is far likelier that Bathsheba will speak *against* Adonijah, in the interest of her son once again.

⁷⁸ In 1 Kgs 1:6, the narrator associates Adonijah with Absalom by mentioning Absalom's name in connection with Adonijah and by describing Adonijah as handsome, a characteristic well-known of Absalom. The text will reveal that both sons of David would also share the same fate—death in connection with uprising against their father David to procure the throne.

⁷⁹ A type-scene exists in 1 Kgs 1: David's situation draws on the similar situation in Gen 27, where old, physically weakened Isaac is manipulated by his aggressive wife for the sake of a favored, younger son – a plot thickened by an oracle of the LORD spoken earlier.

⁸⁰ Alter (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 46) adds the comment: “Genesis... is in some sense a form of play. Play in the sense I have in mind enlarges rather than limits the range of meanings of the text.”

⁸¹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 259.

⁸² Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 156. Alter (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 46) warns against how “the creators of biblical narrative... sometimes unexpectedly capture the fullness of their subject in the very play of exploration.”

terms (similar sounding words), onomatopoeia (the formation of a word associated with what it refers to), alliteration (the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words).⁸⁴ Although this is not as immediately obvious as other literary elements, a learned Hebrew reader will be able to detect these masterful enhancements of the text.

Thus, the language of the text is very revealing. The narrator carefully uses language to provide characterization. It is an avenue for the narrator to send subtle messages to the reader through the range of meanings of the carefully selected terms. Linguistic elements add to the aesthetic aspect of the text, creating irony and humor within the text. Next, we look at the narrator's control over narrative details and gaps.

2. Details and Gaps

An important narrative technique is the selection and control over which details the narrator will include and what narrative gaps he will create. The Hebrew narrative text contains numerous details, while concurrently creating gaps by the lack of detail.⁸⁵ Every detail that is included has a role in the narrative; minor details may present key information or insight into the text.⁸⁶ Of note, the details that are *not* provided may also be important.⁸⁷ Berlin writes of the "artistic principle... that the suggestion of a thing may be more convincing than a detailed portrayal of it."⁸⁸ Sternberg emphasizes the literary device of gaps, namely, key bits of information that the narrator does not

⁸³ Bal, *On Story-Telling*, 53.

⁸⁴ Barber, "Onomatopoeia," "Alliteration."

⁸⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.

⁸⁶ This point is perhaps made most poignantly through the example of oft-ignored genealogies. The list of names in 1 Kgs 4 reveals aspects of the kingdom that play an important role after Solomon dies, namely, the mention of forced labour (4:6) and how the provisions of the king and his household are provided by the people of Israel (4:7).

⁸⁷ One of the most profound examples of this in biblical narrative is the oracle that David supposedly made concerning Solomon as heir to the throne (1 Kgs 1:17).

include.⁸⁹ They have the function of raising important questions and often create different interpretations of a passage based on the reader's speculation of the missing information.⁹⁰ Of course some gaps in the text are unimportant omissions, but the reader unconsciously fills others in. Without naturally filling in missing information the text would be discontinuous—"gap-filling consists exactly in restoring the continuity that the narrator broke."⁹¹ Taking such license is necessary, but may at times obscure the reader's interpretation. In general, the function of gaps "may be temporary, building suspense for a later revelation, or permanent, encouraging imaginative exploration of what remains a significant mystery."⁹² Details and omissions are important to consider because of their influence on the reader, the subtle but pivotal information they may provide, and the perspective of the narrator that they reveal. Now we turn to the narrative techniques of repetition, parallelism and irony.

3. Repetition, Parallelism and Irony

The narrator uses a variety of other techniques throughout the narratives. Of particular note is the frequent use of repetition, parallelism and irony. Repetition is regarded as "a guide to what the story is about."⁹³ A word or phrase may be repeated, creating emphasis, structure or alerting the reader to an important moment of plot or characterization or a didactic point in the narrative. Alter states how the biblical narrators "use *almost* verbatim repetition. The 'almost' is the aperture of defining meaning... a

⁸⁸ Berlin, *Poetics*, 136.

⁸⁹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 236.

⁹⁰ Sternberg (*Poetics*, 229) indicates that by illegitimately filling in gaps with contemporary assumptions implausible interpretations are sometimes created.

⁹¹ Sternberg, *Poetics*, 236.

⁹² Tannehill, "Narrative Criticism," 488.

⁹³ Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 59.

whole shift in perspectives and relationships.”⁹⁴ This could be as slight as “the switch from ‘man’ to ‘slave,’ or a reversal in the order of terms.”⁹⁵ Different trends, patterns or repetitions also occur within the larger plot.⁹⁶ Alter has developed the idea of a “type-scene,” a certain reoccurring event with particular motifs.⁹⁷

Closely related to the significance of repetition is the narrator’s use of parallels. There can be parallels within a verse, passage or book or between books.⁹⁸ Often, parallels are developed through repeated or similar terms and themes. Within the text, there is often an *inclusio*, that is, a similar subject, phrase or word at the beginning and end. Parallel episodes are often found in the text and importantly, “variations in parallel episodes are not at all random.”⁹⁹ A motif is a reoccurring element that functions as a textual indicator of a pattern within the text.¹⁰⁰

Irony is “a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very

⁹⁴ Alter, “Reading Biblical Narrative,” 27.

⁹⁵ Alter, “Reading Biblical Narrative,” 27, 29. When Rehoboam repeats the words of his younger advisors to the people, he wisely leaves out the first part of the phrase, which is very arrogant and rather vulgar (1 Kgs 12:10b, 14).

⁹⁶ In 1 Kings, there is a trend among the monarchs to repeat the sins of their fathers. In Israel, it is often said that the king walked in the sinful ways of Jeroboam and led the people of Israel to sin, just as he did. This is said of Baasha (1 Kgs 15:34), Zimri (1 Kgs 16:19), Omri (1 Kgs 16:26), Ahab (1 Kgs 16:31) and Ahaziah (1 Kgs 22:52). Also, often as a result of their sins of idolatry, the people of Israel and Judah continually face oppression and war at the hands of their enemies. This pattern intensifies as the plot continues beyond 1 Kings, until the people are eventually exiled at the hands of their enemies.

⁹⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 47-62.

⁹⁸ A major parallel in 1 Kings is the allusion to Deuteronomy. This is an intentional act of the narrator to draw attention to the fact that the kings of Israel and Judah did not obey the Law of Moses, but rather turned away from the LORD to the sins that Moses warned against. Since the simple telling of the Law did not persuade the people to obey it, the narrator of the book of Kings hopes that illustrating what happens to those who do not obey the Law *will* persuade them to change their ways. Particularly, there is a parallel event between the golden calf constructed under Aaron’s leadership, relayed in Exod 32 and Deut 9, and Jeroboam’s similar actions in 1 Kgs 12:25-32.

⁹⁹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 50.

¹⁰⁰ One example in 1 Kings is the presence of a priest of the LORD and a horn of oil in 1 Kgs 1:39. It is assumed that an anointing of a king is about to occur.

different significance.”¹⁰¹ A situation may arise that is the very opposite of what the reader expects.¹⁰² Dramatic irony occurs when the reader is privy to something that the character is not.¹⁰³ The character may act in a manner not in his or her best interests.”¹⁰⁴ Repetition, parallelism and irony are used within a passage to point to the narrator’s meaning.

There are many other narrative techniques used in ancient Hebrew narratives, but all of the major ones have now been covered. Now, having studied the perspective, structure and additional narrative techniques of the text, we turn to character and characterization.

C. Character and Characterization

In ancient Hebrew narratives, characterization is essential. The narrator uses all the components of Narrative Criticism to portray the character. This process is foundational because the narrator emphasizes the lives of characters for didactic reasons, using them as examples of how one ought or ought not to live. Thus, characters often embody the meaning of the passage. This section begins with an examination of the main elements of a character. Following this is a discussion on characterization.

Characters may be round and complex, with multiple features presented and may demonstrate a transformation or development of character over time. Minor characters are those who are simpler and “flat,” with only one or two features of their character provided.¹⁰⁵ Each agent in the text, however, has a “structural role in literature,”

¹⁰¹ Barber, “Irony.”

¹⁰² Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 361.

¹⁰³ Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 55.

¹⁰⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 125.

¹⁰⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 90.

with minor characters often “paralleling and highlighting the main ones, whether through correspondence or contrast.”¹⁰⁶

Archetypal characters are found throughout the text and are important to note because sometimes the narrator characterizes an individual by representing him or her as a certain type of character.¹⁰⁷ Recognizing the type of character being used allows the reader to build a set of expectations around the individual, which may or may not be fulfilled.¹⁰⁸ Sometimes characters transition between sympathetic and unsympathetic, as “many characters are in turn one and the other as the story unfolds.”¹⁰⁹ Major characters undergo some form of transformation or change.¹¹⁰ The narrator also uses foil characters—individuals who “set off or heighten another, usually by being a contrast but occasionally by being a parallel” figure.¹¹¹

A character is far more than simply a type. Since the text is about humanity, it is necessary to study characters as individuals, questioning the relation between their thoughts and motives with their reactions and behaviours.¹¹² Thus, biblical characters must also be examined on an individual basis by raising questions about their motivations, bringing about a sense of individuality and humanity to their person. This gives a deeper sense of significance and complexity to the character, enabling the reader to relate to the character, which brings further meaning to the text.

¹⁰⁶ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 86.

¹⁰⁷ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 26-27.

¹⁰⁸ Ryken (*How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 53) explains that a tragic character is one of essentially good character, but who experiences a change of fortune because of a fatal flaw; a punitive character is punished; a pathetic character experiences suffering despite innocence (usually moral); a comic character captures the reader’s sympathy and hope and in the end receives fortune and/or happiness; and a heroic character is traditionally one who accomplishes something great. A satirical character receives ridicule or rebuke (Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 72).

¹⁰⁹ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 72.

¹¹⁰ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 72.

¹¹¹ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 72.

¹¹² Wong, Interview by author, 15 March 2007.

Characterization is the method of representing an individual in the text through direct and indirect means.¹¹³ In narrative approaches to the text, characterization always receives a great deal of attention. Bar-Efrat notes the importance of characters, who “transmit the significance and values of the narrative to the reader, since they usually constitute the focal point of interest.”¹¹⁴ When an individual is first introduced into the text, his or her characterization begins immediately.¹¹⁵ There is a variety of ways that the text accomplishes characterization. Direct characterization is accomplished through the voice of the narrator, “while indirect characterization is the product of an analysis of the person’s discourse and his/her actions and conduct.”¹¹⁶

The narrator utilizes several methods of direct characterization. The most obvious are epithets and statements about the individual’s thoughts, motives, feelings or will. These asides reveal the attitudes, motives, goals and responses of the individual—in essence, their inner workings. It also “serve[s] as the basis for speculation that must be verified or disproved by means of other information supplied by the story.”¹¹⁷ Names are a dominant form of characterization, immediately creating a context in which to view the individual or place.¹¹⁸ Provin presents the importance of names of characters, stating, “names are commonly invested with a great deal of significance in the Old Testament, and can function as vehicles through which authors convey something of their own

¹¹³ Barber, “Characterization.”

¹¹⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 47.

¹¹⁵ An example of direct characterization occurs at 1 Kgs 15:3, where the complete characterization of Abijah is provided solely by the narrator. In the following passage, the audience is told of Asa. The narrator tells the audience that Asa followed the LORD, yet, indirect characterization is also present in that the narrator states that Asa expelled the male shrine prostitutes, destroyed the idols, deposed his grandmother from a royal position for making an Asherah pole and returned the gold and silver to the temple. These acts characterize Asa as a man who was serious about ridding the land of idolatry, regardless of jeopardizing personal relations, an inference potentially made by the audience.

¹¹⁶ Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 74.

¹¹⁷ Amit, “Whom To Believe?” 76.

viewpoint.”¹¹⁹ Throughout the narrative, the name of a character functions to describe the individual’s disposition or to provide important information about him or her. In this way, a single name provides information not stated in the text. It also indicates the narrator’s perspective. As Bar-Efrat notes, “The names or designations used to refer to the characters in the narrative also often reveal that the narrator has adopted the viewpoint of one of the characters.”¹²⁰ At important moments in the plot, the narrator will use a particular title or relation of a person to emphasize a point.¹²¹ Occasionally, the narrator will insert a physical description of the character to depict a particular characteristic reflected in the individual or to foreshadow a possibility for a character quality.¹²² Narrative silence and the inaction of a character are also of value, contributing to the reader’s portrait of the individual’s character.¹²³

Indirect characterization occurs through the individual or surrounding characters. The speech, action, responses, relationships and roles of an individual demonstrate personal abilities, skills, qualities and traits.¹²⁴ In the case of minor characters, “single actions necessarily serve to define the person” and are intended to “constitute the essential nature” of the individual.¹²⁵ Other characters also provide characterization. Their response and interaction with the individual not only reveal their own character, but may also enhance the reader’s understanding of the individual. Tribble suggests that the

¹¹⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 38, explains that when a name of a character is provided it suggests that the narrator desires to give that character a personality.

¹¹⁹ Provin, *1 & 2 Kings*, 21. It is no coincidence that Elijah, whose name means “YHWH is my God,” was a prophet during a time when the name of the LORD was sparse and one who boldly declared the word of YHWH, despite pending persecution.

¹²⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 36.

¹²¹ A prime example of this is the description of Bathsheba as “Uriah’s wife” even after she is married to David (2 Sam 12:10, 15).

¹²² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 195-196.

¹²³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 82.

¹²⁴ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 109.

¹²⁵ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 77.

reader “analyze difference in gender, nationality, and class as they function in literary analysis.”¹²⁶ The opening words of a character are also important, as Alter correctly deems them: “a defining moment of characterization.”¹²⁷ At certain key times, another character will cast judgement on the individual. Though the judgement may or may not be true, it influences the reader, especially if it comes from the mouth of YHWH or a prophet.

In summary, characters are present in every passage and should be understood both as type and as individual. Characterization allows one to understand the characters, which is the essential material of every narrative. This is accomplished through direct and indirect means, every character having a role in the text and every moment of characterization contributing to the overall analysis of the character. Having addressed the aspect of characterization, this detailed overview of Narrative Criticism is now complete.

¹²⁶ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 105.

¹²⁷ Alter, *David Story*, 42. This is illustrated through the life of Elijah. His opening words are to Ahab: “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word” (1 Kgs 17:1). As the narrative progresses, Elijah will continue to demonstrate his allegiance to the LORD, be associated with miraculous events and speak words that are *not* good news for Ahab.

Summary

Narrative Criticism is a systematic analysis of the literary qualities of the text.¹²⁸

It is distinguished by emphasizing text-centered and reader-centered perspectives of the text, studying the final form as the primary text, approaching the text as a unified whole and illuminating the artistic value of the text. Narrative Criticism provides an engaging approach to studying the Hebrew Scriptures. The role of the narrator is important because it determines the perspective from which the narrative is presented. Knowledge of the components of structure is also important, including setting, plot, unity and a variety of narrative techniques. Characterization allows one to understand the characters, which is the essential material of every narrative and the emphasis in this study.

¹²⁸ Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 12; Rhoads, Dewey and Michie, *Mark*, 3.

Chapter 3: Procedure

So far, this thesis has outlined the history of Narrative Criticism and detailed its various components. The next chapter will begin the study of Gen 38. As this thesis applies Narrative Criticism to the character of Tamar and Judah, it is important to articulate the particular procedure which has been used. This chapter describes the application of the methodology used in the remainder of this thesis.

In general, the procedure emphasises personal interaction with text before consulting scholarly works. This approach differs significantly from the notable procedure set out by Phyllis Tribble. She suggests beginning with a reading of the text and then immediately consulting scholarly works on the text.¹ The problem with consulting scholarly works at the onset is the possibility of stifling the reader's process of observation. It is similar to the difficulty posed by being given a full description of any other art piece. Once the piece of art is fully interpreted for the viewer, the viewer may have difficulty in making an independent interpretation. Yet, if an art piece is first freely examined and enjoyed, it is far likelier that the viewer will be able to form a preliminary opinion of the art piece and may make original observation. Then, reading commentary on the art piece will serve to further one's appreciation of it and provide a basis against which to weigh independent observations. As one who values the initial impact of the text on the reader and one who enjoys a creative and new perspective, I have independently studied the text first, following a different order of steps than Tribble suggests.

1. Pray. Study of Scripture ought always to begin with a sincere desire to allow the Spirit of God to guide one's thoughts and lead one to insights in the text. This is

especially helpful in preventing one from arriving at a conclusion that is unwarranted by the text. Also, it often produces insights and observations in the text that would otherwise go unnoticed. Before each study time and at each moment of confusion, tiredness, weariness or uncertainty, one should pause and pray once again.

2. Translate the entire passage from Hebrew into English.² This requires knowledge of the ancient Hebrew language, necessary for serious study of the Hebrew Scriptures.³ Consulting other sources should be limited to grammars, lexicons and electronic Hebrew language programs. As Tribble suggests, “use the same English word for the equivalent Hebrew word; do not translate a single Hebrew word by a variety of English words.”⁴ Every Hebrew term should be understood and analyzed. Verbs should be fully parsed and the variant meaning of all terms examined. Even though some meanings may not be immediately applicable, narrative word play may be at work in the text. While only one meaning can be reflected in the translation, other meanings can be footnoted and may be commented on at a later stage of study.

Several insights can be drawn at this point in the study. As familiarity with the text emerges, themes and key words may be observed. Every observation should be recorded in rough copy for later reference.

¹ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 101.

² Since there are various copies of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, it is necessary to decide which copy of the text to use. In this study, I did not use more than one ancient text, but this is a possibility. However Licht (*Storytelling in the Bible*, 62) suggests: “The only text one can safely comment up on is the one that has been handed down to us as the Hebrew Bible; any attempt to improve upon it (even where the Septuagint, or some other witness, might be available for the purpose) is too risky to be relied on.”

³ Tribble (*Rhetorical Criticism*, 101) states, “if you do not know Hebrew, despair not.” However, the Hebrew language is so key in analysing the text that to do so without a basic understanding of the text would be a monumental disadvantage.

⁴ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 105.

3. Read the entire Book of Genesis, preferably in one sitting. Read chapter 38 many additional times (at least ten), giving close attention to the characters.⁵ Write down any insights, questions and thoughts that come immediately to mind. It is surprising how powerful and influential the first reading of the text can be for an individual. This initial impression may be furthered solidified by future study or disregarded for a completely opposite conclusion.

4. Analyse the passage based on the principles of Narrative Criticism described in the previous chapter of this thesis without consulting any other resources. This independent exercise is important to acquaint the reader with the text and to establish a foundation for further study of the passage. As the following elements are reflected upon, special emphasis should be placed on how each applies to the main characters, Judah and Tamar. In the next stage of this procedure, conclusions will be made regarding Judah and Tamar, so it is best to focus on how each element relates to the characters from the beginning.

a) Perspective - What perspective of Judah and Tamar does the narrator provide? Consider narrative asides and what particular details are provided. Analyse how the narrator uses certain details and the presentation of events and characters to persuade the reader. How does the narrator judge these characters, directly and indirectly through other characters or events? Note any theological assumptions or any biases that are present in the passage.

b) Structure - How does the setting, plot and unifying elements of the passage contribute to Judah's and Tamar's characterization? Consider how the time and place create a particular context for the story. Does the narrated time function to emphasize a

⁵ Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 101.

certain moment in the story? Note the order and timing of events, including the entrance and exit of characters. Do simultaneous events create irony? Consider the element of space. Note any descriptions that may be present in the narrative. How do the physical locations bear significance? Does place represent a type? Analyze how shifts in time and space affect the plot. How does the plot of the story provide organization, in terms of beginning, conflict, climax, resolution and ending? Is there information provided at the opening of the passage that establishes a context for the story or is used at a later point? How does the introduction correspond to the rest of the passage and provide a narrative perspective? Note the focus and details of the plot. Trace how tension in the story is resolved. Determine the narrative and plot types present within the story and how they are used. Examine how unity is present at every level of the story. Are there certain themes and motifs that prevail? Consider the place of the story within the greater narrative.

c) Narrative Technique – Examine the different techniques that the narrator uses to convey meaning. Look at the language of the text. Are there any double meanings? Reflect on the specific terms chosen by the narrator where other more common terms could have been used and note any potential importance. Investigate what any symbols or metaphoric language may be representing. Contemplate on how each detail in the plot contributes to the story. Do narrative gaps impact the story? Search for patterns of repetition and parallel, and the presence of irony in the text. How do the characters in the story parallel, contrast or highlight one another? What do moments of irony reveal about Judah and Tamar?

5. Organize all the observations and notes collected up to this point. Begin to form a thesis statement and perspective of the passage. This is still a preliminary stage, but have the results of this independent component prepared to be evaluated.

6. Examine the characterization of the individuals in the passage based on the organized insights from the major components of the story presented above. Focus on Tamar and Judah, yet observe how the minor characters impact the story and influence the reader. Analyse how characterization is accomplished through direct and indirect means, assuming that every detail and moment of characterization is significant. How does the text reveal character, including the attitudes, motives, goals and responses of the individuals? How do speech, action, responses, relationships and roles of an individual demonstrate personal abilities, skills, qualities and traits? Overall, what judgements are made of the characters and from whose perspective? Are the individuals characterized by a particular character type? How should this impact the perception of the character? At this point, all preliminary observations should be organized and the characterization of Judah and Tamar analyzed.

7. Scholarly work should now be consulted. Compose a list of all sources to be researched. While reading through these sources, note where there is similarity and difference. Since there is not much scholarly work available on Gen 38, it is particularly important that all works be consulted. Use this scholarly work to adjust and supplement observations made during independent study.

8. Draw conclusions as to the characterization of Tamar and Judah as presented in the biblical narrative text, based on the results of both the independent and scholarly research. Support these conclusions by the plethora of observations and research

conducted. Demonstrate how the components of Narrative Criticism support these conclusions. In the end, there should be a detailed character analysis of both Tamar and Judah. Following the character analysis, state its significance and importance and how the character study brings to light the meaning and message of the passage.

At this point, the research is largely complete. The scholar may set out to write the thesis. This task will require the author to organize all of the research into logical and relevant chapters. Research material that is not immediately required for the thesis may be saved for potential use at a later time.

Chapter 4: Scholarly Work

Having discussed my methodology, this thesis will now illustrate the lack of scholarly work on Gen 38. By providing an overview of the major and minor narrative works available, it will be demonstrated that while narrative work has begun on Gen 38, there is no lengthy narrative study published to date.

Narrative Works on Gen 38

The first significant study of Gen 38 from a narrative perspective was by Robert Alter.¹ He emphasizes a few major repeated terms and their larger thematic purpose, especially the theme of recognition and the role of garments in the story. Alter presents these as intentionally crafted by the narrator, evidenced by “the exact recurrence at the climax of Tamar’s story of the formula of recognition, *haker-na* and *vayaker*, used before with Jacob and his sons.”²

He then moves to elucidate how these themes provide character highlighting and contrast. Alter comments that for Judah, it is “an exemplary narrative instance of the deceiver deceived... the narrator shows him exposed through the symbols of his legal self given in pledge for a kid... 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.”³ Having successfully moved from noting the purposeful technique of repetition to drawing points of characterization, Alter addresses the theologically important point that Judah has learned “through his own obstreperous flesh that the divinely appointed process of election cannot be thwarted by human will or social convention.”⁴

¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 4-12.

² Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10.

³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10.

⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10.

Primarily Alter uses Gen 38 to illustrate the presence and importance of the art of biblical narrative in the Hebrew text, especially the use of repetition. Importantly, for each of the points of literary interest upon which he draws, Alter elucidates the thematic justification for its presence in the text and ultimately, its theological significance.

Partially in response to Alter, Gunn and Fewell provide a reader-response narrative perspective on this story.⁵ They provide a number of narrative insights not mentioned by Alter, especially focusing on the characters Judah and Tamar, but emphasizing Judah and his characterization. Judah is presented in a very negative light: self-centered, irresponsible, unfaithful, controlling and exhibiting a double-standard. Tamar, on the other hand, is considered to be a thoughtful and careful planner. Even though their perspective of the characterization of Judah is harsh, they defend their stance well by citing many textual examples. Some of their comments, however, are mere psychologising of the text and are not substantiated with textual evidence.

Several other scholars have written short articles or sections of articles on a narrative perspective of Gen 38. Of these, only a few offer fresh insights. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes discusses the limits of patriarchy in the stories in 2 Sam 13 and Gen 38, doing a fine job of comparing the two Tamar characters and presenting the Tamar of Gen 38 as one who procures power and overcomes patriarchal oppression.⁶ James Williams makes two strong, yet brief points on the character of Tamar: (1) Tamar fulfills the role of the heroine, not the temptress and (2) Tamar has a symbolic function of positive counter-order, in that, although not loved by the patriarch, she has an important role in

⁵ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 34-45.

⁶ Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar," 135-156.

Israel's identity.⁷ Johanna W. H. Bos presents the story of Tamar as one that "challenges the notion that male initiative alone advanced the promises of God to the ancestors of Israel," emphasizing Tamar's overt deception as a counter to Alter's betrothal type-scene.⁸

Commentary on the narrative of Gen 38 before the early 1980s is very sparse and unsubstantiated. In the past, scholars accepted Gen 38 as an inserted document from a priestly source, thus, not requiring the same depth of study as the surrounding chapters.⁹ In their respective commentaries, Alexander Maclaren, Robert Neighbour and Joseph Parker do not even include a section on Gen 38.¹⁰ Past commentaries have generally only addressed the textual issues surrounding placement and source, and the connection between Gen 38 and the law.

Commentaries from the last twenty years tend to include brief narrative comments on Gen 38, particularly those by Victor Hamilton, Gordon Wenham and Claus Westermann.¹¹ However, most of the insights they provide are, more or less, taken from Robert Alter. Even recent books on women of the Bible, both academic and popular, do not contain a section on Tamar.¹²

Summary

This overview of scholarly work demonstrates that from a narrative perspective, Gen 38 has been grossly overlooked and, in particular, Tamar's character has been

⁷ Williams, *Women Recounted*.

⁸ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 37-49.

⁹ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 40.

¹⁰ Maclaren, *Genesis*; Neighbour, *Wells of Living Water*; Parker, *Genesis*.

¹¹ Hamilton, *Genesis*; Wenham, *Genesis*; Westerman, *Genesis*.

¹² For example, Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible*; Mathews, *Woman God Can Use*; Sakenfeld, *Just Wives*; Tribble, *Texts of Terror*; Tucker, *Women in the Maze*; Wold, *Women of Faith and Spirit*.

neglected. In light of the lack of resource on Gen 38 that acknowledges narrative aspects of the text, this present work is important.

Present Thesis

Having presented my methodology and past scholarly work of Gen 38, this thesis seeks to prove that in Gen 38, Tamar is the hero of the story. I will argue that Tamar is the hero of the story by providing an analysis of Gen 38 using Narrative Criticism and then analysing her characterization in the text.

PART II: GENESIS 38

Chapter 1: Detailed Analysis of Story

This chapter will present a summary of Gen 38 and then begin the analysis of the Judah-Tamar passage. Preliminary comments on the story will be provided under Background Information. Then, Gen 38 is analyzed verse-by-verse, emphasizing the points of characterization illuminated by the ideological perspective, structure and narrative technique of the text. Once the passage has been fully analyzed, the following chapter of this thesis will examine the characterization of Judah and Tamar, ending with a consideration of Tamar as hero.

A. Summary of Genesis 38

Genesis 38 presents the story of Judah and Tamar. After Judah leaves his father and brothers, he aligns himself with Canaanites. In a short period of time, Judah befriends a Canaanite man, marries a Canaanite woman and has three sons. Judah chooses a Canaanite woman named Tamar as a wife for his first son, Er. However, Er is wicked in the eyes of the LORD and is put to death by the LORD. Since he dies before Tamar is impregnated, his death leaves Er without an heir and Tamar barren and with an uncertain future.

Judah instructs his second son, Onan, to have sex with Tamar and provide an offspring for his brother. Onan does lay with Tamar, but purposely withdraws from her, preventing a pregnancy and inciting the fatal wrath of the LORD. Judah is concerned that Tamar is the cause of the deaths of his two sons. So, rather than give his third son, Shelah, to Tamar, he sends Tamar to her father's house to wait until Shelah is older.

Now Tamar is exiled from the family and must wait until the youngest son is grown. Yet, as time passes, it becomes evident that Judah does not intend to give his third son to Tamar. This leaves Tamar with few options. She is bound to stay unmarried because her rightful husband is the youngest son, Shelah (Deut 15:5-10). Yet, if Shelah is not given to her, she will be a barren widow for the rest of her life. This is a shameful and hopeless situation in her culture.

Judah's wife dies and, after the mourning period, he and his Canaanite friend travel to Timnah for the sheep-shearing festivities. Tamar seizes this opportunity to change her predicament. Positioning herself by the side of the road, she waits for Judah to pass by. As hoped, Judah regards her as a prostitute. There is a powerful interaction between the two characters. Judah initiates the meeting by approaching Tamar and requesting sex. He offers the pledge of a young goat in return. Tamar procures Judah's staff, cord and seal as payment until the pledge is delivered. Following their exchange of words, Tamar has sex with her deceased husband's father.

Tamar becomes pregnant and cleverly hides the identity of the father. Judah sends his Canaanite friend to fulfill his pledge of a young goat to the "harlot," but cannot find her. To avoid shame, he lets the matter remain unresolved.

Three months later, Tamar's pregnancy is reported to Judah. He immediately issues the verdict: Bring her out and burn her. Yet, Tamar publicly presents the pieces of identification that Judah gave her. It is thus discovered that Judah impregnated Tamar. Judah is given no option but to confess that Tamar was justified in her actions, since he did not give Shelah to her. Within a few short verses, Tamar is declared guilty of prostitution, condemned to an immediate death and then not only absolved, but also

declared righteous by Judah. Neither the narrator nor any of the characters condemn what she has done.

When the time comes for her to give birth, Tamar brings forth twins. Their rivalry within Tamar's womb for the honour of firstborn is a fitting conclusion to the story, reflecting the theme of struggle throughout this passage. Nothing more is said of Tamar or Judah in this passage, but the birth of a successor to Judah's line brings the story to its conclusion. In the end, Judah's line is continued and Tamar procures justice for herself.

B. Literary Context

Following the above summary of the story, this section will provide some preliminary comments on Gen 38. Appropriately, in light of the wealth of past commentary, this Narrative Criticism analysis of Gen 38 begins with the issue of the unity between Gen 38 and the surrounding chapters. The connection between Gen 38 and the Joseph novella (*toledoth* of Jacob, Gen 37-50) is discussed primarily because this has been the predominant issue addressed in commentary on Gen 38 and Narrative Criticism has made a significant contribution to this discussion. This commentary provides a good lead into the verse-by-verse analysis of Gen 38 that follows.

The particular location of Gen 38 and its relation to surrounding passages has been a widely discussed topic and a primary concern of scholarly commentary on the chapter for decades. Past scholarship did not recognize a connection between Gen 38 and surrounding chapters. In the last twenty years, Narrative Criticism has contributed a great deal to this topic. Narrative insights have persuaded scholars to now accept that the passages are intentionally related. Indeed, the main focus of Alter's commentary is the connection between Gen 38 and the chapter before and after.

Alter demonstrates how various elements of unity, namely the repetition of key terms and themes, relate Gen 38 to the rest of the text. First, he notes the repeated theme of recognition, used by the brothers before Jacob, by Tamar before Judah and thematically in the Joseph narrative.¹ The contrast between characters is highlighted by the theme of mourning. Reuben's "sincere sense of bereavement is expressed quite simply," while Jacob's mourning is depicted as extravagant.² Judah's reaction to the death of his two sons, Alter notes, "is passed over in complete silence... [which] underscores Jacob's excesses."³ A strong point of connection is brought about by the theme of "going down."⁴ Jacob laments that he will "go down" to the grave mourning the death of his son Joseph. In chapter 38, Judah is introduced as "going down," "connecting this separation of one brother from the rest with Joseph's."⁵ Chapter 39 also continues this theme by stating that Joseph was brought down to Egypt.⁶ The result from this narrative critical commentary is that scholars now agree that there is "no other place for this story."⁷ Having introduced an alternative perspective and defence against a variety concerns raised by textual, rhetorical and source criticism, Narrative Criticism can move beyond this issue to illuminate further narrative insights into the text.

We will now move to the text of Gen 38. A complete translation of the passage is in Appendix I. Below is a detailed, verse-by-verse analysis of Gen 38.

¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 4-12.

² Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 5.

³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

⁶ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

⁷ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 431. See also Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, 144; Hartley, *Genesis*, 314; Humphreys, *Joseph*, 37; Speiser, *Genesis*, 299; Wenham, *Genesis*, 365.

C. Verse-by-Verse Analysis

This section provides a narrative critical approach to the text of Gen 38.

Observations have been made based on the components of Narrative Criticism presented in Part I and below is the result of the observations. Included is commentary based on the ideological perspective, structure and narrative technique of Gen 38. The focus of this section is on the characters of Judah and Tamar.

1. A Family is Established (Verses 1 to 5)

In many ways Gen 38 follows a pattern consistent with most Hebrew narratives. The setting is established in the first few words: “Meanwhile, it happened at that time” (Gen 38:1a). The story of Judah and Tamar opens with a time setting that both is ambiguous and connects the story to the previous chapter. It happens at “an appropriately ambiguous formulaic time.”⁸ It is appropriate in that chapter 37 ends on a note of uncertainty as well, with Jacob in a state of inconsolable and hopeless mourning, his children unable to do anything about it and Joseph journeying to a foreign country (Gen 37:34-26). So chapter 38 begins וַיְהִי בָּעֵת הַהִוא (meanwhile, at that time; Gen 38:1). This phrase is used to “equate in time a second event with a first,” and is backed up by the resumptive repetition at Gen 37:36 and 39:1.⁹ The time of this story, then, is connected to both the life of Judah’s father and his brother, Joseph. Chapter 37 concludes with:

He recognized it and exclaimed, “It is my son’s tunic... Joseph has surely been torn to pieces!” Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters stood by him to console him, but he refused to be consoled. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I will go to the grave mourning my son.’ So Joseph’s father wept for him. Now in Egypt the Midianites sold Joseph to

⁸ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 5.

⁹ DeVries, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, 340. This means that both Gen 38 and 39 continue temporally from chapter 37.

Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard. (Gen 37:33-36 NET)

These verses establish the situation of both characters. At home, Judah's father is presented as inconsolable; no one could bring his father comfort. The narrator does not describe Judah's particular response to these events, but based on the narrator's description of Jacob's response to news of Joseph's death, we can suppose that such a situation would bring distress into the home. Additionally, his father believes that the loss of his son is due to a wild animal. Judah had a dominant role in causing his father's prolonged mournful state and leaves the tense situation in his father's home to begin his own life elsewhere.¹⁰

Thus, before the story even begins, the situation is complex. The opening words of chapter 38 indicate that the narrator wants the reader to be mindful of the circumstances surrounding Judah's departure and the tension created by Jacob's intense mourning and the assumed finality of the departure of Joseph.

The text continues, "Judah moved down from his brothers" (Gen 38:1a). Importantly, Judah has moved away from his family, creating distance from his sociological group and intermingling with the Canaanite people and culture. The geographical location of this story is the land of Canaan. Although the text does not indicate this specifically, it does say that Judah went down from the land of his father and that he stayed with a man from Adullam (Gen 38:1). Importantly, the point is not simply that Judah moved to Canaan; Jacob's family also lived in Canaan. Rather, it is that Judah moved away from his family and his sociological group to live and dwell among and

¹⁰ Gunn and Fewell (*Narrative*, 35) draw on Gen 37 to establish the character of Judah as introduced by the narrator, speculating that the reason for Judah's departure from his brothers is that "his father's

marry the Canaanites. Isolated Canaanite territory is not a good context for a Hebrew story and could not indicate good things to come. Canaan, as the setting of the story, serves as a symbol of rebellion and disobedience; it has a negative nuance in the book of Genesis. This introductory connection between Judah and the Canaanites suggests that there will be trouble.¹¹ The father of the Canaanites, Ham, was a cursed man (Gen 9:25). The land of Canaan was promised to be given to Abraham (Gen 17:8). Marriage to Canaanite women in particular has already been condemned. Abraham has made his servant swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites and Isaac in turn instructed his son Jacob to do likewise (Gen 24:3; 28:1). Esau's marriage to Canaanite women was an act of rebellion against his father and a source of distress to his mother (Gen 27:46; 28:8). Jacob's family has interacted with the Canaanites before. In chapter 34, Levi and Simeon killed all the males in Shechem—an incident that revealed the sinful act of a Canaanite to his family and a situation that caused feelings of animosity between the two people groups.¹²

The indication that Judah left his family to dwell with the Canaanites assumes a certain negative symbolic significance. Thus, the “place” of the story suggests that there will be trouble and disobedience; Judah's choice to dwell there is an early sign of his lack of wisdom. Alter ties the motif of “going down” to the greater theme of the “reversal of the iron law of primogeniture.”¹³ Not much background information is required, since “that time” has just been described in the previous chapter, so the text quickly moves into the rest of the plot, by introducing Judah's first action.

inconsolable grief is, perhaps, a too-constant reminder of his part in the conspiracy against his brother Joseph. A little distance provides relief from his guilt.”

¹¹ Judah is intermingling with the Canaanites—both his friend Hirah and the Canaanite woman he takes.

In the first five verses, a great deal happens in the span of a few words. Judah wastes no time getting himself a woman: he sees, he takes, he enters. There is no mention of marriage or acquiring her as a wife from her family. The lack of details creates the impression that the process occurred rather quickly. The spotlight is initially on Judah, describing what he is doing and where he is going. The narrator solidifies Judah's move away from Israel by emphasizing the connection he makes with Canaanites: "and he turned to a man, an Adullamite, now his name was Hirah. And there Judah saw the daughter of a man, a Canaanite" (Gen 38:1b-2a).

Names are revealing in this chapter. Hirah from Adullam is the second name mentioned in the story (Gen 38:1).¹⁴ Throughout the passage, the narrator notes that Hirah is from Adullam.¹⁵ This is significant because it identifies Hirah as a Canaanite and reveals Judah's choice to befriend a Canaanite. That Judah "turned aside" to this Adullamite may be understood not only in the sense of a physical move or gesture of friendship, but also in a metaphoric sense, that he was turning aside from his family ties, suggesting an act of disloyalty.¹⁶ Jeansonne states, "The narrator thereby suggests that Judah's political loyalties are leaning in the direction of this Canaanite man."¹⁷

The next association of Judah is with the daughter of Shua: "...now his name was Shua" (Gen 38:2b). The woman's name is not given anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures.

¹² Jacob tells Levi and Simeon that they have made him "a stench" to the local Canaanite peoples (Gen 34:30).

¹³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

¹⁴ BDB (301) places this name under the root meaning to "be or grow white, pale."

¹⁵ BDB (726): As an Adullamite, it is assumed that he is from the city of Adullam. It was an old Canaanite city with its name possibly coming from the root meaning of acting equitably or turning aside, as in refuge.

¹⁶ BDB (640) categorizes this word under the semantic option of "bend, turn, incline," particularly the inclining of an individual toward another. One example is the inclination of Joab toward Adonijah in terms of supporting him (1 Kgs 2:28). Characters also turn away from another character, as when Solomon turned away from the LORD (1 Kgs 11:9).

¹⁷ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 100.

This immediately presents her as a minor figure in the story and suggests that she does not have an important role. She is only known by relation to her father.¹⁸ The meaning of the name Shua (שׁוּא) is described as “opulence,” a term referring to wealth, riches and affluence.¹⁹ By choosing a wife connected with wealth, Judah is characterized as a man who is attracted to wealth. This is foreshadowed in the previous chapter, when Judah is attracted to the wealth of the passing Midian caravan (Gen 37:25).

Indeed, Judah “then took her and he went in to her” (Gen 38:2b). One may notice the contrast between the way that Jacob carefully acquired Rachel and how Judah simply “takes” the daughter of Shua. Wenham comments: “Though ‘take’ is a perfectly proper term for marriage, the combination of ‘see’ and ‘take’ has in Genesis overtones of illicit taking (cf. 3:6; 6:2; 12:15; 34:2; cf. Judg 14:1-2).”²⁰ The text suggests that this process went by quickly and, notably, this is the only moment of interaction between Judah and his wife in the passage. Her only function is to bear children. The following three short verses each produce a child. The text states, “And she conceived and she bore a son and he called his name Er. And she conceived again and she bore a son and she called his name Onan. And she multiplied again and she bore a son and she called his name Shelah” (Gen 38:3-5a). It is a strike against the daughter of Shua that she is a Canaanite, yet this minor character is portrayed in a significantly positive light. Her main role is to bear three sons and she does this in quick succession, as the short consecutive Hebrew phraseology suggests.²¹ Thus, the daughter of Shua is presented as a fertile woman. In light of the prevailing desire to create lineage throughout the story, this is an exalted status, as she is

¹⁸ Many translations give her the name Bath-Shua, meaning, “daughter of Shua.”

¹⁹ *BDB*, 447a.

²⁰ Wenham, *Genesis*, 366.

²¹ Cassuto, *Genesis*, 39.

able to fulfill this mandate so effectively. The fact that her name is never mentioned in the text, though, demonstrates that she remains a minor character, highlighting Tamar's more significant role in the text.

The names of the sons of Judah serve to characterize these three simple characters. The name Er (עֵר) is associated with rousing oneself and awaking.²² Er (עֵר) is described as evil (רָע) (Gen 38:7). These two words are simply a reversal of letters, observed quite easily when both words are written in close proximity (Gen 38:7).²³ The meaning of the name Onan is “vigorous,” related to the Hebrew root אָנָן (vigorous, wealth).²⁴ This name has several connections to the story. First, Onan's defining err was his refusal to be *vigorous* with Tamar.²⁵ The second meaning, *wealth*, furthers the motif of wealth and the desire for profit in the life of Judah. Yet a third option of this root is “trouble, sorrow, wickedness,” as it is used in Gen 35:18 when Rachel names her second son Ben-Oni (בְּנֵי־מִיָּן).²⁶ Onan was also a *wicked* son who brought *trouble* to his family by his actions against Tamar (Gen 38:9). His resulting death was no doubt a point of *sorrow* (Gen 38:10). The name Shelah (שֵׁלָה) from the root to *ask* or *request*, refers to the “thing asked for.”²⁷ His name embodies the motif of requests that will surface throughout the story. Ironically, he himself will be the desired object. His mother designates this name for him and thus it may be a reflection of her desire—a third son for which she had asked for. If this is the case, Shelah was a disappointment, for his line did not receive the

²² BDB, 734d, 1105d.

²³ Van Dikj-Hemmes, “Tamar,” 147.

²⁴ BDB, 20b, c.

²⁵ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 100. In Gen 49:3, Jacob refers to the Reuben as the firstfruits of “my vigour” or “my strength” (אֹנִי). A similar usage is at Deut 21:17 and Pss 78:51 and 105:36. These verses demonstrate the connection between producing a firstborn offspring and being “vigorous” by understanding this verb in terms of the father's procreative power.

²⁶ BDB, 19d. See Gen 35:16-18.

firstborn rights. The name Shelah also means “rest.”²⁸ This perhaps reflects his character best, as he “remains a silent and inactive character in the narrative.”²⁹

Next, a minor detail is provided by the narrator: “and he was in Chezib when she bore him” (Gen 38:5b). This place has a minor role in the text. כְּזִיב (Chezib) is suggested by Speiser to be the same location as Achzib in Josh 15:44 (a location allotted to Judah’s clan) and Mic 1:14 (a town that will prove deceptive to the kings of Israel).³⁰ Outside of these references, there is nothing known of this place.³¹ Hartley suggests that Chezib should be understood as the place where Shelah was born, to demonstrate that “all of Judah’s children were born in the territory that will belong to his tribe.”³²

The first five verses complete the introduction, presenting “a calm initial situation” and Judah as the main character.³³ Although Judah’s decision to move away from his family and his close connection to the Canaanites are negative choices, a moment of crisis has not yet arisen.

2. Evil Sons (Verses 6 to 10)

Within the next four verses a variety of situations occur. The announcement of Judah’s move away from Jacob, his marriage to a Canaanite, birth of three sons and the marriage of Er and Tamar offer the exposition of the plot. After all of this important background information is provided, a crisis arises. The death of the two sons is extreme

²⁷ BDB, 981b-982c.

²⁸ BDB, 983b.

²⁹ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 100.

³⁰ Speiser, *Genesis*, 297.

³¹ According to Gunn and Fewell (*Narrative*, 35) Judah’s presence in Chezib, “a place of ‘deception,’ while his wife is busy having a baby prompts us to suspect him of being both irresponsible and unfaithful, characteristics of his later treatment of his daughter-in-law.”

³² Hartley, *Genesis*, 315. Manor (“Chezib,” 904) indicates that this information was needed for the descendants of Shelah.

³³ Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 27.

and jeopardizes the lineage. This section builds up the tension of the plot by leading to the moment of crisis. The full extent of the crisis of the story is realized at verse eleven.

This second section begins with Judah choosing a wife for his son: “Then Judah took a wife for Er his first born” (Gen 38:6a). Hamilton notes that Judah “feels quite free to select his own wife, but he does not extend that privilege to Er.”³⁴ The text states, “and her name was Tamar” (Gen 38:6b). Bird states that the name תָּמָר (Tamar) refers to a fertility symbol.³⁵ The name likely means “palm-tree.”³⁶ This type of tree is “tall, slender, unbranched with a tuft of feather-like leaves 10 to 12 feet long, which produces fruit, specifically, *Phoenix dactylifera*.”³⁷ The root of the word is “to be erect, stiff.”³⁸ Most of the derivatives are associated with “palm-tree,”³⁹ a “common ancient figure for a woman of slender figure and for imposing female beauty.”⁴⁰ Thus, the root and particular derivation of her name have sexual connotations. It seems clear that Judah’s desire is for Tamar to be a fertile woman, to provide him with grandchildren. But as the text will soon report, Judah’s plan has a fatal flaw—his son is wicked.

With the introduction of this new character, the plot could have taken a new direction, but instead the text makes an unexpected announcement regarding Er: “And it happened—Er, the firstborn of Judah, was wicked in the eyes of the LORD and the LORD caused him to die” (Gen 38:7). This death begins the crisis in Judah’s family. The continuation of Judah’s line is now left to Onan and Shelah. Judah’s firstborn fulfills the

³⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 434.

³⁵ Bird, “Harlot as Heroine,” 134 n11.

³⁶ BDB, 1071c; Westermann, *Genesis*, 51.

³⁷ Swanson, “Tamar.”

³⁸ BDB, 1071b.

³⁹ BDB, 1071c.

⁴⁰ Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:268.

common role of “losers in Genesis.”⁴¹ This is all the text says of Er’s character. The nature of his wickedness is not disclosed, yet the narrator reports that the reason for Er’s death is due to his own shortcoming. It also serves to connect the lives of the characters. Judah and Tamar have both lost the same close relation.⁴² This verse also includes the first act of the LORD in this passage. YHWH plays a minor role in the story. After causing Er’s death, he causes Onan to die as well. Beyond this, the role of YHWH is only implicit. Based on the portrayal of YHWH throughout the biblical text, the reader might perceive the implicit role of YHWH to bring about redemption in the lives of the characters.

At this point, the story slows down with the introduction of speech and the ensuing details.⁴³ Upon the death of Er, Judah becomes responsible for Tamar.⁴⁴ He instructs his second son to fulfil the levirate law: “And Judah said to Onan, ‘Go in to the wife of your brother and do a brother-in-law’s duty to her and raise up an offspring for your brother’” (Gen 38:8). Like every society, there are assumed governing rules of conduct. Though not codified yet, law plays an important role in this story. Particularly, this story reflects the cultural understanding of the appropriate response to a widow in the event of the death of her husband. The concept of levirate marriage enacted in Gen 38 is stated in Deuteronomy:

If brothers live together and one of them dies without having a son, the dead man’s wife must not remarry someone outside the family. Instead, her late husband’s brother must go to her, marry her, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law. Then the first son she bears will continue the name of the dead brother, thus preventing his name from being blotted out of Israel. But if the man does not want to marry his brother’s widow, then she

⁴¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

⁴² Also, both Judah and his father have lost a son.

⁴³ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 41.

⁴⁴ Westermann, *Genesis*, 51.

must go to the elders at the town gate and say, “My husband’s brother refuses to preserve his brother’s name in Israel; he is unwilling to perform the duty of a brother-in-law to me!” Then the elders of his city must summon him and speak to him. If he persists, saying, “I don’t want to marry her,” then his sister-in-law must approach him in view of the elders, remove his sandal from his foot, and spit in his face. She will then respond, “Thus may it be done to any man who does not maintain his brother’s family line!” His family name will be referred to in Israel as “the family of the one whose sandal was removed.” (Deut 25:5-10 NET)

The purpose of this custom was to ensure that each family would have a surviving lineage and that the name of the deceased man would be continued through a child of his nearest relative.⁴⁵

The term for offspring (יָרֵעַ) is a word used very frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴⁶ It is also the term for *seed*, an offspring of a man and woman.⁴⁷ It features as a term present in the promises YHWH makes to Abraham (Gen 12:7; 13:15-16; 15:18; 17:7). Onan is instructed to “raise up a seed” for Er (Gen 38:8). Yet, Onan refuses to do so and, in refusing to impregnate Tamar, he was also refusing participation in the promise to Abraham.⁴⁸ His thoughts, then, have a sense of irony: “But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his” (Gen 38:9a). Sure enough, Onan would not have an offspring. In trying to prevent his brother from having offspring, he was also preventing his own opportunity for a line and a place in the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham.

Onan is reported to have ejaculated to the land, or more literally, to have spilled his seed (וַיִּשְׁתַּח אֶרְצָה): “And it happened—when he went in to the wife of his brother then he ejaculated to the land” (Gen 38:9b). Skinner states that the responsibility of the brother

⁴⁵ Burrows, “Levirate Marriage in Israel,” 23-33.

⁴⁶ Logos software cites 229 occurrences of this term.

⁴⁷ BDB, 282.

⁴⁸ His action is similar to those of Elimelech in Ruth 4:3-6.

to the widow was so strong that it is expected that Onan would keep his defiance of it a secret: “he does not dare openly defy it; yet his private family interest induces him to defeat its purpose.”⁴⁹ Hartley further states, “[Having sex with] Tamar without owning up to his responsibility in regard to her and his deceased brother was an affront to Yahweh.”⁵⁰

The narrator could have used the term *הָאֲדָמָה* for ground. The term *אֶרֶץ* is used, a term commonly translated as *to the land* and bearing a far greater significance in the context of the book of Genesis. It can mean more than simply the physical ground, but also, the products of the ground, the people and the community in general.⁵¹ The phrase “he ejaculated to the land” (*וַיִּשְׁחַת אֶרֶץ*) is similar to the phrase at Gen 6:12, where during the time of Noah the land (*הָאָרֶץ*) was corrupt (*וַיִּשְׁחָתָה*) before God. Onan’s action of “spilling his seed” on the ground is an act that defiles the community.

Onan’s ongoing, secret act against Tamar introduces the theme of deception in this passage. Deception is a theme evident throughout the book of Genesis. Many times, deception occurs in an effort to protect one’s self, as when Abraham and Isaac lie about the status of their wives before foreign leaders (Gen 12:12-13; 20:2; 26:7). Deception will play a powerful role in this story.

Tamar is referred to as “the wife of [Onan’s] brother” (Gen 38:9b). This is an insightful moment. It is clear that Onan has not taken Tamar to be his own wife for she is still referred to as Er’s wife. Also, her name is not used, suggesting an impersonal title—reflective of how she is being treated. Onan’s offensive behaviour is not only directed

⁴⁹ Skinner, *Genesis*, 452.

⁵⁰ Hartley, *Genesis*, 315; Westermann, *Genesis*, 52.

⁵¹ BDB, 75d-76c. For example, Lev 19:29 states, “Do not defile your daughter by making her a prostitute, lest the land become prostitute and the land become full of wickedness.”

against his brother, “in order not to give an offspring to his brother” (Gen 38:9c), but also against Tamar because he does not fulfill the levirate obligations that is rightfully hers by taking her to be his own wife.

This introduces the theme of fraternal rivalry in Genesis: “In both chs. 37 and 38 we observe fraternal rivalry. Onan feels about Er as Joseph’s brothers feel about him.”⁵² Joseph’s brothers are described as hating him and later we discover that despite his pleas for mercy, they still sell him (Gen 37:4; 42:21). Even between the brothers there is disunity (Gen 37:26-29-30). The theme begins with the first brothers, Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1-16), and is evident between Jacob and Esau (Gen 25:23; 27:41), Rachel and Leah (Gen 29:1-30:22) and Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37:4). It will be evident again by the end of this chapter.

There is no doubt in the text that Onan’s actions are wrong. The narrator states, “And what he did was wicked in the eyes of the LORD and he caused him to die also” (Gen 38:10). Only two verses after the announcement of Er’s death, Onan dies as well. Onan’s actions are described by the phrase *וַיֵּרָע* (it was evil), the same root term used to describe Er.⁵³

Specifically, the narrator notes that both Er and Onan did evil “in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen 38:7, 10). This is a common phrase throughout the entire Hebrew Scriptures to report how an event or person is perceived by the LORD. In Genesis, the phrase is only used three times. Two of them appear here in order to describe the sons. The other

⁵² Hamilton, *Genesis*, 432.

⁵³ Interestingly, the next occurrence of this term is in Gen 39:7-10, when Joseph refuses to have sex with his master’s wife, stating “how could I do such a great evil and sin against God?” It is no coincidence that this term is placed in the mouth of Joseph, creating a contrast between Onan and Joseph. Onan is sexually irresponsible by having sex with Tamar without letting her be impregnated and thereby fulfilling his levirate duty. Joseph is sexually responsible by resisting the seductive woman and thereby fulfills his duty of loyalty to his master.

occurrence is to describe the favour that Noah had before the LORD (Gen 6:8). The fact that this phrase is only used three times draws attention to the difference in the context of its use; the description of the wicked sons is contrasted by the righteous standing of Noah. Sadly, this is the first time that the text notes that the LORD perceives an individual as wicked.⁵⁴

The death of Onan concludes this section of the passage. A crisis arose in Judah's family with the death of Er and was worsened with the death of Onan. Two of the three sons are dead and Judah's desire for a line is so far unfulfilled, thus leaving all hope of solving this problem resting with Shelah. The story changes focus, as Judah must decide what to do with Tamar and his one remaining son.

3. Tamar Leaves (Verse 11)

Verse eleven is a pivotal verse, both in terms of revealing Judah's character and in initiating an event that will eventually motivate Tamar to act against (and yet in a sense for) Judah. It is at this verse that the moment of crisis reaches its highest point. Er and Onan have died, leaving Judah with only Shelah able to provide him with a line. When Judah delays giving his last son to Tamar he jeopardizes this opportunity for a grandchild to continue his line.

First, the narrator records Judah's audible statement, "Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, 'Remain a widow in the house of your father until Shelah my son grows up'" (Gen 38:11a, b). The term for "his daughter-in-law" is בְּלֵתָא and "may mean

⁵⁴ In other situations, such as the story of Cain, the term עָר is not used. What Cain does is clearly condemned by YHWH, yet he is not labelled as inherently evil or wicked. Similarly, in Gen 6, YHWH sees the wickedness of humanity and the evilness in their heart, but this is a general statement about the condition of humanity, not the description of a pointed individual as evil.

either ‘daughter-in-law’ or ‘bride’.”⁵⁵ Could this be a subtle rebuke to Judah, who did not make Tamar a bride for Shelah? By using the title daughter-in-law the narrator reminds the audience of Judah’s responsibility to Tamar.⁵⁶ Clearly, Judah is still accountable for the well-being of the young widow. He is also required to take responsibility for her marital status, as his own words indicate. She is to “remain a widow”—faithful to his family line. Judah gives her the assurance that she will not be forgotten for her faithfulness, but will be given Shelah.

The instructions given by Judah, who has been making all the decisions for his household up to this point, seem clear and logical. It is suggested that at the event of a woman’s husbands’ deaths, this was common practice, as in Ruth 1.⁵⁷ However, in this situation, there is still a remaining son to be given to Tamar. In Ruth 1, Naomi associates returning to a woman’s house as an indication of severing ties with the husband’s family. Indeed, the term *בֵּית* may also be translated as household, family or clan.⁵⁸ Is Judah subtly sending Tamar away from his *household*, away from his family? It seems that he wants to rid his clan of the infection of Tamar and thus, instructs her to leave his clan completely.

Judah’s instruction to Tamar would seem noble, if it were not for the narrator’s revelation of Judah’s true motive: “for he thought,⁵⁹ *lest he die also, like his brother*” (Gen 38:11b). Though it becomes clear that withholding Shelah from Tamar was wrong, the narrator intimates that Judah’s motive was to protect his son rather than to harm Tamar. Yet we realize that Judah is giving Tamar the false hope of eventually returning

⁵⁵ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 103.

⁵⁶ Alter (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7) indicates that the reference to Tamar as Judah’s daughter-in-law, “an otherwise superfluous designation that reminds us of his legal obligations,” indicates early on that “Judah is in the wrong.”

⁵⁷ Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:269.

⁵⁸ *BDB*, 109d-110c.

for Shelah, “the pretence of a promise.”⁶⁰ Here the theme of deception is continued.

Judah lies to Tamar to protect his son (Gen 38:11). Like Onan, Judah is short-sighted and responds in fear.⁶¹

Tamar is obedient, passively following Judah’s instructions: “So Tamar left and remained in the house of her father” (Gen 38:11c). At this point, the characters of Tamar and Judah begin to contrast and highlight each other. Judah has left his father’s home and Tamar is going to her father’s home. Judah has rebelled against his father in his plot against Joseph but Tamar silently and submissively follows her father-in-law’s instructions. Judah has a social position of power, but Tamar is a childless widow.⁶² The report that Tamar leaves the house of Judah and returns to her father’s house also indicates a shift in place. This scene is now over.

Until this point, the story has been mostly expository. A problem arises when Er dies, but has the potential for an early resolution when Judah instructs Onan to impregnate Tamar. Yet when Onan also dies, the conflict increases. The inciting moment comes at verse eleven when the reader becomes privy to the fact that Judah has no intention of giving Shelah to Tamar. At this point, Judah’s remaining son is prohibited from continuing the line. Thus Judah heightens the crisis. As time passes, Judah does not resolve the problem and this leaves room for another character to bring resolution to the crisis. In the following section, Tamar acts to bring resolution to the crisis by getting impregnated by Judah to provide offspring to continue his line.

⁵⁹ Literally, “said,” however, this epithet provided by the narrator indicates what Judah was privately thinking.

⁶⁰ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 41.

⁶¹ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 41. Onan feared that Tamar would get pregnant so he withdrew prematurely; Judah was afraid that his only remaining son would die so he did not give him to Tamar.

4. The Unexpected on the Road to Timnah (Verses 12 to 15)

Verse 12 begins much the same as verse 1, namely, with a description of Judah's situation. In the first part of the narrative, Judah has independently moved away from his family, has married and has produced three males. At the beginning of this second part of the narrative, Judah is supervising his estate affairs, has mourned his wife and two of his sons have died. This is a substantially different situation. From this point on in the narrative, Judah is shown to be an increasingly less important and morally unacceptable character, as Tamar is shown to be an increasingly more important and morally acceptable character. Also, as Tamar moves back to the house of her father the rising action of the plot begins. Tamar must resolve the problem that she has been removed from the house of Judah. In each of the following scenes, Tamar works to establish a solution to this problem. First, she gets impregnated by Judah and retains proof that he is responsible for her impregnation.

So far, the plot has progressed at lightning speed, pausing only for a short speech and a few details. A whole generation has been born and has grown in these few verses. At verse 13, the plot significantly slows down. It takes fourteen verses for the next three months to pass. The longer sentences, recorded dialogue and variety of details in the following verses allow for a sustained narrative depiction of the situation and draws the reader into the scene. Tamar's actions in particular are given in great detail.⁶² The narrator carefully adds several details to the story that reveal Judah's true intentions and the precarious situation that Tamar faces.

⁶² Wenham (*Genesis*, 365) notes that other women in Genesis have been childless. Since both Sarah and Rachel eventually became pregnant, the reader can hopefully predict that Tamar, too, may become pregnant, despite the odds against her.

⁶³ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 41.

This section commences with commentary from the narrator: “And a great many days passed” (Gen 38:12a). This statement presents a clear shift in time. Alter suggests that this description is extracted from Tamar’s perspective: the description “a long time” at verse 12 is included to justify Tamar’s “own perception... [of being] deliberately neglected.”⁶⁴ If she has been waiting for Judah to act upon his promise, she has certainly been waiting a long time. The extensive passage of time suggests that now Shelah is of marriageable age, although still not given to Tamar.

The plot thickens with the announcement: “and the daughter of Shua, the wife of Judah, died” (Gen 38:12b). The death of the daughter of Shua means that the possibility of Judah having more children is significantly reduced. His hope for a lasting line remains with Shelah and he takes no initiative in giving this last son to Tamar. This also establishes Judah to be a single man, which lessens our criticism of him for his future act involving a prostitute.

With no break in the text, Judah’s next actions are reported: “and Judah was comforted and he traveled up to shear his flock” (Gen 38:12c). This news indicates a shift in place. As the story gradually shifts location away from Judah’s house, so also the narrative perspective shifts away from Judah and toward Tamar. The term comforted, from the root נָחַם, emerges in both Gen 37 and 38.⁶⁵ Jacob mourns for Joseph yet, despite the efforts of his family to comfort him, Jacob is not consoled (Gen 37:35). This contrasts Judah, who is not pictured as mourning for the death of his sons, nor of expressing sorrow at the death of his wife.

⁶⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

⁶⁵ BDB, 636d, 637a.

In Genesis, there are only two stories involving the shearing of a flock: the deception of Laban and the deception of Judah (Gen 31:19; 38:12-13).⁶⁶ Just as Jacob deceived Laban during the time of sheep-shearing, so Judah will be deceived during the time of sheep-shearing.⁶⁷ Interestingly, the only other moments where sheep-shearing is noted as an activity in the Hebrew narrative tradition are the stories of Nabal and Absalom, particularly the chapter where Amnon wrongs Tamar and Absalom has him struck down (1 Sam 25:2-11; 2 Sam 13:23-24).⁶⁸ It is no coincidence that the story of deception surrounds the time of the sheep-shearing celebrations.

So, Judah is traveling, “he and Hirah his friend the Adullamite, to Timnah” (Gen 38:12d). By referring to Hirah as Judah’s “friend”, רֵעֵהוּ (his friend), the narrator is subtly reminding the reader of Judah’s dangerous liaisons with the Canaanites. At first, his alliance with the Adullamite may have been professional, but now there is no doubt that Judah has befriended the Canaanite. Their destination is Timnah. The exact identity of this place is difficult, as “Timnah is a relatively common place name.”⁶⁹ Yet it may be noted that it was at a location named Timnah “that Samson’s famous misadventure with his Philistine wife took place (Jdg 14),” another incident of deception.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ BDB, 159c.

⁶⁷ The rare two occurrences of this term in the Hebrew text draw attention to the parallel characteristics of Laban and Judah. The first moment of characterization in the portrayal of Laban is his eye for wealth and his attraction to it (Gen 24:29-30). Like Judah, Laban’s words are not completely trustworthy. He declares that the meeting of Abraham’s servant and Rebekah is from the LORD, but the reader can very well be suspicious that Laban’s compliance may be rooted in the wealth that the servant brought with him (Gen 24:50). Laban is also a deceiver, using the garment of a bride to hide the identity of Leah (Gen 29:23, 24). Like Judah, his deception is based on the unjust withholding of an offspring (Gen 29:25). Later in the text, Laban is deceived himself by an in-law, at the very time that he was sheep-shearing (Gen 31:19-20). The theme of deception in the story of Laban sets up the reader to expect another story of deception at the mention of sheep-shearing.

⁶⁸ BDB, 159c.

⁶⁹ Kotter, “Timnah,” 6:557.

⁷⁰ Kotter, “Timnah,” 6:557.

As we will soon discover, the purpose of the trip is sheep shearing. The time of sheep shearing was a festival, one to which the owner invited guests, as did Absalom in 2 Sam 13:23.⁷¹ Spencer comments that Judah attends the sheep-shearing festival for a “much-needed diversion” after having to endure the rituals of the mourning period required by the death of his wife.⁷² At this point in the story, the plot changes focus from following the life of Judah to emphasizing the roles of both Tamar and Judah.

Until now, the story has been presented mainly from the perspective of Judah’s family. The death of his wife and his response are provided, but the text does not reveal the inner thoughts or feelings of Tamar. Shelah has surely been growing older, but there is no suggestion that he will be given to Tamar. So far, Tamar has been presented as “a passive object, acted upon” and depicted in the biblical text by verbs of “compliance and retreat.”⁷³ Tamar’s silence in the first portion of the story is noted by Alter and he comments, “this may suggest silent submission, or at least her lack of any legal options... it certainly leaves us wondering about what she is feeling.”⁷⁴ At this point, the focus of the story shifts to include Tamar as an equally major character.⁷⁵

A group of “reporters” enter the scene. Their role is pivotal, yet their motivation is not explicitly stated. Surely they know of Tamar’s predicament and their information presents Tamar with an opportunity to act. “And it was reported to Tamar saying, ‘Behold your husband’s father is going up to Timnah to shear his flock’” (Gen 38:13). Possibly, the reporters took initiative to inform Tamar of Judah’s actions. Or, it may be, as Bos proposes, “that Tamar’s passivity may not have been total. She has kept herself

⁷¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:269.

⁷² Spencer, “Riotous—Yet Righteous,” 13.

⁷³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 8.

⁷⁴ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

informed about the doings of her father-in-law.”⁷⁶ Either way, their reference to Judah as “your father-in-law” emphasizes his relation to Tamar, “for whom he has responsibility—responsibility he has not yet fulfilled.”⁷⁷

Here we have a glimpse into the general consensus of Tamar’s situation. It would seem that the community assumes the enduring obligations of Judah to Tamar, for they refer to Judah as Tamar’s husband’s father. This information is passed on to Tamar under the assumption that she will act. Alter comments that the textual note reporting, “Judah has been widowed and the official period of mourning has passed,” allows for Tamar to “plausibly infer that Judah is in a state of sexual neediness.”⁷⁸ The next verse, with its many verbs, indicates that she certainly does act, emphasizing her transition from predominantly passive to active.⁷⁹

Tamar quickly responds: “So she took off her widow’s garments from upon her and she hid with a veil and she covered herself and she remained by the gate Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah” (Gen 38:14a, b). Notably, while Judah has been consoled over the death of his wife, Tamar is still wearing her widow’s garb.⁸⁰ These two characters stand in stark contrast. Judah has quickly passed through the grieving process for his wife of many years, one who bore him three sons, while Tamar is still showing respect to her dead husband after “many days have passed,” a man who was wicked. Tamar’s actions in this verse symbolize a change in her character. Just as she removes her widow’s garments, so she is acting to overcome her status of widow. Her act of hiding with a veil reflects her desire to hide her identity from Judah. Bar-Efrat notes: “The

⁷⁵ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 45.

⁷⁶ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 45.

⁷⁷ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 44.

⁷⁸ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

object of changing her clothes is clear: Tamar does not want Judah to recognize her, and even wants him to think she is a harlot.”⁸¹ She remains at the gate of Enaim, a place where “one way may diverge in two directions. Probably it was a place whence Tamar might be seen, to which some by-way was near, where Judah might turn.”⁸² Yet this waiting is not a passive act, as was her waiting for Shelah. For Tamar, waiting by the gate of “Eyes” is a result of her correct perception of the situation; for Judah it is a result of his blindness of the situation. Interestingly, Gunn and Fewell comment that the “entrance to Enaim” may be translated “opening of the eyes,” and this meaning adds to the presentation of Judah as lacking an understanding of what is truly happening: “For where Judah sees a prostitute we know that he in fact is seeing someone else. It is as though his eyes are closed. But in due course his sight of this woman will lead to his eyes being opened to his unjust treatment of Tamar.”⁸³ This new location on the road to Timnah indicates a minor shift in place and introduces the next scene between Judah and Tamar.

Bird notes that the text does not state that Tamar dressed as a harlot, only that she hid behind her veil, leaving it up to Judah to make the necessary assumption.⁸⁴ However, the text suggests that it is her desire that Judah will indeed regard her as a harlot and stop. Her change of clothes suggests that she was willing to use whatever means necessary to obtain her desired end. Thus, Tamar’s action of leaving her father’s home to stand by the gate of Enaim begins a new journey for Tamar, one that will lead her to return to the household of Judah.

⁷⁹ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 45.

⁸⁰ Wenham, *Genesis*, 367.

⁸¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 51.

⁸² Calvin, *Genesis*, 283.

⁸³ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 39.

⁸⁴ Bird, *Missing Persons*, 203.

The narrator provides us with Tamar's motivation, just as we learned of Judah's motivation several verses earlier: "for she saw that Shelah had grown up and she had not been given as a wife" (Gen 38:14c). In the contrasting characterization of Judah and Tamar, this verse is essential. Judah acted to prevent Tamar from being with Shelah and receiving what she rightfully deserved, committing an injustice against her. Here Tamar acts to receive what is rightfully hers, rebelling against the injustice committed against her. At the core, Judah acted unjustly, whereas Tamar acts to bring about justice. Interestingly, the text does not say that she *knew* or *heard*, but that she *saw* that Shelah had grown up, reminding the reader of the "small-town" context of the story.

Sure enough, "When Judah saw her, he mistook her for a harlot, for she hid her face" (Gen 38:15). Again, the narrator shares with us the motivation and reason behind events. Every one of the six times this term "for" (כִּי) is present in chapter 38 the narrator is revealing important background information. So far this term has occurred at three other key moments—Onan does not want to give his brother an offspring, Judah does not want Shelah to die and Tamar knows Shelah was not given to her (Gen 38:9, 11, 14). Now we discover that Tamar has disguised her appearance so that Judah does not recognize her.

Yet the fact that Tamar has disguised herself does not excuse Judah's action. There is nothing in the text to suggest that going to a harlot was acceptable or normative behaviour and Judah is the only Israelite in the book of Genesis to go to a זֹנֶה (harlot).⁸⁵ Many commentators regard this narrative aside as an excuse for Judah's behaviour.⁸⁶ The

⁸⁵ The only other reference to a harlot outside of this chapter is in Gen 34:31, when Judah's brothers express disgust at how their sister had been treated by the Shechemites. Bos ("Out of the Shadows," 49) notes that the sexual behaviour of Judah is "unorthodox compared to the other patriarchs."

⁸⁶ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 45.

narrator tells us twice that Judah did not realize he was interacting with his daughter-in-law (Gen 38:15, 16). By doing so, the narrator makes an excuse for Judah's act of incest. Bos provides an additional perspective: "More importantly, these two phrases draw attention to the flaw in Judah's character which was first hinted at in v. 11. His behaviour toward Tamar shows lack of righteousness, and so he involves himself in deeds of which he cannot see the true impact."⁸⁷

5. The Encounter (Verses 16 to 19)

When Judah and Tamār meet, the story moves into a lengthy dialogue between the two characters, creating an instance of "narration-through-dialogue"⁸⁸ and building up the rising action of the plot. Licht comments that in the timing of the Judah-Tamar passage, "the conversation between Tamar and Judah... is marked throughout by the simplest possible 'he said,' 'she said,' creating the atmosphere of a matter-of-fact transaction."⁸⁹ Slowing the pace of the plot dramatically, the dialogue is presented in a straight-forward style. This dialogue between Judah and Tamar narrows in on the emphasis of the story. No doubt it is a powerful exchange of words. Remarkably, throughout the entire episode Judah fails to recognize Tamar, demonstrating "how little Judah knew her and how long it had been since he inquired of her."⁹⁰

It is specifically noted that "he turned to her to the road" (Gen 38:16a). This turn marks another one of Judah's bad choices. The story begins with Judah making a *turn* to the Adullamite. His next *turn* is to a supposed prostitute. Alter criticizes Judah for visiting a prostitute: "his sexual appetite will not tolerate postponement though he has

⁸⁷ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 46.

⁸⁸ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 69.

⁸⁹ Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 104.

⁹⁰ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 103.

been content to let Tamar languish as a childless widow indefinitely.”⁹¹ Judah’s opening statement is direct: “and he said, ‘Allow, please, may I go into you?’” (Gen 38:16b). This statement by Judah may equally be translated, “Come now! I will go in to you!”⁹² His words are brief and pointed. In his conversation with Tamar, Judah “[wastes] no time with preliminaries.”⁹³

Judah may be innocent of intentionally sleeping with his daughter-in-law, as we are informed: “for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law” (Gen 38:16c). Yet, these words would surely come back to haunt him. His particular request, “please” (נא) is present twice in this chapter. Later, Tamar will ask Judah: “Identify, please, to whom these are...” (Gen 38:25). One instance is a request for sex; the second is a request for the identity of the person who committed sex. Judah’s words will return to him in a much different context and will have a very different outcome a few weeks later.

Tamar is not easily taken. She bargains with Judah: “Then she said, ‘What will you give to me, in order that you may go into me?’” (Gen 38:16d). Judah offers what will soon be readily available to him. “And he said, ‘Surely I will send a kid of female goats from the flock’” (Gen 38:17a). Judah plans to give a young goat to Tamar and emphasizes that he will send the gift. Ironically, Judah did not give Shelah to Tamar to provide a line, but soon he will “give himself” to Tamar and fulfill Shelah’s duty to provide a line.

However, Tamar requests a pledge until Judah brings the kid of female goats: “Then she said, ‘If you will give a pledge until you send...’” (Gen 38:17b). Using as few

⁹¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 8.

⁹² The exact meaning of the particle נא is not known. *BDB* (609) defines this term as a particle “of entreaty or exhortation, I (we) pray, now (enclitic).”

⁹³ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9.

words as possible, Judah eagerly inquires of Tamar: “And he said, ‘What pledge—that I should give to you?’” (Gen 38:18a). Tamar immediately replies, stating only the items she desires from Judah: “And she said, ‘your signet-ring and your cord and your staff that are in your hand’” (Gen 38:18b). The significance of Judah’s statement appears to go deeper than its surface meaning.

A “signet-ring,” or “seal” according to other translations, was “probably a cylinder seal, a small, delicately carved... made of hard semiprecious stone, drilled through lengthwise so that it could be worn on a cord around the neck. Such seals were often rolled on damp clay, leaving the impression of a ‘signature’ that could be used as a personal means of attestation, legal or otherwise.”⁹⁴ Alter suggests that the signet-ring, cord and staff that Judah so easily pledges are the equivalent of “all his major credit cards,” demonstrating the value of the items.⁹⁵ Bos quips that the items are more like a driver’s license and passport, since they bear his identity.⁹⁶ Hamilton notes these “objects would have been immediately recognized by all by-standers.”⁹⁷

Judah’s staff was also a piece of identity and a “symbol of authority.”⁹⁸ By demanding Judah’s staff, Tamar heightens the significance of her request. Notably, the term for a natural stick, *מַקֵּל* (Gen 30:37), is not used, but rather, this more complex term that has the potential for double meaning.⁹⁹ Throughout Genesis and Hebrew Scriptures, this term for staff refers to a tribe. The narrator has chosen this term carefully,

⁹⁴ Youngblood, *Genesis*, 249. For examples, see Pritchard, *Ancient Near East*, plate 240; Wiseman and Millard, “Seal, Sealing,” 3:1406-07.

⁹⁵ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9.

⁹⁶ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 46.

⁹⁷ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 318.

⁹⁸ Wenham, *Genesis*, 368.

⁹⁹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:272.

immediately bringing to mind the thrust of the story toward the desire for a line.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, the Judah tribe will largely be determined by Tamar.¹⁰¹

Tamar adds the clause "...that are in your hand" (Gen 38:18). Indeed, on the surface she is referring to the wooden staff in Judah's physical hand. However, if the reader understands *ṭṭṭ* (your staff) to have the double meaning "your tribe", then it may be that *ṭṭṭ* (in your hand) also has a double meaning. Hand is often used in a figurative sense. As such, it has a wide variety of meaning: strength and power, various technical senses (one of which is to represent a phallus, Isaiah 57:8) and power, possession or agency.¹⁰² Such a reading would render Tamar's words as "...and your tribe that is in your power (to give)" or "that is your possession." This potential word play provides a moment of irony. Indeed, by having sex with Tamar, Judah did give Tamar the seed that would continue his tribe. It also emphasizes Judah's control over the situation, for only he could enable Tamar's pregnancy, by providing Shelah or himself. It is also ironic that this word play presents Tamar asking Judah for his tribe, for as the next verse states, he did give it to her.

From here the scene ends quickly. The whole story has been leading to this moment, both the crisis and the solution of the plot bound up in one brief statement: "And he gave to her and he went into her and she conceived from him" (Gen 38:18c). Again we have a quick succession of events. The report that she is pregnant immediately adds an element of suspense to the story, as the reader awaits Tamar's next action.

¹⁰⁰ Gunn and Fewell (*Narrative*, 126) note a third usage of the term *ṭṭṭ* (your staff) as a euphemism for the male sexual organ: "The phallic shape of the staff also allows sexual connotations to play in an already sexually loaded story. Tamar is essentially bartering for a phallus that will bring her children and security...." However, other passages in the biblical text do not attest to this meaning.

¹⁰¹ See 1 Chr 2:4-6.

¹⁰² BDB, 388d-391c.

There are five boys born in this chapter, but only four of them are described as conceived, וַתֵּהָר (and she conceived). When Shelah is born, it is because the daughter of Shua has “multiplied” or “added” (וַתִּבְרַךְ; Gen 38:3-5, 18). A comparison of the sons creates a contrast between the daughter of Shua and Tamar. The two sons that the daughter of Shua conceived introduced death; the two sons of Tamar introduced life, both in that they literally lived and they provided their own offspring to continue the line. The text vaguely states that Judah gave to Tamar, not specifying what exactly Judah has given. Indeed, the most obvious answer is that Judah gave the pledge to Tamar. In light of the multiple meanings in Tamar’s request, one may accept that Judah gave more than simply his pledge; he gave her the means to establish her place as matriarch of the family and bear his heir as well.

Despite the fact that Judah did not know Tamar’s identity, by having sex with her he brought great shame on himself. He committed the forbidden sin of uncovering the nakedness of his daughter-in-law, a violation of Lev 18:15.¹⁰³

The entire scene is put to rest with Tamar’s change of clothes. “And she arose and she left and she took off her veil from upon her and she put on widow’s garments” (Gen 38:19). The action of changing her clothes, “symbolic of her larger goal, ...neatly frames her dangerous deception.”¹⁰⁴ Jeansonne finds importance in the inclusion of this detail, stating that Tamar’s “innocence as a prostitute is revealed by the narrator’s final comment on this scene. Tamar does not attempt to remain as a prostitute for a moment.

¹⁰³ Spencer, “Riotous—Yet Righteous,” 14. At the literary time of this story the law has not yet been delivered, yet the implied readers view this passage in light of the law of Sinai. This is made clear by the narrator’s concern to note that Judah did not have sex with Tamar again (Gen 38:26).

¹⁰⁴ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 38.

She immediately puts on the clothing that identifies her as a widow.”¹⁰⁵ As for having a worthy motive, the term “arose” is used to convey a similar message. Onan did not obey his father and “*raise up* an offspring for [his] brother,” so Tamar *arose* (Gen 38:8, 19). Tamar herself fulfilled the instructions Judah had spoken to Onan.

Like her action of changing clothes, Tamar’s action of taking forms an inclusio around this entire scene of deception. The term וָתָסַר (and she took off) occurs twice in Gen 38. The first time is in verse 14: “And she *took off* her widow’s garments from upon her and she hid with a veil...” (Gen 38:14). Thus begins the deception of Tamar. The second instance is in verse 19, concluding the scene: “...she *took off* her veil from upon her and she put on widow’s garments” (Gen 38:19). The action of taking off her widow’s garments reflects Tamar’s motivation. She is unwilling to remain a widow and wait for Judah to give her his son Shelah. By removing her widow’s garments, she is acting to remove her identity as a childless widow.

In the larger context of the passage, this act of deceit concludes the trail of serious lies and deceitful behavior that has occurred several times. It began with the secrecy of the wicked deeds of Er and Onan, prompting Judah to think that the cause of their deaths lies with Tamar. Judah deceives Tamar with the promise of Shelah, while having no intention in mind to give him to her. Eventually, Tamar deceives Judah by posing as a prostitute. From this point forward, the truth is gradually revealed.

6. The Sending of the Young Goat (Verses 20 to 23)

The rising action of the story continues as the story moves to its resolution. Although Tamar is pregnant by Judah, her position in his family is not secured. Tamar conceals the evidence that identifies Judah until her pregnancy is made known. The plot

¹⁰⁵ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 103.

now shifts to a scene back at Judah's abode and the spotlight returns to the house of Judah. It could have been easily summarized in a single line, but the narrator chooses to use four long verses to provide several important details. As this scene plays out, the reader is aware that time is passing, remembering, of course, that Tamar is pregnant. In a sense, the comical edge to this episode actually builds up tension in the plot. The reader is well aware that Judah gives attention to keeping a pledge to a prostitute, but has neglected to keep his pledge to his own daughter-in-law. Meanwhile, there is a far more important issue with Tamar gaining momentum.

Judah attempts to fulfill his pledge to the supposed prostitute. "And Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite to take the pledge from the hand of the woman, but he did not find her" (Gen 38:20). This verse introduces the section through a basic summary. Yet the narrator uses this statement to characterize Judah. First, Judah is presented as keeping his commitment to the "harlot" by indeed sending the pledge, seemingly at the first opportunity. On the other hand, the Adullamite is identified as his friend or fellow citizen. Jeansonne comments that he is called "'the Adullamite' because what matters is not his name, but the fact that he is a Canaanite."¹⁰⁶ It also shows that Judah has developed a comradeship with this man. Tamar is vaguely referred to as "the woman," demonstrating Judah's perspective of the unknown harlot.

Hirah takes initiative to seek out the whereabouts of the woman. "So he asked the men of the place, saying, 'Where is the temple prostitute—she was at Enaim along the road?' And they said, 'No temple prostitute was here'" (Gen 38:21). When approaching Tamar, Judah believes her to be a זונה (harlot). Yet the Adullamite inquires about a הקדשה (temple-prostitute). In ancient Hebrew, two different names are used to

distinguish two types of prostitutes. One term is used for “a woman who provides sexual gratification for a fee.”¹⁰⁷ This term is similar to a modern-day prostitute. When the people of the community want to present such a woman in a more dignified light, they call her a cult-prostitute, “the most respectable designation for public prostitutes in Canaan.”¹⁰⁸ These temple prostitutes functioned in Canaanite cultic sites and were regarded by the Canaanite community as sociologically acceptable. Hartley notes, “When [the men of the town] want to dignify their hiring such a woman, they identify her as ‘a holy woman,’ but when they want to cast her in a bad light or place the blame for such activity on her, they refer to her as ‘a harlot.’”¹⁰⁹ Since a temple prostitute is considered more dignified than a common prostitute, the Adullamite is trying to give greater dignity to Judah by this label. Yet despite efforts to avoid shame for Judah, incriminating evidence will soon be presented.

Hirah correctly reports everything to Judah: “So he returned to Judah and he said, ‘I have not found her and also, the men of the place said, ‘No temple prostitute was here’” (Gen 38:22). His accurate report portrays him as an honest and trustworthy individual. Here Hirah contrasts Judah, who has been deceptive and untrustworthy. Hirah’s questioning of the men demonstrates his effort to fulfill his assignment. The effort by Hirah is contrasted with the lack of effort of Judah who is willing to dismiss the whole matter: “And Judah said, ‘Let her keep it for herself lest we become an object-of-contempt—behold, I sent this goat and you did not find her’” (Gen 38:23). To avoid public disgrace, Judah stops the search for the prostitute. Calvin comments, “Judah would

¹⁰⁶ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 103.

¹⁰⁷ Hartley, *Genesis*, 317.

¹⁰⁸ Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:262; Speiser, *Genesis*, 300.

¹⁰⁹ Hartley, *Genesis*, 317-8.

rather lose the ring, than, by spreading the matter further, give occasion to the speeches of the vulgar.”¹¹⁰ Judah accepts that the mission to deliver the young goat to Tamar has failed and draws the Adullamite into the situation by stating, “lest *we*” (Gen 38:23). He places blame on his friend by stating “*you* did not find her.” By doing so, it seems that Judah tries to justify his failure to deliver the goat and avoid shame.¹¹¹ In the end, the resolution of the unfulfilled payment is left to Tamar, by keeping the pledge as payment.

This whole scene and the great detail provided are rather comical.¹¹² Ironically, Judah’s servant has put forth such admirable effort to fulfill Judah’s pledge of a goat, but Judah himself has not done anything to fulfil his much greater pledge of a son. This irony is elucidated by Hartley:

Judah attempted to clear himself of failing to keep a pledge by making a formal pronouncement that he had sent this young goat, but Hirah could not find the woman. A play is made on the term “pledge.” Judah sought to pay his debt to a prostitute (Tamar), even though he had failed to keep his more important pledge of arranging for his widowed daughter-in-law (Tamar) to marry Shelah. Ironically, in trying to cover a small disgrace he was unaware that much greater disgraced was being exposed—his disregard of levirate marriage. Tamar thwarted Judah’s attempt to pay his small pledge because she had been thwarted by his failure to keep his pledge of marriage to his youngest son.¹¹³

A term that highlights Judah’s actions is לֵּשׁ (lest). There are two moments when Judah makes a decision based on *lest*. First, he withholds Shelah *lest* he die also. Then, Judah does not seek after the “harlot” *lest* he become a laughingstock. In both cases, the clauses following *lest* reveal Judah’s motivation. He is driven by self-interest and fear. Ironically, the very two things he fears (that Shelah be inhibited from providing him a grandson and

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Genesis*, 285.

¹¹¹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 41.

¹¹² Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 46.

¹¹³ Hartley, *Genesis*, 317.

he face shame for his indiscretion with a prostitute) are the very things that happen to him.

This whole scene is important for the emotional tension of the story. The fact that Judah cannot find the woman to fulfill his pledge adds a complication to the story. Preminger and Greenstein expound: “By separating the various strands of the plot, leaving Judah shamed without his pledges and having Tamar melt back into her widowhood, the story makes possible the all-important, climactic scene of discovery and recognition.”¹¹⁴

7. Discovered! (Verses 24 to 26)

The next several weeks pass by uneventfully. The text provides no information, until the group of anonymous reporters discovers Tamar’s gradually expanding belly.¹¹⁵ The passage of time indicates a new act has begun. “Then it happened, after about three months, it was reported to Judah, saying, ‘Tamar, your daughter-in-law, committed harlotry and also, behold—is pregnant from harlotry’” (Gen 38:24a). Jeansonne makes the interesting point that “in order for Tamar to be considered an adulteress, she must be either Er’s widow or Shelah’s future wife. Tamar has been denied on both accounts.”¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, these reporters have assumed the role of judge and jury, interpreting Tamar’s obvious pregnancy as evidence of prostitution. Once again, the reporters ever so subtly remind Judah of his responsibility over this “daughter-in-law” by referring to her as such. In this context, however, they may be referring not to Judah’s obligations to protect, but rather, to punish her. They also dignify her prominent role in the story by

¹¹⁴ Preminger and Greenstein, *Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism*, 491.

¹¹⁵ The rare use of the Hophal tense is used both times, in vv. 13 and 24.

¹¹⁶ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 105.

calling her by name.¹¹⁷ The accusation has been made and they wait expectantly for Judah's response.

No doubt Judah provides all the necessary drama to satisfy these reporters: "And Judah said, 'Bring her and let her be burnt'" (Gen 38:24b). Suddenly Judah's line is once again in jeopardy. Though he does not realize it, he issues the death of two more of his sons by condemning Tamar to death.¹¹⁸ Based on ancient biblical law, there is a mandate to kill both the woman and the man when adultery has been committed (Lev 20:10). However, Judah declares his judgement without investigating the identity of the man. Alter grants Judah no leniency: "The naked unreflective brutality of Judah's response to the seemingly incriminating news is even stronger in the original, where the synthetic character of biblical Hebrew reduces his deadly instructions to two words."¹¹⁹ This echoes his earlier staccato demand for sex in verse 16.

The story continues to intensify as it leads to the climax. Judah's condemnation of Tamar creates a second obstacle for her to overcome in the rising action of the story. The audience (both the ancient narrative audience and the contemporary reader) is no doubt filled with anticipation as none of the characters except Tamar seem to realize what has really happened. "When she was being brought out and she sent to her husband's father saying, 'To the man to whom these belong I am pregnant'" (Gen 38:25b). Finally the truth is presented. The narrator does not let us forget the scandalous aspect of the story, referring to Judah as "her husband's father." Ironically, here Tamar "sends" to Judah and is successful, contrary to Judah's failure to send to Tamar.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 47.

¹¹⁸ Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar," 151.

¹¹⁹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9.

¹²⁰ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 43.

This final appearance of this anonymous group ends the motif of anonymous reporting in Gen 38. It is first reported to Tamar that Judah is travelling to Timnah. A group of unnamed men report that no shrine prostitute had been beside the road at Enaim. Later, it is reported to Judah that Tamar is pregnant. Lastly, there is this group of reporters who relay messages between Tamar and Judah. We can imagine the group standing there in shock, and the narrator suggests this by the notable gap in their response. Since those who have brought her out give no response, Tamar continues: “And she said, ‘Identify, please, to whom these are—the signet ring and the cord and the staff’” (Gen 38:25b). This statement is remarkable. She sends this message to Judah, while also challenging the crowd of people, her accusers, to identify her items as well. Just as she has been publically shamed by Judah’s withholding of Shelah, so she stages this scene to publicly justify her actions. Tamar boldly chooses the perfect time to reveal Judah’s pieces of identification. In a sense, Tamar has justified herself, even before Judah can reply. In agreement with Tamar’s direct and powerful manner, the text does not include a large self-righteous speech. Tamar does not explain her actions nor justify herself. The fact that Shelah has grown up and Tamar is still a widow at her father’s house is enough evidence for the people. These are Tamar’s last words.

By the time the items are presented to Judah, everyone already knows that Judah is responsible for Tamar’s pregnancy. Judah is left with little choice but to claim his right as the father. Thus, the text states: “Then Judah identified...” (Gen 38:26a). Now the roles have been completely reversed. Judah told Tamar to remain in her father’s house and she complied; here, Tamar instructs Judah and he complies.

This whole episode has been carefully crafted by the narrator to create a parallel to previous chapters. What happens to Judah illustrates a theme in Genesis that the events in the life of a father are often repeated in the life of the son. Just as Jacob deceived Esau, but was deceived himself by Laban, so Judah deceives Tamar, but then is deceived himself. Similarly, there are strong connections between the way Judah treated his father and how he has now been treated. The verb “identify” is carefully chosen by the narrator. In the previous chapter, it had been Jacob who had identified Joseph’s garment. In both instances Judah is guilty. In Gen 37, the brothers successfully deceive their father, just as Tamar successfully deceives Judah in chapter 38.¹²¹ The brothers pretend to “comfort their father, all the time restraining their glee at the demise of Joseph,” just as Judah pretentiously tells Tamar to wait until Shelah grows up (Gen 38:11).¹²²

In both the deception of the brothers and Tamar, a personal item of identification and a goat play a role (Gen 37:3, 31; 38:14, 17, 25). In both cases, “evidence is presented by one party... to another party to establish either facticity... or culpability.”¹²³ The term נָתַן (please) is used. Also, in both situations, reporting is involved. The plot to deceive Joseph and Judah are both planned while the main male character is travelling toward the deceiving subject (Gen 37:18; 38:13-14). Also, the deceiver is a relative, in one case a brother and in the other, a daughter-in-law.¹²⁴ This parallel may contribute to the vindication of Tamar, in that her actions toward Judah serve to bring him justice for the deceptive way he treated his own father.

¹²¹ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 427.

¹²² Hamilton, *Genesis*, 427.

¹²³ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 432.

¹²⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 432.

The text continues: “and he said, ‘She is more righteous than I because I did not give her Shelah, my son’” (Gen 38:26b). Once the identity of the disappearing harlot is revealed by Tamar, Judah “is finally brought to insight.”¹²⁵ Judah’s statement has been variously translated. Medieval scholarship tried to downplay Judah’s confession, as Rashi legitimately translates: “She is right; it is from me.”¹²⁶ Wenham translates, “She is in the right, not I.”¹²⁷ Jeansonne, perhaps at the other extreme, states, “His statement that he ‘did not give her to Shelah, my son’ implies that not only did [Judah] fail to tell Shelah to have sexual relations with her, but that he was wrong in not having Shelah marry her.”¹²⁸ It is clear that Judah acknowledges the rightness of Tamar’s actions, in light of his misdealing with Shelah. However, Judah’s statement is not a confession of guilt for two reasons. Usually, the declaration of one’s sin is stated in explicit terms.¹²⁹ Yet Judah does not explicitly admit that he has sinned or that his action of withholding Shelah was wrong. Also, when an individual declares one’s own guilt and another’s innocence, there is usually a comparative expression that emphasizes the contrast between the rightness of one action and wickedness of the other.¹³⁰ For example, Saul’s statement to David is similar to Gen 38:26: “You are more righteous than I, for you have dealt well with me, while I have dealt wickedly with you” (1 Sam 24:17). In Exod 9:27, Pharaoh declares, “I have sinned. The LORD is in the right and I and my people are in the wrong,” Although Judah compares Tamar’s action with his own, he does not contrast them. He only

¹²⁵ Van Dijk-Hemes, “Tamar,” 155.

¹²⁶ Scherman, *Chumash*, 213.

¹²⁷ Wenham, *Genesis*, 364.

¹²⁸ Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 105.

¹²⁹ Usually the individual states, “I have sinned” (אָנאָשטענדיג; Exod 9:27; Num 22:34; Josh 7:20; 1 Sam 15:24, 30; 26:21; 2 Sam 12:13; 24:10, 17).

¹³⁰ In 2 Sam 24:17 David says, “I have sinned... but what have these sheep done,” contrasting his sin with the people’s innocence. See also Prov 24:24; 2 Kgs 10:9.

declares that Tamar is more righteous than he. Thus, this confession is not really an admission of guilt or wrongdoing.

Westermann notes that Tamar has procured justice for the community by protecting the rights of the community.¹³¹ Importantly, he accepts Tamar's pregnancy as his responsibility. His statement provides the climax of the tale. Tamar is vindicated and released from condemnation.

Judah's response is as follows, "And he did not continue to know her" (Gen 38:26c). This is foremost a euphemism to explain that Judah no longer had sex with Tamar. The narrator is careful to protect Judah's character by stating that once he realized Tamar's identity, he did not commit incest again.

In this section Tamar changes the course of the plot by presenting the evidence of Judah's identity as father of the twins. Verse twenty-six marks the climax of the story. The turning point of Tamar's situation occurs when Judah declares that her actions have actually been more righteous than his. She is vindicated and her goal of returning to the house of Judah is accomplished. Tamar's actions have brought resolution to the problem, both the immediate problem of her imminent death and the broader dilemma of Judah's line. Judah's unjust actions are exposed, Tamar is freed from condemnation, and the wrong done against her is vindicated. From this moment onward, things will be better for Tamar and the reader can feel assured that the problem of the threat to Judah's line will be resolved. The story has moved from straight narrative to narrative-through-dialogue and ends with descriptive narrative.¹³²

¹³¹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 55-57.

¹³² Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible*, 31.

8. Twins! (Verses 27 to 30)

After Judah's declaration, the story concludes with Tamar taking center stage until the curtain draws.¹³³ It reads, "And it happened at the time she was bearing,¹³⁴ behold—twins in her womb!" (Gen 38:27). What a delightful surprise for Tamar. The story has come full circle, beginning with the death of two sons and ending with the birth of two sons. The announcement that Tamar is pregnant with twins brings the theme of fertility that has created a contrast and highlight between the characters of the story to a close. Fertility and infertility contrast the daughter of Shua with Tamar and highlight the failures of the sons. The chapter begins with three pregnancies by the daughter of Shua, contrasting the seeming inability of Tamar to bear children. Later, one son fails to impregnate Tamar, one son refuses and the other is never given the opportunity. The fertile Tamar is childless, until she finally has the surprise of twins—showing her to be doubly fertile.

Tamar is no longer the childless widow for, just like Sarah and Rachel, Tamar has become pregnant. The remaining four verses provide a detailed account of Tamar's labour, in almost a "play by play" retelling. There is no birth oracle of the twins and, uncharacteristic for ancient Hebrew narratives, there is great detail given to the actual birth moment.¹³⁵ Throughout the story, the details of traditionally private activities have been made public. The narrator continues this pattern by providing the details of Tamar's labour: "And it happened, as she was bearing, one gave a hand and the midwife took and tied upon the hand a scarlet saying, 'This one came out first'" (Gen 38:28). This is the

¹³³ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 47.

¹³⁴ Here and in the next verse, the translation "she was giving birth" would be a clearer option; I have stated "bearing" to avoid using the term "giving," which is a key word throughout the passage.

¹³⁵ Interestingly, there is also a brief birth account of Esau and Jacob (Gen 25: 22, 25, 26).

last instance of the verb נתן (to give) in the passage. The frequent use of the verb to give develops an important motif in this chapter. It begins with Onan's refusal to give an offspring to his brother (Gen 38:9). Then the narrator announces that Tamar realizes that she has not been given to Shelah as a wife (Gen 38:14). When the opportunity arises, Tamar asks what Judah will give her for sex, then what he will give as a pledge (Gen 38:16, 17). "What pledge should I give you?" Judah asks and he proceeds to give the pledge (Gen 38:18). In the end, Judah confesses that he did not give her Shelah (Gen 38:26). Finally, Perez gives his hand as he is being born, but then withdraws it (Gen 38:28). Thus, a situation is presented whereby Onan and Judah did not give, so Tamar asks Judah to give and he does and admits that he was wrong not to give in the first place. Often the object in question, either directly or indirectly, is an offspring for Tamar. It is fitting then that the final occurrence of the verb is in reference to Perez. This boy's action reflects the way Judah dealt with Tamar. Just as Perez gave only a portion of himself forth, so Judah only gave a part of what he owed Tamar. The boy withdrew, as Judah did, and, like Judah, it was to his humiliation.

The mention of the term "first" reminds us of an ongoing theme of the first throughout the narrative. The daughter of Shua was the first wife, yet her children were not chosen to continue Judah's line; Er was the first son, but he was not chosen to continue Judah's line. This ongoing theme foreshadows the nature of what happens next: "And it happened when returning his hand—behold his brother came out and she said, 'What a gap you broke for yourself!' So he called his name Perez" (Gen 38:29). Once again the younger, second individual is the chosen one. This is another example in

Genesis of when the law of primogeniture is set aside.¹³⁶ Throughout the book of Genesis, the younger son is chosen over the older one, demonstrated by Abel (Gen 4:1-5), Isaac (Gen 17:20-21), Jacob (Gen 27:36), Joseph (Gen 37:3), Ephraim (Gen 48:18-19) and, here in chapter 38, Shelah and Perez.¹³⁷ The struggle over firstborn rights between Perez and his brother also demonstrate the rivalry between siblings throughout Genesis.

Just like these boys' struggle for the position of firstborn, the characters in this story have been continually motivated by self-preservation. Judah aligns himself with wealth and procures a daughter-in-law who promises to be fertile. Onan does not want to put his own family in jeopardy and so does not impregnate Tamar. Judah sends Tamar away to protect his remaining son. Tamar devises and executes a plan to bear a child to preserve herself by producing a child in Judah's family. She carefully selects identifying articles of Judah to protect herself later on. Judah seeks out the prostitute to keep his pledge, thereby attempting to save his reputation, but then stops the search in an effort to save his reputation. This concluding competition is a fitting end, then, to a story filled with tension between characters to continue the line.

The story ends with this final verse: "Afterwards, his brother, who upon his hand was scarlet, came out and he called his name Zerah" (Gen 38:30). The safe delivery of the two boys brings the theme of line to a close. In this passage, Er and Onan put Judah's line in jeopardy. Judah withholds Shelah in an effort to protect his line. Yet it is Tamar who truly guards the line by producing sons. Even within the twins there is a competition for firstborn. First, each one fights to exit the womb before the other. Second, as we later

¹³⁶ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 6.

¹³⁷ Wenham, *Genesis*, 364. It may also be noted that Rachel is favoured over Leah (Gen 29:30).

discover, it is not Shelah through whom the line of David and the Messiah comes, but through Perez.

The future of these boys leaves room for much speculation. Jacob and Esau, a set of twins wrestling for firstborn rights, definitely had their own drama, raising a question as to what sort of drama will happen in the lives of Perez and Zerah.¹³⁸

The text gives no further information about Tamar, although the birth of the boys secures a place for Tamar in the patriarchal society.¹³⁹ Her story ends at a point of vindication. Victory is attributed to Tamar whose “aspiration to become the mother of male offspring [is] realized twofold.”¹⁴⁰ Throughout the story, Tamar’s function has been to provide a line for Judah’s family; once this is accomplished, there is no more use for her. At the same time, the reader is left to wonder what further impact this bold, ingenious female had on the house of Judah.

It is fitting that the last word of the story is about Tamar’s children. As for Judah, this is not the ending of his story at all. The reader will have to wait several chapters before Judah surfaces again, but when he re-enters the text, a great transformation of character is indeed evident. The tension of the story has been the threat to the line of Judah. The birth of Tamar’s twin boys brings the story to a finish by fulfilling this

¹³⁸ Sailhamer (“Genesis II,” 232) comments on the relation of Perez and Zerah to Jacob and Esau: “The whole of the Jacob narratives reaches a fitting summary in this brief account of the birth of the two sons Perez and Zerah. As the Jacob narrative began with an account of the struggle of the twins... so now the conclusion of the Jacob narrative is marked by a similar struggle of the twins. In both cases the struggle resulted in a reversal of the right of the firstborn and right of the blessing. The result of both struggles was that the younger gained the upper hand over the elder. As Jacob struggled with Esau and overcame him, so Perez overcame Zerah, the elder, gained the right of the firstborn (vv. 28-29, cf. Num 26:20, where Perez is regarded as the firstborn). The brevity and austerity with which the narrative is recounted leaves the impression that the meaning of the passage is self-evident to the reader. Indeed, coming as it does on the heels of a long series of reversals in which the younger gains the upper hand on the elder, its sense is transparent.”

¹³⁹ Bos, “Out of the Shadows,” 48. This is also the case in Ruth 4, where no further information is provided about Ruth or Naomi.

¹⁴⁰ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9.

thematic quest for an heir. Judah's line is indeed secure. Tamar is victorious. As is typical of ancient Hebrew narratives, the story concludes on a note of peace: "the plot line ascends from a calm point of departure through the stage of involvement to the climax of conflict and tension, and from there rapidly to the finishing plot and tranquillity."¹⁴¹ The final section of the story, then, provides both the falling action and the denouement. As the reader might have predicted, Tamar successfully gives birth. Tamar is further vindicated by the birth of two boys, being doubly blessed. She has achieved more than could be expected by bearing twins. By the conclusion of the story Tamar's final state is much better than her initial one.

In Part I of this thesis, Narrative Criticism was discussed. After presenting my procedure, this thesis examined Gen 38. We have studied this passage very closely and many insights have been illuminated. Now this thesis will present the characterization of Judah and then Tamar. Once the characterization of Tamar is discussed, this thesis will present Tamar as the heroine of the story and consider the applications and conclusions that can be drawn from her life.

¹⁴¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 121.

Chapter 2: Analysis of Characterization of Judah and Tamar

Having critically examined the narrative of Gen 38, this thesis will now present the characterization of Judah, followed by the characterization of Tamar. The ultimate objective of this thesis is to present Tamar as the heroic figure of Gen 38. Thus, this chapter will also develop a definition of true heroism, based on the qualities of a heroic figure and conclude that Tamar fits such a description perfectly.

A. Characterization of Judah

Judah is one of the main characters in Gen 38. This portrayal of Judah's character focuses on the related qualities demonstrated in chapter 38, but also provides a variety of comments regarding Judah's characterization before and after this passage. Judah is the first character introduced in Gen 38. His characterization, though, begins at his birth. His name יהודה (Judah) means "praised, object of praise"¹ and originates from his mother's declaration to praise the LORD for giving her a fourth son (Gen 29:35). The meaning of his name suggests that there will be something about Judah for which to praise the LORD. This is confirmed by Jacob in Gen 49:8. In the greater context of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is certainly praiseworthy that Judah is singled out as a special tribe and that both the Davidic line and the royal Messiah came from him.

The first scene where Judah is particularly singled out is Gen 37. The brothers decide to kill Joseph—all but Reuben. The narrator assures us that he intended to save Joseph (Gen 37:22). With Joseph out of the way in an empty cistern, the men sit down to satisfy themselves with food. Along comes a wealthy caravan and Judah speaks up. "What profit is there...?" Judah asks (Gen 37:26). It is unlikely that selling Joseph is an

¹ BDB, 397.

act of mercy. Judah has already written Joseph out of the equation and now sees an opportunity to benefit and he seizes it.² His opening words in the biblical text, then, depict a man whose primary concern is profit and who easily disregards a relative. He states, “What profit is there if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites; but let’s not lay a hand on him, for after all, he’s our brother, our own flesh” (Gen 37:26-7 NET). This last addition almost makes Judah appear good. But, unlike the case of Reuben, there is no narrative aside revealing Judah’s worthy intentions. The reader must judge by Judah’s own words—and his first utterance is his self-serving question: “What profit is there?” Besides demonstrating a character with little regard for others and motivated by self-interest, this passage also reveals that Judah is an unperceptive individual. He is oblivious to what is really going on—Reuben is trying to save Joseph. Judah ought not to be harshly judged for this, but it is an important point in the development of Judah’s character, for very soon Judah will once again lack proper judgement in a circumstance. Genesis 37, then, creates a picture of Judah as a profit-seeker who has little regard for others, who is heartless in dealing with his own family members, who does not demonstrate mercy and who lacks correct perception of his situation.

The opening of chapter 38 presents Judah as a man who has self-serving motivations. First, he seeks after wealth. Judah, a man with a keen eye for seizing the opportunity for profit, wastes no time in taking Shua’s (Wealth’s) daughter (Gen 38:2). Marriage to Shua, a wealthy man’s daughter, would invariably be a desirable alliance for a man who sought after riches. Judah’s friendship with Hirah, a man of “splendour,” may also contribute to Judah’s characterization as a man who sought after wealth. The second

² Carmichael, *Women, Law, and the Genesis Traditions*, 57.

person Judah takes is Tamar, a woman whose name suggests she will be a very fruitful woman. No doubt Judah desired a woman who would provide him a sizeable line.

Judah's instructions to Onan are also self-serving, motivated by the desire for lineage and not obligation to Tamar.³ While this may be expected in an ancient Near Eastern society, throughout all of his dealings with Tamar, he neglects his responsibility to provide a secure position for her within his family, ensuring that this daughter-in-law is not abandoned because of his son's death. Instead, he sends Tamar away to serve his own desire to protect Shelah from her, again placing his own interests and that of his immediate family unit above his responsibility to her.⁴ His motivation in giving the prostitute a young goat is to get back his pledge and his decision to let her keep the pledge is only to prevent himself from becoming a community laughingstock (Gen 38:20, 23). The nature of his pledge is also surprising. Yet by easily giving away such a valuable possession, Judah reveals the self-centred world he has created for himself. He wants sex with this apparent harlot so much that he disregards any cost it might be to him. While the motivation that caused Judah to declare that Tamar be burnt is debateable, it was a convenient opportunity to get rid of her (Gen 38:24). It is to be expected in ancient Near Eastern culture that individuals give priority to the well-being of the community, yet Judah seeks to further his own interests at the expense of others.

Judah is also presented as a rather cold-hearted man, detached from his family relationships. This portrayal is first evidenced by his treatment of Joseph in chapter 37.⁵ It is furthered by his move away from his other brothers and father at the beginning of

³ See above discussion; Judah does not use a personal reference to Tamar and does not instruct Onan to marry her, as the law indicates.

⁴ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 44.

chapter 38. The way in which he procures a wife is immediate and devoid of affection, quite a contrast from the 14-year betrothal love story of his father Jacob.⁶ Judah meets her, marries her and sleeps with her—all in one verse (Gen 38:2). As Wenham notes, “the fact that his wife’s name is not mentioned... may point in the same direction.”⁷ Judah never expresses any feelings for his wife.⁸ Several commentators note that even Judah’s decision to marry a Canaanite demonstrated disregard for his forefathers’ desire that their descendants should not forge alliances with Canaanites. Wenham comments, “Yet knowing his father’s antipathy, Judah went ahead, showing once again his callous disregard for his father’s feelings.”⁹ He adds that “it may be presumed that Jacob felt similarly [as Isaac felt when Esau married the Hittites] about his son’s marriage.”¹⁰

Judah’s dealing with Er and Onan and the noticeable omission of mourning also present Judah as cold-hearted. Notably, when Judah’s first son dies, the narrator neglects to mention any sad response by Judah, suggesting Judah’s lack of attachment to others. From the narrator’s perspective, it is business as usual for Judah and he instructs his second son to take up his responsibility to his dead brother. Alter expands on this:

After we have been exposed to Jacob’s extravagant procedures of mourning over the imagined death of one son, Judah’s reaction to the actual death in quick sequence of two sons is passed over in complete silence: he is only reported delivering pragmatic instructions having to do with the next son in line. If this striking contrast underscores Jacob’s excesses, it surely also makes us wonder whether there is a real lack of responsiveness in Judah.¹¹

⁵ Selling Joseph was certainly better than having him killed, yet based on his own speech, it can be argued that Judah was more interested in the monetary profit from selling him than the well-being of Joseph’s life.

⁶ Preminger and Greenstein, *Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism*, 491.

⁷ Wenham, *Genesis*, 366.

⁸ Again, Judah contrasts his father. Jacob greets Rachel with a kiss and Gen 29:18 states that he loved Rachel. Throughout the Jacob novella, Jacob interacts personally with his wives. When he recounts Rachel’s death, he states that it was to his sorrow that she died (Gen 48:7).

⁹ Wenham, *Genesis*, 365.

¹⁰ Wenham, *Genesis*, 365.

¹¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

The manner in which he makes this demand is purely matter-of-fact; he “does not say to Onan, ‘marry her,’ just ‘go in to her’ or ‘have sex with her.’”¹² At the death of his second son, there is still no sorrow mentioned in the text. Then there is the announcement of Judah’s wife dying and the ambiguous reference to mourning.¹³ Whether or not Judah in fact mourned, when the respectable time of mourning passes, Judah carries on his affairs, attending the sheep-shearing festival.

His visit to Tamar as a prostitute without identifying her also demonstrates his detachment. The fact that Judah did not recognize Tamar by her physical features demonstrates that indeed Judah could not have seen very much of her, even when standing right beside her. Calvin observes this: “He sees the woman at a distance, and it is not possible that he should have been captivated by her beauty.”¹⁴ This was a woman with whom Judah had been familiar with for a long time and yet he does not even recognize her voice or her mannerisms.¹⁵ Despite the intimate nature of his interaction with her, he does not realize it is his daughter-in-law. Not once in this passage does Judah employ Tamar’s personal name, referring to her only by relation.¹⁶

Judah is characterized as a man who mistreats those around him. This theme is evidenced by the way Judah mistreated Joseph. The way he treats his wife is purely authoritarian, devoid of the personal interaction that his forefathers exemplified with their wives.¹⁷ Judah’s delay in properly dealing with the matter of Tamar, leaves Shelah in a

¹² Hamilton, *Genesis*, 435.

¹³ See comments on Gen 38:12 in the previous chapter of this thesis.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Genesis*, 284.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Genesis*, 285.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 425, 435.

¹⁷ For example, Adam follows Eve’s lead and eats the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:6), Abraham sleeps with Hagar at Sarai’s suggestion (Gen 16:2) and then sends Hagar away at the request of Sarah (Gen 21:9-14), Isaac responds to Rebekah’s request that Jacob leaves to find a wife elsewhere (Gen 27:46-28:2), and Jacob

limbo state, old enough to marry but prohibited because his father does not give him to Tamar. From the information provided by the text, it seems that Judah remains satisfied to ignore the matter, as long as he is not immediately inconvenienced and Tamar is kept out of sight. For Judah, it is a difficult dilemma—shame demands Tamar be given to Shelah, but Tamar may cause the death of Shelah. Nevertheless, the way Judah treats Tamar is completely unjust. He does not allow her to be impregnated by his third son. When he becomes suspicious that she has had an influence in the death of his two older sons and now that she is of no benefit to him, Judah sends her back to her father.¹⁸ The narrator emphasizes the wrongful action of Judah by inserting the title of daughter-in-law, thereby reminding the reader of Judah's responsibility to ensure that Tamar is given an offspring and is supported.

The dialogue that transpires between Judah and Tamar reflects the way he has been treating women throughout this passage. He is quick to take them when desired and for as long as they serve his purpose. The dialogue he shares with Tamar is also speedy and Judah clearly projects an element of control. Judah does not ask for Tamar's permission to have sex with her, but practically demands it, demonstrating his disregard for the person and his overwhelming urge to get the deed accomplished.¹⁹ His hasty condemnation of Tamar, discussed below, further demonstrates his unjust mistreatment of others.

sleeps with his wives' handmaidens at their individual requests (Gen 30:3-12). As for the relationship of father and son, Judah himself will negotiate with his father, persuading him to send Benjamin to Egypt (Gen 43:3-13).

¹⁸ A similar situation occurs in Ruth 1 and the women are sent back to their father's houses. Yet, in that situation, there were no other sons for the daughters-in-law to marry.

¹⁹ Genesis 38:16: "Come now! I will go in to you." However, Tamar is offering her service of prostitution and is not under obligation to have sex with him. One would expect an offer of payment for her service, not a demand that she have sex with him before discussion of payment or pledge.

Throughout Gen 38, Judah demonstrates a lack of good judgement. Judah's marriage to a Canaanite was not only showing disrespect for the patterns of his ancestors, but was also an unwise decision in and of itself. The marriage created "a more permanent amalgamation with Canaanites," something strongly warned against by Abraham and Isaac (Gen 24:3; 28:1).²⁰ When Esau married women from among the Canaanites (specifically, the Hittites), it was a source of grief to Isaac and Rebecca (Gen 26:35). Wenham notes that "by marrying the daughter of a Canaanite, Judah had realized the worst fears of Abraham."²¹ For Judah to make this same mistake was clearly unwise.

Judah's assessment of his own family members shows a failure to discern the reality of the situation and to properly assess character. James Williams blatantly states that Judah lacks both knowledge and wisdom.²² His first misjudgment is of his sons. He fails to perceive their extreme wickedness. He also fails to realize that his attempt to force Onan to give Tamar a child is completely defeated. Judah also misjudges Tamar. First, he blames her for the deaths of his sons. Then he naïvely assumes that Tamar would not rebel against his decision to withhold Shelah. Even the ease with which Judah gives his pledge to Tamar is unwise, certainly an unduly valuable pledge to guard so lightly.

Based on the words and actions of Judah, he is an untrustworthy individual. In his first individual appearance, he presents himself as a man trying to save Joseph's life, yet we can be suspicious that his real motive is better captured by his opening words that express his desire for profit (Gen 37:26). Then, he participates in lying to his father about Joseph's death, presenting Judah's speech as untrustworthy (Gen 37:31-32). Further, we do not trust Judah because he lies to Tamar, made known to us by an aside from the

²⁰ Skinner, *Genesis*, 451.

²¹ Wenham, *Genesis*, 364.

narrator (Gen 38:11). Judah does not fulfil his promise to send a goat to Tamar.²³ Even Judah's declaration upon realizing that he is the guilty partner who slept with Tamar is slightly ambiguous.²⁴

Judah is clearly portrayed as morally insensitive. The death of his two sons creates a bad situation, yet he assumes that the source of the problem is not within his own household or the evilness of his sons, but with Tamar. Gunn and Fewell cite this incident as an example of how "characters may see the world one way when in fact it is different," by stating that "Judah thought the woman caused the deaths of his sons, when their deaths were their own fault or, at least, God's doing."²⁵

Self-righteousness and pride also characterize Judah by the way he tries to present himself as better than he truly is. Hirah's belief that the unknown woman of Enaim was a cult-prostitute, despite Judah's perception that she was a harlot, suggests that Judah and Hirah have presented the prostitute in a better light, assumingly in an effort to avert shame on Judah. Then, to avoid public disgrace, Judah stops the search for her. He does not accept any blame for not fulfilling his promise. Rather, Judah covers his own failure to deliver the young goat by diverting blame to Hirah.²⁶ He draws the Adullamite into the situation by stating that they both would become a laughingstock and by casting the ultimate blame on Hirah because he could not find the woman (Gen 38:23). As readers, we know that there is little reason for this delivery man to be blamed for Tamar's

²² Williams, *Women Recounted*, 102.

²³ Although Judah did technically send the young goat to Tamar, because the messenger did not successfully deliver it, he did not fulfill his promise. His personal effort to keep his word was minimal, instructing his friend to send the young goat rather than doing it himself and ending the search at an early stage (Gen 38:23).

²⁴ When Judah states, "She is more righteous than I" (Gen 38:26) the reader must interpret what exactly he means, as noted in the earlier analysis.

²⁵ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 74.

²⁶ See above commentary on Gen 38:23.

disappearance. Yet, Judah does not take any responsibility for the situation, blaming Hirah and letting Tamar resolve the situation by keeping the costly pledge as payment. Throughout the whole scene Judah is motivated by his desire to “keep face” before others.²⁷

Judah’s self-righteousness is evident by the double-standard he enacts; particularly, his double-faced standard is evident in how he deals with Tamar’s pregnancy. Gunn and Fewell observe, “characters may enact values different from those they propound. Judah was anxious to burn his daughter-in-law for committing the same sin of which he was guilty.”²⁸ In Gen 38:26, Judah seems to humble himself and accept responsibility for Tamar’s pregnancy. He states, “She is more righteous than I because I did not give her Shelah my son” (Gen 38:26). But is Judah truly humbling himself? At long last, Judah rightly perceives the situation. He has not discerned the sinful deeds of Onan, he has misjudged Tamar’s role in the death of his sons, he has mistaken her for a prostitute, he blamed his unfulfilled pledge on the Adullamite for not finding a prostitute and he wrongly condemned Tamar’s actions. Now the truth is revealed. He identifies the objects as his and realizes what has happened. It was not Tamar who was contagious (Judah himself certainly did not die), nor was she infertile. The Adullamite was not to blame for the disappearing harlot. Above all, he was very wrong to condemn Tamar. Yet does Judah take responsibility for his failures? His statement is not exactly a full confession. It is hardly even remorseful. Judah is righteous, to be certain, but Tamar is just *more* righteous. He does not actually confess to wrongdoing. But he does (almost) admit to the real reason for sending Tamar away; Judah had no intention of giving her

²⁷ Surely this is to be expected from Judah. However, this is an important point of characterization because the text will later reveal a transformed and humble Judah.

Shelah. Gunn and Fewell note that in light of “the implicating objects and the public nature of the confrontation... Judah is working hard to save face,” this being an example of how public speeches may not be reliable indicators of character.²⁹ As far as Gen 38 is concerned, Judah is presented as self-righteous and proud to the end.

In all of his actions, Judah does not show mercy towards others nor personal repentance. Like other elements of his characterization, this too is demonstrated by the way he acted toward his brother Joseph. Evidently Judah feels no remorse for leaving his daughter-in-law to be a young widow in her father’s house, nor Shelah to be a young man unable to marry, for he does nothing to resolve the issue. Upon hearing of Tamar’s pregnancy, he immediately issues a merciless, fatal sentence that “was more harsh than the subsequent law” demanded (Lev 20:10).³⁰ This is especially surprising in light of the fact that it was Judah’s own withholding of Shelah that prevented Tamar from getting pregnant through appropriate means. Even when he is identified as the father, he does not fully repent of the way he treated Tamar.

It is important to note that in Gen 38 the characterization of Judah is not completely negative. The narrator helps to reclaim Judah’s reputation by several earlier asides. The birth of three sons can be accepted as a sign of God’s blessing on his household. There is no direct suggestion by the narrator that the wicked deeds of the sons reflect poorly on Judah. Importantly, the narrator tells the reader that Judah went to the prostitute *after* his wife had died (Gen 38:12). It is also significant that the reader is told that Judah did not realize he was sleeping with his daughter-in-law; indeed, we are informed of this twice (Gen 38:15, 16). Moreover, we can be sure of this if we recall that

²⁸ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 74.

²⁹ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 69.

Judah thought Tamar was to blame for the deaths of his sons! Also, although he is surely trapped by the presence of the objects he pledged, Judah does not deny his role in Tamar's pregnancy (Gen 38:26). As noted above, the narrator adds that Judah did not sleep with her again.³¹

Finally, Judah does demonstrate some redeeming traits in this passage. In dealing with Onan, Judah "appeals to Onan's sense of sympathy by referring to the late Er as *your brother* rather than as 'my son.'"³² He encourages his son to do right by Er by reminding him of his legal duty (Gen 38:8). Though he does not refer to his first sons by name, he does refer to Shelah by name, reflecting a personal bond with him (Gen 38:11, 26). From a human perspective, sending Tamar away can be interpreted as protecting his family, specifically Shelah. Judah did believe that Tamar could cause the death of Shelah too; thus, it should be credited to him that while his actions seem heartless toward Tamar, they appear legitimate for a father with one son left and a need to preserve his line. His last act in the passage is to name his sons, taking responsibility for the result of his incestuous actions with Tamar. The meaning of his last son's name and the final word of the text, "Dawn," from the verb "to rise" or "shine,"³³ is far more positive than the meaning of the name of his first son Er. Tamar's victory of bearing twin boys is ultimately also Judah's victory, for at the conclusion to the story, Judah's overarching desire for a line is fulfilled and the tension created in the life of Judah is resolved.

So far, in this study, the characterization of Judah has been largely negative. Our introduction to Judah in previous chapters of Genesis presents him as a violent man who

³⁰ Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:262.

³¹ Keil and Delitzsch (*Pentateuch*, 1:274) views this as partially redeeming and evidence that Judah did not approve of what happened.

³² Hamilton, *Genesis*, 425.

seeks profit. Gen 38 reveals Judah as having self-serving motivations, being cold-hearted and detached, mistreating others, lacking in judgement, untrustworthy, self-righteous and merciless. Yet, I suggest that all the negative traits of Judah's character are redeemed by the narrator. Following Gen 38, the narrator proceeds to show that Judah's character has undergone a major transformation, evidenced primarily in the speech he makes to Joseph.³⁴

Judah returns to his father's land, the shift in location being a first indication of a shift in his character. Next, he and his brothers speak honestly before Joseph (Gen 42:10-13). In his trip to Egypt, Judah demonstrates good judgement and honesty, as the brothers begin to properly interpret events: "Surely we are being punished because of our brother, because we saw how distressed he was when he cried to us for mercy, but we refused to listen. That is why this distress has come upon us" (Gen 42:21 NET). In this, they have good judgement. When they return to their father they provide an honest report (Gen 42:29).³⁵

Judah next demonstrates selflessness, attachment to others and humility. When the brothers must convince Jacob to let them bring Benjamin to Egypt, Judah makes a statement that is powerful evidence of a character change:

Send the boy with me... and we will live and not die, indeed we and also you and also our children. I myself will be a guarantee for him, by my hand, I will secure him. If I do not bring him to you and place him before

³³ BDB, 280b. This is especially in reference to the dawning of Zion, see Isa 60:3.

³⁴ Wenham (*Genesis*, 364) states: the "beginning of the transformation [is] when he admits 'She is in the right, not I.'" Since I have demonstrated that this is not a complete confession of wrongdoing, I present the true revelation of Judah's character transformation as occurring after Gen 38. Williams (*Women Recounted*, 102) comments: "A change of heart occurs only when he [Judah] and the brothers are plunged into the deprivation of famine and a worse calamity, the unutterable grief of the father should he lose Benjamin as well as Joseph."

³⁵ This is significant because the last time they travelled back to their father they fabricated a story about Joseph's death and deceived him (Gen 37:32).

you, then I have sinned to you all of my days, for if we had not delayed until now we would have returned twice. (Gen 43:8-10)

Judah is proactive in resolving the issue and willingly accepts personal responsibility for Benjamin. Judah's offer to take care of Benjamin shows concern for others. Judah is presented as trustworthy by the intensity of his pledge, offering his own life (Gen 42:37; 43:9). Judah seems to be motivated less by self-interest and more by the interest of the group. Judah properly discerns the situation and his response reveals that he understands his father's feelings. Finally, this statement hints at a humbled Judah, willing to accept condemnation if he fails.

On the second trip to Egypt, Judah's character transformation reaches its climactic moment. The first sign of humility and repentance occurs when Judah and his brothers tear their clothes at the news of Joseph's cup in Benjamin's sack and then throw themselves to the ground before Joseph (Gen 44:12-14). In Judah's speech, his character transformation is pointedly revealed: "What can we say to my lord? What can we speak? Or how can we declare ourselves righteous? God has found the iniquity of your servants. Behold, we are the servants of my lord, indeed we and also the one of whom the cup was found in his hand" (Gen 44:16 NET). Judah displays great humility. He takes full responsibility—ironically, for something he did not do.³⁶ There is no blame cast on another. He interprets these events as his just punishment.

In his next speech, Judah stands before Joseph and insists that his life be taken in place of a brother (Gen 44:33). Judah "appeals for Benjamin's release with great warmth and tenderness, describing with great love his father's suffering since Joseph's

³⁶ This claim assumes that Judah is taking responsibility for the cup in Benjamin's sack. It could be that Judah is referring to the fact that he sold Joseph, perhaps believing that his past sin is the reason for what

disappearance and foreseeing his sorrowful death if Benjamin is not allowed to return.”³⁷ He thinks about what would happen to his father if he returned without Benjamin (Gen 44:34 NET). In summary, Judah gives an honest and self-sacrificial speech that assumes responsibility and protects the well-being of a relative.

Although the narrator presents Judah in a predominantly negative light, the dishonourable qualities he exhibits in this chapter are essential for two reasons. First, they serve to highlight the good qualities in the character of Tamar. Second, Judah’s actions following this story reveal a powerful character transformation, in which all of the negative qualities that he demonstrates in this story are completely overcome. From the outset, this characterization of Judah may seem harsh. Yet, many of Judah’s failures are seemingly due to “accidents” of his situation, as Judah tries above all to protect his line. These negative traits are continually exemplified in Gen 38. Yet, the characterization of Judah beyond chapter 38 eventually demonstrates a great transformation of character.³⁸ Although he is initially portrayed as one who is motivated by self-interest, cold-hearted and detached from familial relationships, lacking judgement, untrustworthy, deceptive, self-righteous and merciless, all of these traits are redeemed. Judah becomes a character who demonstrates selfless motivations, attachment to his familial relationships and perceptive judgement, and is trustworthy, honest, humble and repentant. The contrast in the development of Judah highlights the positive character traits in Tamar. We will now examine the characterization of Tamar in detail, using the insights presented in the previous verse-by-verse analysis of Gen 38.

has happened. If this is the case, Judah’s statement still reveals a repentant spirit, as this is still the first time he has confessed to his actions.

³⁷ Wenham, *Genesis*, 364.

B. Characterization of Tamar

Genesis 38 is one chapter in the life of Judah. He appears both before and after this chapter and the other scenes in which he appears are important contributions to his characterization. In the case of Tamar, her characterization is restricted to this narrative. Yet despite the limited portrayal, the reader may draw a variety of conclusions about her character and may observe her transformation of character. In the end Tamar is presented as a complex character who has a great influence on the history of the Israelite nation and receives personal recognition for her bold and cleverly constructed scheme. Her ultimate success demonstrates her ability to overcome major obstacles and procure a victorious outcome for herself and for Judah.

Unlike Judah, Tamar is not mentioned before Gen 38. Yet, we still know something of her situation. As a woman in ancient Near Eastern culture and as demonstrated in Gen 38, she had less power and control over her life than men, since men made the major decisions regarding the well-being of the household. Also, as a Canaanite, she was considered an “outsider” to Judah’s Hebrew family ancestry. This rendered her with even less power. Since Tamar lived in a culture that gave women few options to procure personal power over their lives, what she accomplished is truly remarkable.

Tamar is introduced early in the passage. She is not a nameless figure like the woman Judah takes as a wife. Indeed, her name is a good point at which to begin a study of her characterization. Since the image of a palm tree is one of fruitfulness, the reader ought to rightly predict that this character will bear children. The meaning of her name

³⁸ The final contribution of the book of Genesis to the character of Judah is the blessing of Jacob at Gen 49:8-12 and is not discussed above. This blessing does not explicitly refer to the acts of Gen 38 and to

indicates that it is not Tamar who is responsible for inhibiting a pregnancy. Thus, the narrator introduces Tamar as a woman who will successfully fulfill the hopes of Judah to bear a child for his line.

Until Tamar takes the initiative to act on her behalf, the narrative does not explicitly portray her character. Initially, all we know of Tamar is that she was married to a wicked man—so wicked that the LORD caused him to die. Tamar remains a silent figure in the text, since the text does not reveal Tamar's response to Er's death. Once Tamar is with Onan, she must face the consequences of being acted against by a wicked man. And once again Tamar does not act or speak.

Amazingly, Onan is also killed for his wickedness. In a seemingly short period of time Tamar has lost two men. Again the text does not report Tamar's response. We can assume that she did not disclose Onan's actions against her; at least Judah seems to have no knowledge of the behaviour. Therefore, the introduction to Tamar's character reveals a woman who has the misfortune of having a first husband who is excessively evil and then being mistreated by Onan, who prevents her from conceiving. Throughout these events, Tamar is a passive, silent character.

The verse containing Judah's instructions to Tamar and her response provides a key moment of characterization. In these opening scenes, the narrator presents Tamar as obedient, emphasizing her obedience to Judah by using the same verbs in both the command and the response. She is told: שְׁבִי אֶל־מִנָּה בֵּית־אָבִיךָ (remain a widow in the house of your father; Gen 38:11). Then the narrator reports: וַתֵּלֶךְ תָּמָר וַתֵּשֶׁב בֵּית אָבִיהָ (so Tamar left and remained in the house of her father; Gen 38:11).

Throughout the story, Tamar is treated unjustly. The injustice in Tamar's life begins with the misfortune of being married to a man so wicked that YHWH puts him to death. Then she is unjustly treated by Onan, denied her right to bear a child. Judah does nothing to ensure that Tamar is being treated right by Onan, leaving her seemingly powerless to act. Left widowed and childless, she is without the support and security provided by a marriage and children. Judah then denies Tamar his third son. This is yet another injustice committed against Tamar. Worse, Judah lied about his intentions, leaving Tamar waiting in vain for Shelah.³⁹

Finally, as readers, we must also recognize the social injustice against Tamar. In a general sense, Tamar lives in a patriarchal society where women are powerless to oppose the rule of the patriarch within the social limits. For Tamar to act against Judah, she must act independently of the social system, since Judah himself does not ensure that she is treated justly. The text itself demonstrates the higher standing of males over females: "Words for males abound: son (vv. 3, 4, and 5), firstborn (vv. 5 and 7), brother (vv. 8 and 9). Tamar is identified twice without a proper name and in relation to a male: brother's wife (vv. 8 and 9)."⁴⁰ Her particular situation puts her at a greater disadvantage—she must bear the shame of being thought by the community as infertile.⁴¹

These injustices set up Tamar to be either a tragic figure or a tragic hero. Despite the destiny of her name, tragic events happen over which she has no control. A victim of the sins of the men in her life, Tamar is left to be a childless widow. These tragic events evoke compassion in the reader for Tamar.

³⁹ Judah's actions may be compared to Ruth, who released her daughter-in-laws from their bond to her family line (Ruth 1:8-15).

⁴⁰ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 42.

⁴¹ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 42.

After silently allowing all of these injustices to be committed against her, Tamar acts in her defence. In Gen 38:12, stating that a long time had passed, the narrator suggests that Tamar's situation is not going to change. Judah will not provide a resolution to the problem. If Tamar wants justice, she will have to procure it herself. Genesis 38:13, the announcement that Judah is traveling to Timnah, creates the very opportunity for Tamar to act. From this point on, Tamar demonstrates admirable qualities of assertiveness and power.

Tamar demonstrates the qualities of boldness and risk-taking.⁴² To pose as a harlot and hope that Judah and Hirah did not recognize her was both bold and risky. She had no assurance that Judah would not realize that it was her and condemn her for posing as a prostitute. Especially in light of the intimate nature of their interaction, her disguise could have failed and Judah could have recognized her. Then, Tamar is bold to negotiate the terms of the pledge with Judah. Possibly, Judah did not have much else with him to barter. Nevertheless, Tamar extracts from Judah very valuable pieces of identity. Even in her request for Judah's staff, she boldly uses language to ask him for far more than the wooden stick in his hand. Through her choice vocabulary, Tamar boldly asks Judah for his tribe.⁴³ Surely Judah is thinking about the staff in his hand; Tamar undoubtedly is hoping for his tribe. What she did not ask for before, she does eventually request. Finally, Tamar does not send word to Judah that she is pregnant. She lets her gradually protruding stomach be the only evidence. At the last possible moment—after Judah has pronounced his judgement and as she is being brought out to be burned—she reveals the identity of the father. Again, Tamar's nerve is astounding.

⁴² Westermann, *Genesis*, 53.

⁴³ BDB, 641c.

Even before the reader is told what exactly Tamar is doing—or what she hopes to accomplish by her disguise—the narrator reports her motive: “for she saw that Shelah had grown up and she had not been given as a wife” (Gen 38:14). At some point, she began to realize that Judah had no intention of inviting her back in to his home. The surrounding community and her own family would have known about this public humiliation. Tamar sees Shelah getting older and older, but she does nothing. She waits. Rightly, Tamar blames Judah and patiently awaits the opportunity to act. Her motive was to secure a place in Judah’s household by a pregnancy.⁴⁴ This was not a purely selfish motive, for it would directly benefit Judah by providing him with an heir. The biblical text later commends Tamar for the child, and by extension, the lineage, she gave to Judah (Ruth 4:11-12).

Tamar cannot be judged harshly for her scandalous trickery. As Van Dijk-Hemmes explains, oppressed individuals must use deceitful means, even endangering their lives “in order to receive justice within the given framework. They cannot permit themselves the luxury of staying within the moral code of the ruling class.”⁴⁵ In light of her situation, Tamar was forced to either accept her situation or break the social limitations and taboos to gain justice.

Yet it is important not to glorify Tamar’s motives completely, for she too displays self-interest. Like Judah, she seeks to procure very valuable articles from Judah. The first spoken words of Judah demonstrated a man seeking profit; the first words of Tamar will reveal a woman seeking profit. “What will you give me?” she asks Judah (Gen 38:16). Tamar knows that in the ancient Near East, a childless widow has little hope

⁴⁴ Delitzsch, 270, quoting Ambrose: She posed as a harlot “to escape by stratagem the disgrace of childlessness.”

for the future. By bearing Judah's child, Tamar would receive a secure place in his household and would be provided for. Nevertheless, as a Canaanite, Tamar had to decide whether to stay faithful to this Hebrew family or to leave and marry whomever she pleases.⁴⁶ Living in the house of Judah has created problems for this young widow. The neglect of Judah to give her to Shelah would have been a justifiable excuse for Tamar to leave Judah's family completely. After all, it was Judah who sent her away. Yet, her motivation to pose as a harlot is for her own preservation and to take what was rightfully hers.

Importantly, Tamar does not act solely for her own interest as Judah did. Her actions advance the interests of the community.⁴⁷ By providing a line, she cares for the well-being of both the community and the patriarch.⁴⁸ The interests of the community are of great importance, for "on a theological level... its well-being is founded on divine promises."⁴⁹ Johanna Bos concludes, "The choice of Tamar is not merely for the continuation of the patriarchal family embodied in the house of Judah; it is a choice for the building of a house which reflects God's choice for Israel and for the creation."⁵⁰ Also, by vindicating herself and "righting the wrongs," she brings a sense of justice to Judah's family. As the injustice committed against Tamar by Judah is rectified, the entire community is made better.

Tamar's interaction with time presents her as a patient character. Almost all of her time is spent waiting. The speed of the plot, as discussed earlier, creates the

⁴⁵ Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar," 152-3.

⁴⁶ See Ruth 1:8-9, where Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers land to find another man to marry.

⁴⁷ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

⁴⁸ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

⁴⁹ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

⁵⁰ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

assumption that both brothers died at an early stage. Tamar is left to wait a long time for Shelah to grow up. But even when the plot picks up speed as Tamar begins her scheme, Tamar is still left waiting—waiting by the gate for Judah to come by and hoping her plan will succeed. This is certainly not a passive waiting, for she is choosing to wait, as an active step in her scheme. Then Tamar waits again. Only time will reveal if indeed she is pregnant. When it is clear that indeed she is pregnant, Tamar does not tell anyone, but she actively waits for people to discover her protruding stomach, for it to be reported to Judah and for Judah to respond. Tamar carefully chooses the time to reveal the identity of the man with whom she had sex for maximum effect. After she sends Judah the message, she must wait once again. The plot pauses for the message must be sent to Judah and his response given. This process of waiting at first holds Tamar captive, inhibiting her from escaping the life of a young widow cast from her husband's family. But in the end, it is Tamar's patience and manipulation of time that causes Judah to condemn himself and ensures her survival.

The quiet and passive Tamar becomes vocal and active. In her dialogue with Judah, Tamar guides and controls the conversation and in a few short lines she manages to create a power shift. Until their dialogue, Judah has controlled the situation and in a single instruction to Tamar, he dictated the next several years of her life and her social standing as a widow. Yet, by carefully executing her plan, Tamar takes control of the situation herself and places herself in a position of power over Judah. By her own initiative, she removes her widow's garments and sits by the gate.⁵¹ She procures his valuable pieces of identity and becomes pregnant with his child. She is responsible for turning around the situation so that now *Judah* is the one who has been deceived; *he* does

not know what is going on. At one point, Tamar finishes her statement, "...for you will go into me." Most translations place this imperative tense in the conditional, presenting a translation such as, "*if* you will go into me." But from Tamar's perspective, there is no conditional in the question. She has orchestrated this whole scene and she is not about to let the opportunity pass. Keil and Delitzsch write, "it is noble of Tamar not to disgrace Judah publicly, and rather to go to death than at once to name him."⁵² Yet this portrays Tamar as a passive character, not speaking in her own defense. Contrarily, Tamar seems to bring disgrace to Judah in a clever way. There is no doubt that his pledge would be immediately identified and all would have known that he himself was the father, the guilty party with whom Tamar has had sex.

Contrary to Judah, Tamar is able to rightly perceive the situation and discern the best course of action.⁵³ First, Tamar realizes that Judah will not give Shelah to her. Van Dijk-Hemmes observes that verse 14 indicates that she realizes the injustice of this.⁵⁴ If she is to bear a child through Judah's line, she rightly perceives that it will require her own initiative. Second, Tamar knows Judah well. As the text illustrates, when it comes to women, Judah simply "takes." Tamar uses this knowledge to procure power over Judah. She rightly assumes that if she makes herself available to him in the disguise of a prostitute, he will approach her. Many have labeled Tamar as a temptress or seductive woman.⁵⁵ However, this is a misconception, as Tamar does not approach Judah, but the reverse. As James Williams comments, "There is no indication in the text that the

⁵¹ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 45.

⁵² Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:274.

⁵³ Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar," 152.

⁵⁴ Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar," 152.

⁵⁵ For example, Van Dijk-Hemmes ("Tamar," 137) presents Tamar as the seductress who overcomes social limitations set by the patriarchal society by her ability to seduce.

disguised Tamar tries to allure Judah.”⁵⁶ Further, in the exchange of dialogue, Tamar does not coerce Judah; there is no flattery or cajoling.⁵⁷ Although Tamar uses inappropriate means, we see Tamar not as an evil, conniving woman, but rather one who knows that all she needs to do is set the trap for Judah and he will follow. Third, Tamar is socially perceptive. Judah’s speech presents him as direct; Tamar matches him by being very direct herself. Fourth, she also assumes Judah to be a harsh man, one who will not mercifully forgive her for getting pregnant. Rightly gambling that Judah will make a scene of her pregnancy, she uses his harsh judgment to her full advantage. By so publicly presenting his pieces of identification as evidence of the father, she forces him to humbly confess to his role in the whole affair before the crowd. Finally, Tamar knows that Judah’s great desire to have a line will mean that she and her offspring will be welcomed into his home and her future will be secure. Speiser comments, “In resolutely following the intent of the law, by unorthodox and hazardous means, Tamar thus takes her place alongside Rachel.”⁵⁸

Though Tamar is acted against during the first part of the story, she becomes a powerful figure by the end.⁵⁹ All of her speech is short and direct; yet her dialogue is powerful. She demonstrates power by procuring Judah’s valuable personal items. Then, she remains in a power position over Judah and “controls the situation” by remaining in disguise, so that Judah is kept ignorant of what has happened.⁶⁰ She negotiates with the patriarch for the position of matriarch and she wins. Even her final speech is short, with not one extra word: “...she sent to her husband’s father saying, ‘To the man to whom

⁵⁶ Williams, *Women Recounted*, 93.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Women Recounted*, 93.

⁵⁸ Speiser, *Genesis*, 300.

these belong I am pregnant.’ And she said, ‘Identify, please, to whom these are—the signet ring and the cord and the staff’ (Gen 38:25). Yet in those two short lines, she publicly shames Judah for withholding Shelah and then impregnating his daughter-in-law. This empowers Tamar in that she redeems her integrity, for the community realizes that she did not turn to prostitution. It also saves her from Judah’s condemnation of a death penalty. Also, by bearing Judah’s offspring, she becomes matriarch of Judah’s household. This gives her a permanent role as matriarch in Judah’s family.

Judah’s response to and declaration of Tamar is the final indirect characterization: “She is more righteous than I” (Gen 38:26). Tamar is completely vindicated. Although Tamar’s act of sleeping with her father-in-law is shameful, she is remembered not for her sinfulness, but for her righteousness.⁶¹ This is a great honour: a non-Israelite woman, expelled from her home by her father-in-law and left as a childless widow is declared righteous—more righteous than a Hebrew patriarch. She receives this honour as both a woman and a Gentile. Tamar’s second vindication comes from the birth of her sons.⁶² That she gives birth to twin boys is an indication of the LORD’s blessing on her.

The outcome of the pregnancy is an amusing affirmation of Tamar’s fruitfulness. Twins! The LORD has indeed opened Tamar’s womb. The subplot of the struggle between the infants and their names can be viewed as commentary reflecting on Tamar’s own life. She, too, had to struggle. All signs indicated that she would not be the one to carry on Judah’s line. The name of the second son, Zerah, meaning Dawn, from the root

⁵⁹ Van Dijk-Hemmes (“Tamar,” 150): “Tamar’s performance thus brings about a number of fundamental changes. She reverses her position of powerlessness to one of power.”

⁶⁰ Van Dijk-Hemmes, “Tamar,” 151.

⁶¹ Spencer, “Riotous—Yet Righteous,” 8.

“to rise,” also reflects what Tamar has done. She has risen above her circumstance to create a new status for herself.

Summary

The contrast between the characterization of Judah and Tamar highlights Tamar’s worthy qualities. Judah believed Tamar to be a source of death, yet from Tamar comes life. Judah assumed that his choice to exile Tamar would benefit his line, yet it was in her presence that his line was preserved. Tamar rescued herself from a hopeless situation to one of great significance. She was exiled, but returned to be the matriarch of Judah’s family line. Cultural norms left Tamar powerless, but through her own ingenuity, she procured power and status for herself. A male was withheld from her, yet she gave birth to two males. Finally, not only did Tamar overcome cultural and social trials, she also saved Judah’s line from extinction. Because of Tamar’s act, Judah’s line continued. Her reaction to all of the injustices demonstrates that with the passage of time the character of Tamar has indeed undergone a transformation. The quiet and passive Tamar that kept Onan’s wicked act to herself broke societal and cultural boundaries and secured justice for herself. In an instance of poetic justice, Tamar deceives the deceiving Judah. Yet despite mistreatment, Tamar remains faithful to the line of Judah. The narrator presents her in such a way that a transformation of character is evident, from passive to active, from responder to initiator and from silent to a powerful orator. Her words and actions reveal a bold and courageous woman, one who is rather ingenious and certainly able to defend herself. In this sense, she is anything but a flat, simple character. Although only given a few verses of attention in the text, the narrator has said a great deal about her. Her legacy is lasting as she becomes matriarch of the line of Judah.

⁶² Wassen, “Judah and Tamar,” 355.

C. Tamar the Hero

We now move to a discussion of the attributes of a literary heroic figure and a presentation of Tamar as heroine. This is the final section of this thesis before moving to the summary and conclusion. It is key in that it argues for Tamar's heroic status, the climactic point of this thesis.

1. Heroes

The ancient biblical narratives are replete with heroic figures. Ryken states that heroes "function as an inspiration... codify a culture's and person's values and beliefs, and focus their consciousness... reconciling us to human failings and limitations."⁶³ In Hebrew narratives, heroes are usually representative of the human situation—a figure with whom all people can identify.⁶⁴ While the text consistently depicts the frail humanity of the hero, usually by the end of the story "a largely exemplary character" emerges; one who provides a "positive example of behavior to follow."⁶⁵

According to Ryken, heroes are known by their: (1) personal traits and abilities, (2) actions, (3) motivations, (4) responses to events or people, (5) relationships and (6) roles.⁶⁶ When these criteria reflect the qualities of a hero, the character may rightly be deemed heroic. There are several features of a hero which include: the ability to solve a problem, an accomplishment of a super-ordinary act, the possession of some sort of strength and the willingness to take some sort of risk. Also, a hero's action benefits some party, which may be the individual's selfish end or the greater good of another human(s).

⁶³ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 109.

⁶⁴ Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 76; *Words of Delight*, 108.

⁶⁵ Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 78; *Words of Delight*, 108.

⁶⁶ Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 76. This discussion is based primarily on Ryken's work because other biblical Narrative Criticism scholars do not define the concept of a literary hero at length.

The hero will influence surrounding events and characters.⁶⁷ Finally, Ryken provides one more aspect of a hero: “many a biblical protagonist achieves full heroic stature in the moment of choice. The choice, indeed, is what the story is finally about.”⁶⁸ Thus, the response of the character in the moment of decision, in the center of the crisis, is a key factor in their characterization and influences how the reader may judge the individual.

There are a variety of literary heroes. We will focus here on the realistic hero—an ordinary human who does an extraordinary deed.⁶⁹ Ryken speaks of “God transforming a person with a severe inferiority complex into a hero whose sheer mastery of situations takes our breath away.”⁷⁰ A hero “takes heroic measures and triumphs in the end.”⁷¹ Yet such persons are individuals with whom “all people can identify.”⁷² In essence, a hero is a person who demonstrates the quality of strength, who takes a risk to benefit some party and who either solves a problem or accomplishes a super-ordinary feat.

2. Tamar as Hero

Several scholars acknowledge the heroism of Tamar. Westermann labels Tamar as the heroine of the story.⁷³ Carmichael declares Tamar’s actions as “daring and courageous.”⁷⁴ Sailhamer highly regards Tamar, declaring, “it is the woman Tamar, not Judah the patriarch, who is ultimately responsible for the survival of the descendants of the house of Judah... the continuation of the line of Judah was not due to the righteous

⁶⁷ Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 76, 82.

⁶⁸ Ryken, *Read the Bible as Literature*, 51.

⁶⁹ Preminger and Greenstein, *Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism*, 142.

⁷⁰ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 114.

⁷¹ Speiser, *Genesis*, 300.

⁷² Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 108.

⁷³ Westermann, *Genesis*, 50.

⁷⁴ Carmichael, *Women, Law, and the Genesis Traditions*, 58.

actions of the patriarch Judah but rather lay in the hands of the 'righteous' Tamar."⁷⁵ In his commentary, John Skinner provides a lengthy note:

...it is just the exceptional nature of the circumstances that explains the writer's obvious admiration for Tamar's heroic conduct.... Tamar shows her fortitude by her disregard of conventional prejudice and her determination by any means in her power to secure her wifely rights within her husband's family. To obtain this right the intrepid woman dares the utmost that womanly honour could endure, ...stoops to the level of an unfortunate girl, and does that which in ordinary cases would lead to the most cruel and shameful death, bravely risking honour and life on the issue. At the same time, like a true mother in Judah, she manages her part so cleverly that the dangerous path conducts her to a happy goal.⁷⁶

Gordon Wenham, too, speaks of the heroic act of Tamar:

Such determination to propagate descendants of Abraham, especially by a Canaanite woman, is remarkable, and so despite her foreign background and irregular behavior, Tamar emerges as the heroine of this story. She is like Melchizedek (chap. 14) and Abimelek (chap. 26), one of those foreigners who see God's hand at work in Abraham and his descendants and therefore align themselves with Israel.⁷⁷

Surely, Tamar is a heroic figure. She demonstrates the quality of strength through her courage to rise up against her culturally powerless status, risks her very life to commit a deed punishable by death and benefits her husband's father by continuing his line through the super-ordinary means by getting impregnated by him through posing as a harlot. Through her unfortunate circumstance she achieves the status of hero. Being a Gentile, her concern for the Israelite line is admirable, as is her ability to overcome the limitations of her situation. She chooses the good, not only for herself, but also for the benefit of her dead husband's family. Like most biblical heroes, she undergoes a character transformation, from initially passive, to boldly active. When the opportunity to

⁷⁵ Sailhamer, "Genesis II," 232.

⁷⁶ Skinner, *Genesis*, 455.

⁷⁷ Wenham, *Genesis*, 365.

act arises, she takes the risk to act. In the end, she is victorious and accomplishes her objective.

Thus, it is Tamar and not Judah who emerges as the hero of Gen 38. Just like Joseph acts to save Jacob's family in the larger novella, so Tamar acts to save Judah's family in this smaller story with the novella. As most heroes, she arises at the turning point in the story and, indeed, is responsible for the turning point in the story. She redeems the situations, resolves the tension of the plot and emerges as the unlikely hero.

Chapter 3: Conclusion on the Life of Tamar

This thesis set out to argue that Tamar is the unsung hero of Gen 38. First, it was demonstrated that although Tamar is a key character of Gen 38 and provides significant contribution to the Judah narrative, there is little biblical scholarship written about her. Traditionally, most attention is allotted to Judah. Having established that she is indeed “unsung,” this thesis sought to argue that she is the rightful hero of the Judah-Tamar story. Tamar is the one to ensure that the injustice committed against her is made public and that justice is ultimately accomplished. From a literary perspective, it is this female character who becomes the focus of the narrator, the dominant voice and the primary main character, as the text moves from its opening remarks about Judah to the concluding narration about Tamar and her offspring. Her influence extends from an immediate impact on the family of Judah through to all the generations from her offspring. Doubtless, Tamar has left her mark as a significant minor character in the biblical canon. Sadly, the lack of scholarly interest in her character has left her largely unrecognized. Indeed, Tamar is the “unsung hero” who, although exiled and seemingly powerless, manages to continue Judah’s line and re-establish herself in his family and in the genealogy of Christ.

For such a short passage, the recorded events in the life of Tamar are quite remarkable. From the onset, Tamar seems ill-fated, with little potential for significance. She is a Canaanite female and there is no mention of family connections in her introduction. The first fact we discover about Tamar is that her husband is named Evil, is wicked in the eyes of the LORD and is put to death by the LORD. Since he dies before Tamar is impregnated, his death leaves her barren and with an insecure future. By rite,

she is given to Evil's brother. Herein lies potential for a child, and thus a future, but Evil's brother purposely withdraws from her, preventing a pregnancy and inciting the fatal wrath of the LORD. Rather than give Tamar to his third son, Judah sends her away to live with her father. Now Tamar is exiled from the family and must wait until the youngest son is grown up. Yet the text will demonstrate that Judah does not intend to give his third son to Tamar at all. This leaves Tamar with few options. She is bound to stay unmarried because her rightful husband is the youngest son, Shelah. Yet, if Selah is not given to her, she will be widowed and barren for the rest of her life. This is a shameful and hopeless situation in her culture.

Then the opportunity to change her predicament arises. Tamar is told that her father-in-law will be passing through and she acts quickly. Through the deception of apparent prostitution, she sleeps with her deceased husband's father and is impregnated. The narrator provides us with Tamar's motivation to procure what is rightfully hers. To meet this end, she craftily bargains the terms upon which Tamar will re-establish herself within Judah's family. When Tamar becomes pregnant and is absolved of condemnation, it is a victorious day for both her and Judah! With the birth of twins, Judah's line is continued and Tamar procures justice for herself.

Judah is presented as a man who seeks profit, having self-serving motivations, being cold-hearted and detached, mistreating others, lacking in judgement, untrustworthy, self-righteous and merciless. Although this sets up Judah for a character transformation later in the text, his negative traits in Gen 38 are highlighted by Tamar's positive traits.

Tamar is no doubt the hero of this passage. Judah believed Tamar was a source of death, yet from Tamar came life. Judah assumed that his choice to exile Tamar would

benefit his line, yet it was in her presence that his line was preserved. Tamar rescued herself from a hopeless situation to one of great significance. She was exiled, but returned to be matriarch of Judah's family line. Cultural norms left Tamar powerless, but through her own ingenuity, she procured power and status for herself. A male was withheld from her, yet she gave birth to two males. Finally, not only is Tamar a hero in that she overcame cultural and social trials, she also saved Judah's line from extinction. Because of Tamar's act, Judah's line continued and produced great kings and eventually, the Messiah. Indeed, her act had an important, albeit minor, role in preparing the way for the coming of the Christ (Matt 1). The heroic role of Tamar in this story contributes to the Book of Genesis. Importantly, early on in this history of the nation of Israel, YHWH's promises to Abraham of offspring, inheritance and blessing include a Gentile woman. Tamar's character demonstrates that unlikely, powerless individuals are used to accomplish the plans of YHWH. The more scandalous aspects of prostitution, incest and the resulting mixed blood line suggests that this line of Judah will be far from flawless and its redemption will continue to depend on the intervention of YHWH.

Looking beyond the scope of this thesis, further emphasis could be made regarding the role of Tamar in ancient religious society. Particularly, one may argue that Tamar provides a prototype of how women can achieve heroic status and secure a place of power, significance and dignity in an ancient patriarchal authoritarian society. One might explore other ancient narratives that present a Tamar-like character to substantiate the claim. It would be interesting to trace Tamar's character influence on later such narratives to demonstrate how she is an archetype for powerful females in an ancient context. Furthermore, one could draw a parallel between the life of Tamar and the role of

women in contemporary cultures, especially those who are repressed. There are many implications of a story of a foreign female hero in an ancient patriarchal narrative for contemporary issue, such as: the power of women in the ancient world, especially overarching major male figures; the influence of women characters in the history of religion; the justification of the role of women in modern religious society; and the means by which a female can procure power, dignity and influence in a male-dominant culture.

There are also implications for theology and applications to Christian ministry for the present study. Robert Alter writes: “The ancient Hebrew writers... seek through the process of narrative realization to reveal the enactment of God’s purposes.”¹ I believe that it is with these very conclusions that the present study of the characters within the Gen 38 text finds meaning and purpose. Several theological implications may be drawn from the study of the life of Tamar. This passage speaks “of a God who delights in creating, recreating, and redeeming the created order.”² God rewards faithfulness. Despite Tamar’s hardships and evil men around her, the LORD provided for her, blessing her with sons. The story of Tamar is one of receiving justice. It demonstrates the works of YHWH to bring about redemption and salvation. Some readers may identify with Tamar, who faces oppression and hopelessness, and be assured of God’s empowerment, faithfulness, provision and justice. The story of Tamar applies to Christian ministry. The note of redemption and hope that concludes Tamar’s story is an inspiration to disadvantaged people groups who have limited social standing and power.³ Her plight is similar to millions of African women and others who must fight against starvation, oppression, sexual exploitation and male dominance. Tamar’s struggle and her heroic act of

¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 33.

² Masenya, “Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness,” 217.

overcoming major obstacles is an encouragement to all people in contemporary times, as all people have something they must overcome to fulfill God's divine purpose in their lives. This thesis is also a valuable contribution to the issue of women in ministry by illuminating the role, importance and theological contribution of a narrative that emphasizes the significance of a Gentile female in shaping the theology of Genesis and the formation of the people of Israel. It reveals that the redemptive work of God is accomplished through women and that God blesses their bold initiatives, fulfilling YHWH's plan through their actions. Such revelation has the power to draw a Christian closer to the LORD, while encouraging females in particular to recognize their historical significance in the work of God.

³ Blotz, "Bitterness and Exegesis," 47; Thomas, "Weaving the Words," 158.

Appendix I: Translation of Genesis 38¹

(1) Meanwhile,² it happened at that time, Judah moved down from his brothers and he turned to a man, an Adullamite, now his name was Hirah. (2) And there Judah saw the daughter of a man, a Canaanite, now his name was Shua, and then he took her, and then he went in to her. (3) And then she conceived and she bore a son and he called his name Er. (4) And then she conceived again and she bore a son and she called his name Onan. (5) And then she multiplied again and she bore a son and she called his name Shelah and he³ was in Chezib when she bore him. (6) Then Judah took a wife for Er his first born and her name was Tamar.

(7) And then it happened—Er, the firstborn of Judah, was wicked in the eyes of the LORD and the LORD caused him to die. (8) And Judah said to Onan, “Go in to the wife of your brother and do a brother-in-law’s duty to her and raise up an offspring for your brother.” (9) But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. And then it happened—when he went in to the wife of his brother then he ejaculated to the land in order not to give an offspring to his brother. (10) And what he did was wicked in the eyes of the LORD and he caused him to die also.

¹ This translation has the repetitive “and” and “then” used throughout. This is important for the following reasons: (1) it makes the story rapidly flow at certain key moments, just as the Hebrew text has portions of information given in quick succession (see verses 1-6 and 27-30), (2) there is a certain rhythm to the translation that is created by repetitious “and”s, a rhythm of continuity that reflects the flow of the story in Hebrew. Also, this translation is slightly awkward at times. I have made an effort to translate every Hebrew term and to translate the roots consistently. For this reason, for example, I translate “said” throughout, opting to refrain from various other translations, such as “replied” or “responded,” to highlight the repetition of key words in the Hebrew.

² This is an example of resumptive repetition, indicating simultaneous events. Genesis 39 continues the story from Genesis 37.

³ “He” may equally be translated “it.”

(11) Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, “Remain a widow in the house of your father until Shelah my son grows up,” for he thought, *lest he die also, like his brother*. So Tamar left and remained in the house of her father.

(12) And a great many days passed and the daughter of Shua, the wife of Judah, died and Judah was comforted and he traveled up to shear his flock, he and Hirah his friend the Adullamite, to Timnah. (13) And then it was reported to Tamar saying, “Behold your husband’s father is going up to Timnah to shear his flock.” (14) So she took off her widow’s garments from upon her and she hid with a veil and she covered herself and she remained by the gate Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah, for she saw that Shelah had grown up and she had not been given as a wife.

(15) When Judah saw her, he mistook her for a harlot, for she hid her face. (16) He turned to her to the road and he said, “Allow, please, may I go in to you?” for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. Then she said, “What will you give to me, in order that you may go into me?” (17) And he said, “Surely I will send young female goats from the flock.” Then she said, “If you will give a pledge until you send....” (18) And he said, “What pledge—that I should give to you?” And she said, “your signet-ring and your cord and your staff that are in your hand.” And he gave to her and he went in to her and she conceived from [did not change] him. (19) And then she arose and she left and she took off her veil from upon her and she put on widow’s garments.

(20) And Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Adullamite to take the pledge from the hand of the woman, but he did not find her. (21) So he asked the men of the place,⁴ saying, “Where is the temple prostitute—she was at Enaim along the road?” And they said, “No temple prostitute was here.” (22) So he returned to Judah and

he said, “I have not found her and also, the men of the place said, ‘No temple prostitute was here.’” (23) And Judah said, “Let her keep it for herself lest we become an object-of-contempt—behold, I sent this goat and you did not find her.”

(24) Then it happened, after about three months, it was reported to Judah, saying, “Tamar, your daughter-in-law, committed harlotry and also, behold—is pregnant from harlotry.” And Judah said, “Bring her and let her be burned.” (25) When she was being brought out and she sent to her husband’s father saying, “To the man to whom these belong⁵ I am pregnant.” And she said, “Identify, please, to whom these are—the signet ring and the cord and the staff.” (26) Then Judah identified and he said, “She is more righteous than I because I did not give her Shelah my son.” And he did not continue to know her.

(27) And it happened at the time she was bearing, behold—twins in her womb!

(28) And it happened, as she was bearing, one gave a hand and the midwife took and tied upon the hand a scarlet saying, “This one came out first.” (29) And it happened when returning his hand—behold his brother came out and she said, “What a gap you broke for yourself!” So he called his name Perez. (30) Afterwards, his brother who upon his hand was scarlet, came out and he called his name Zerah.

⁴ Literally “its” place.

⁵ Literally, “are.”

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