

# Genesis 38 – Judah's Turning Point: Structural Analysis and Narrative Techniques and their Meaning for Genesis 38 and its Placement in the Story of Joseph

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Genesis 38 is often viewed as a disruption of the Joseph story, which for some unknown reason found its way into that narrative. This article shows that the placement of Gen 38 is intentional, with many connections to the surrounding chapters. These connections are made through the repetition of words as well as through the repetition of motifs. They connect Gen 38 not only to Gen 37 and 39, but also to Gen 47 and 48. Together with the preceding chapter, Gen 38 builds a double exposition for the following chapters. The question behind these chapters is: which of the sons of Jacob will take over the right of primogeniture and step into the line of blessing coming down from Abraham? Will it be Judah, next in the line after his brothers Ruben, Simeon and Levi, who for various reasons lost their right of primogeniture, or Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel? In this respect, Gen 38 shows how Judah began to transform from a very egocentric person, willing to sell his brother Joseph into slavery, into someone willing to become a slave in the place of his brother Benjamin. This transformation qualifies Judah to become the leader amongst his brothers, while Joseph would receive the double portion as his right of being the firstborn. This article shows the manifold connections between ch. 38 and the surrounding chapters and makes clear how the transformation of Judah begins.*

## **A INTRODUCTION**

The story of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38 bears a long and variable story of interpretation. Walter Hilbrands<sup>2</sup> demonstration of this is convincing and comprehensive. This chapter is usually viewed as a disruption of the Joseph story, especially by historical-critical theologians. In this view, the disruption is made

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure? Die Rezeptionsgeschichte von Juda und Tamar (Gensis 38) von der Antike bis zur Reformationszeit* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

for apparently incomprehensible reasons.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally Gen 38 is attributed to the so called Yahwist, while vv. 27-30 are often viewed as coming from an independent oral tradition. The chapter was incorporated by the Yahwist, who – not finding a better place to put it – situated it at the beginning of the Joseph story.<sup>4</sup> In general, the whole chapter, and especially its placement in Genesis, is unclear for many. Brueggemann<sup>5</sup> shows the deficiency of the historical-critical approach concerning Gen 38:

This peculiar chapter stands alone, without connection to its context. It is isolated in every way and is most enigmatic. It does not seem to belong with any of the identified sources of ancestral tradition. It is not evident that it provides any significant theological resource. It is difficult to know in what context it might be of value for theological exposition.

In recent years however, this position has increasingly been called into question – mainly due to the influence of synchronic narrative exegesis.<sup>6</sup> For example, Alter<sup>7</sup> identified the multifaceted literary references between Gen 38 and the Joseph story in Gen 37 and 39-50. Even more comprehensive is the interpretation of Gunn and Fewell.<sup>8</sup> They show that there are numerous connections between these chapters with regard to both content and literary structure, which makes Gen 38 an integral part of the Joseph story. In her dissertation on

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Gerhard von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose: Genesis* (ATD 2/4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 312 or Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (BKAT I/3; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 42.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Westermann, *Genesis*, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> It is remarkable though, that the early Jewish exegesis already tried to answer the question why Gen 38 is inserted into the Joseph story at this point. In Midrash Bereshit Rabba we read: "R. Eleasar sagt: um das Hinabsteigen (ירידת) des einen mit dem des anderen in Verbindung zu bringen, R. Jochanan dagegen erklärte mit dem Bezug auf Gen. 37, 32.33: „Jacob erkannte es“ und das. 38, 25.26: „Jehuda erkannte es“: Um ein Erkennen auf das andere Erkennen folgen zu lassen (d. i. die Strafe für Jehuda folgte unmittelbar auf die Sünde des Verkaufs von Joseph). R. Samuel wieder sagt, um die Geschichte der Thamar mit der Geschichte von Potiphars Weib zu verbinden: ..."; cf. August Wünsche, *Der Midrasch Bereschit Rabba: Das ist die haggadische Auslegung der Genesis: Zum ersten Male ins Deutsche übertragen* (Leipzig: Otto Schule, 1851), 417.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (2nd ed; New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> David N. Gunn and Danna N. Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Judah and Tamar, Eva Salm<sup>9</sup> also noted these connections with further elaboration. Many other scholars have adopted this opinion in the last years.<sup>10</sup>

This article will demonstrate the connection between Gen 38 and the Joseph story by elaborating on the internal structure and composition of this chapter. In the process, it will become clear that the isolation of the vv. 27-30 does not make sense, but rather that these verses are to be viewed as an integral part of the chapter as a whole. The same is true for the exposition of the story in vv. 1-11, which are also sometimes isolated from the rest of the chapter. Hilbrands<sup>11</sup> writes:

Es gibt keinen Hinweis darauf, dass Teile des Kapitels ein unabhängiges Eigenleben geführt haben. ... V. 12-26 kann erst auf dem Hintergrund der Exposition V. 1-11 recht verstanden werden und der Epilog V. 27-30 bildet die abschließende Schlussfolgerung und das notwendige Ziel der Geschichte.

This article deliberately abstains from a historical-critical analysis and instead follows a canonical-synchronic reading. This is done on the basic assumption that the text in its present form employs a meaningful structure and must be understood according to this structure. Such a synchronic reading does not supersede a diachronic reading, but goes beyond it and leads – at least in the present case – to essential findings, even without a prior diachronic reading.

After an introduction to the placement of the chapter in Genesis and a basic outline of the structure and composition of the narration, the text itself is examined in its narrative units. The units are analysed in sequence in the following manner: Firstly, (a) a structural-analytical analysis (using my own translation<sup>12</sup>) reveals initial connections. Secondly, (b) elements connecting the text

<sup>9</sup> Eva Salm, *Juda und Tamar: Eine exegetische Studie zu Gen 38* (FB 76; Würzburg: Echter, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Esther M. Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (JSJudSup 51; Leiden: Brill 1997), 76, for example, writes: "... the final redaction of Genesis 38 in its present context is intentional and artful." Or as Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB* 1: 604, states: "... this narrative plays an important role within its present literary context." Other representatives of this position are, for example, Casper J. Labuschagne, "The Story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38: Its Compositional Structure and Numerical Features," (2008) n.p. [cited 30 November 2012]. Online <http://irs.ub.rug.nl/dbi/48a542a490ca5>; or Daniël A. Viljoen and Andries P. B. Breytenbach, "Genesis 38 Binne die Josefverhaal: 'n Literêr-Sosiologiese Perspektief," *HTS* 58/4 (2002): 1795-1827.

<sup>11</sup> Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure*, 219.

<sup>12</sup> This translation tries to adhere very closely to the Hebrew text in order to make clear the structural and linguistic characteristics of the text even though this sometimes results in a rather clumsy English.

at hand with the surrounding Joseph story are pointed out. Finally, (c) the narrative techniques (beyond [a] and [b]) are presented which lead the reader to understand the message of the text and show the function of the story in the whole of the story of Joseph (or, as will be seen, Jacob). Using these three steps to analyse the text will result inevitably in some repetitions, which are deliberately taken into account.

Prior to these analyses, the place of the entire chapter in the book of Genesis (and beyond) will be examined in order to make the focus of the chapter much clearer.

## B THE PLACE AND FUNCTION OF GENESIS 38 IN GENESIS

### 1 Genesis: The Book of the Toledoth

In his article "Menschheit und Volk" Crüsemann<sup>13</sup> has shown that the genealogies of Genesis frame the whole book and are closely interwoven with the narrative. In his fundamental research of the genealogies in Genesis, Hieke<sup>14</sup> elaborates on this when he says:

Das genealogische System ist wie ein roter Faden. Deshalb liegt es nahe, das Buch von den Genealogien her zu erschließen, die als Leseanleitung betrachtet werden. Damit wird die konventionelle Blickrichtung umgekehrt: Nicht von den Erzählungen wird auf die Genealogien geblickt, die dann als trockenes Füll- und Brückenmaterial erscheinen, sondern von den Genealogien her werden auch die Erzählungen neu gelesen.

Like Hieke, Hensel,<sup>15</sup> in his analysis of the permutation-stories of primogeniture in Genesis, also shows the genealogies to be structural elements in this book:

Den Makrokontext der Genesis bildet das genealogische System, das die Vertauschungserzählungen regelmäßig durchbrechen ... Die Genealogien bilden die Grundstruktur der Genesis und leisten einen wesentlichen Beitrag für das Verständnis des *gesamten* Buches.

In regard to this basic structure, the *toledoth*-sections are clear signs of division. Each *toledoth*-phrase initiates a development and simultaneously connects the following section with the previous one. The word *toledoth* (תולדות) derives from the root יָלַד (giving birth to) and can be translated "the results that

<sup>13</sup> Frank Crüsemann, "Menschheit und Volk," *EvT* 58 (1998): 180-195.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hieke, *Die Genealogien der Genesis* (HBS 39; Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Benedikt Hensel, *Die Vertauschung des Erstgeburtsegens in der Genesis: Eine Analyse der narrativ-theologischen Grundstruktur des ersten Buches der Tora* (BZAW 423; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 35.

came from ... ." <sup>16</sup> In this sense it stands as a headline for the following narrative.

Hensel divides Genesis into four chapters, according to the *toledoth*-sections.<sup>17</sup> In doing this, he groups some of the *toledoth*-sections together as one chapter and excludes the first *toledoth*-section in Gen 2:4. It is my conviction, that the story of creation also should be included. In the meaning "the results that came from ..." it can in this verse be understood as the headline for the following story, linking it to the first chapter of Genesis.<sup>18</sup> It also seems better to not include the *toledoth*-sections within the "chapters," but to understand them more as independent "chapters" in themselves, which can be grouped somehow into the larger context. This leads to the following structure of the book of Genesis:

"Chapter" 1 (from 2:4) shows what became of the creation of heaven and earth (including the whole history of human kind).

Starting with "Chapter" 2 (from 5:1), Adam and his descendants are in focus, showing that the line of God moves from Seth to Noah. "Chapter" 3 (from 6:9) explores this line, starting with Noah; "Chapter" 4 (from 10:1) delineates and reveals what became of all the sons of Noah; and "Chapter" 5 (from 11:10) turns our attention to that son of Noah who finally leads to Abraham (and through him to the people of Israel): Shem.

"Chapter" 6 (from 11:27) further concentrates on Abraham and his descendants. With this "Chapter" the story of God, with his people Israel, begins. "Chapter" 7 (from 25:12) shows that God's story does not continue with Ishmael, but with Isaac ("Chapter" 8, from 25:19). Similarly "Chapter" 9 (from

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<sup>16</sup> The often used translations "account of the family line" or "the generations" are much too specific in their meaning, because a particular line of descendants does not follow in every case (as is the case especially with the first *toledoth*-section in Gen 2:4).

<sup>17</sup> Hensel's structure is as follows: In the first chapter (Gen 5:1 to 11:26) the line of Israel begins with Adam. The second chapter (Gen 11:27 to 25:11) continues this line to Terah and finally Abraham. The third chapter (Gen 25:12 to 35:29) first starts with a sideline (the *toledoth* of Ishmael), then the focus changes again to the line of Isaac. The fourth and last chapter (Gen 36:1 to 50:26) again starts with a sideline (the *toledoth* of Esau), than changes to the line of Jacob (i.e. Israel). See Hensel, *Die Vertuschung des Erstgeburtsegens in der Genesis*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> It is clear that this would mean a significant change in the division usually made in Gen 2:4, namely seeing 2:4a as conclusion of the "first" creation account and 2:4b as beginning of the "second" creation account. This cannot be dealt with here more extensively. See e.g. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Waco: Word Books, 1987), 49.

36:1 and 9)<sup>19</sup> makes clear that God's story does not continue with Esau, but with Jacob ("Chapter" 10, from 37:2). With Jacob we are finally at the fringe of Israel as a people (since Israel is also the new name Jacob receives). We can therefore see that the storyline of the book of Genesis becomes more and more specific, culminating in a focus on Israel as the people of God. The story of Israel itself then starts with the book of Exodus.

Hieke<sup>20</sup> points to the fact that the story of Genesis – from a genealogical perspective – seems to be a story of male dominance. But if we look at the stories between these genealogies, a different reality becomes clear:

Sehr schnell wird deutlich werden, dass die enge Interaktion zwischen Genealogien und Erzähltexten klarstellt, dass an den entscheidenden Dreh- und Angelpunkten des genealogischen Systems die Frauen eine eminent wichtige Rolle spielen und ebensolche Licht- und Schattenseiten zeigen wie die männlichen Protagonisten.

This is especially true for a comparison of the relationship between the Patriarchs and their wives. Abraham is persuaded by his wife, Sarah, to sleep with her maidservant Hagar. Isaac (who even needed the servant of his father to get him a wife) is betrayed by Rebecca, his wife. Jacob is coaxed by his wives Leah and Rachel into sleeping with their respective maidservants Zilpah and Bilhah, while Judah is manipulated by Tamar, his daughter in law. In every one of these cases the question is one of posterity, regarding the continuation of the line of blessing, coming down from Abraham.

Viljoen and Breytenbach<sup>21</sup> further extend this perspective of the genealogies – especially with respect to Gen 38 – into the future of Israel. In their article on the Joseph story they demonstrate from a literary-sociological perspective that the descendants of Judah not only lead to King David, but also to the later Southern Kingdom, while the descendants of Joseph can be viewed as representatives of the Northern Kingdom.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Gen 36:1 starts with the *toledoth* of Esau and his sons who were born in the land of Canaan. Then the author explains how Esau came to live in the mountains of Seir. After this the *toledoth* of Esau are picked up again in v. 9 and we are informed about all his descendants and how they spread in that mountainous region and became the Edomites.

<sup>20</sup> Hieke, *Die Genealogien der Genesis*. 2

<sup>21</sup> Viljoen and Breytenbach, "Genesis 38 Binne die Josefsverhaal," 1795-1827.

<sup>22</sup> Viljoen and Breytenbach, "Genesis 38 Binne die Josefverhaal," 1813, consider this as some kind of a dialectic relationship. In this perspective Gen 38 represents a polemic view of the Northern Kingdom, stemming from the Southern Kingdom. In this understanding, the dating of Genesis plays an important role. If Genesis was written much earlier than the division of the Kingdom of Israel in 931 B.C.E. it would be

If Gen 37 to 50 is regarded from this genealogical perspective, then these chapters are understood as presenting what came from Jacob and his family.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, Gen 37:2 starts not with the *toledoth* of Joseph but with the *toledoth* of Jacob. Keeping in mind the later importance of David as a descendant of Judah, the question which now arises becomes even more pressing: Who is going to get the blessing of the firstborn?<sup>24</sup> Who will take the lead under the sons of Jacob? Hensel<sup>25</sup> writes:

Gen 36,1-50,26 stehen unter dem Thema des Erstlingstum [sic!] innerhalb Israels. Unter der Frage, wer der Erstling unter den zwölf Brüdern sein soll, entfaltet sich eine komplexe Erzählung um die Konflikte der Brüder untereinander.

Van Selms<sup>26</sup> rightly shows in his commentary on the book of Genesis, that this is the question arising in Gen 37:

Na de virtuele eliminatie van Ruben (35:22, vgl. 49:3,4), Simeon en Levi (hoofdstuk 34, vgl. 49:5-7) is Juda de beste kandidaat om de invalide vader op te volgen, vooral nu Jozef verdwenen is.

Likewise Fretheim<sup>27</sup> states:

Judah's older brothers have been sharply criticized up to this point (Reuben in 35:22; Simeon and Levi in 34:30). Judah, the fourth son,

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difficult to come to such a conclusion. Instead of being viewed as a polemic of the Southern Kingdom against the Northern Kingdom, the findings would rather suggest that the later differences between these two parts of Israel (Judah and the Ten Tribes) have a very old tradition.

<sup>23</sup> This leads for example Laurence A. Turner to speak of Gen 37-50 not as the story of Joseph, but as "The story of Jacob's family." See Laurence A. Turner, *Genesis* (Readings: NBC; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 164. One part of the difficulties some theologians have concerning Gen 38 is due to the misunderstanding of Gen 37-50 as mainly the "story of Joseph."

<sup>24</sup> This is a question which pervades the whole of Genesis. Starting with Cain and Abel up to Ephraim and Manasseh we can see that often God's history with human kind does not follow human rules of primogeniture, but that the blessing of the firstborn is exchangeable (cf. Hensel, *Die Vertauschung des Erstgeburtssegens in der Genesis*, 45-47). In Gen 38 this motive is clearly visible. Margaret Parks Cowan points to the fact that the threefold reference to Er as the firstborn of Judah in Gen 38:3,6,7 as well as the closing report of the birth of Perez, who literally insisted on his becoming the firstborn, clearly shows this. See Margaret P. Cowan, *Genesis 38: The Story of Judah and Tamar and its Role in the Ancestral Narratives of Genesis* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University, 1990), 167-168.

<sup>25</sup> Hensel, *Die Vertauschung des Erstgeburtssegens in der Genesis*, 182.

<sup>26</sup> Adrianus van Selms, *Genesis* (vol. 2; POut; Nijkerk: Uitgeverij G. F. Callenbach, 1967), 190.

<sup>27</sup> Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," 604-605.

played a slave-dealer (37:26) and he leaves the rest of the family. This raises a question comparable to chap. 37: Is Judah, too, being excluded from the line of promise?

On the other hand, Gen 37 contains the two records of Joseph's dreams, which seem to foreshadow a leading role of the eldest son of Jacob's beloved wife Rachel. Who is going to continue the line of blessing? Will it be Joseph, who was sold down to Egypt, or Judah, who went down to Canaan; Joseph the dreamer, or Judah the selfish man of action?

In this regard, chs. 37 and 38 can be viewed as a double exposition. This double exposition then leads to a double closure in Gen 48 and 49. Here we find the blessing of Jacob for his sons. In this blessing Joseph and Judah clearly stand out. In 25 verses, five are speaking of Joseph and five of Judah. This constitutes about 40% of the text. Viljoen and Breytenbach<sup>28</sup> write:

Gen 49 word as'n belangrike hermeneutiese sleutel gebruik wat vir die posisie en plek van Gen 38 van die uiterste belang is.

In this way Gen 37 and 38 are forming an *inclusio* together with Gen 48 and 49.<sup>29</sup>

In conclusion, Judah is clearly made to stand in the first place amongst his brothers. In 49:8 we read about Judah: "Your father's sons will bow down to you." The term used here (יְתַפֵּשׂ = "fall down and adore") resembles Joseph's dream where the sheaves of his brothers are bowing down in front of his sheaf (יְתַפֵּשׂ, 37:7 cf. 37:9, where the sun, the moon and eleven stars are bowing down).<sup>30</sup> The connection between these two passages is clear. The function of the connection is to make apparent that the time when the brothers bow down to Joseph is coming to an end. The leading position belongs to Judah and his descendants.

On the other hand, the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh, replace Joseph, which makes clear that he received the primogeniture (Gen 48:17-19). Later, when the land of Canaan is distributed amongst the tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh are viewed as two different tribes (in the place of Levi, who does not get any possession of land; Josh 14:4). This means that Joseph receives the double portion, which was an important part of primogeniture, while Judah and his descendants receive the ruling position (see 1Chr 5:1.2).

<sup>28</sup> Viljoen and Breytenbach, "Genesis 38 Binne die Josefverhaal," 1821.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Viljoen and Breytenbach, "Genesis 38 Binne die Josefverhaal," 1822.

<sup>30</sup> The fulfillment of these dreams is recorded in Gen 42:6 and 43:26,28, where the brothers of Joseph bow down in front of him, not knowing that it is their brother. In all cases the same Hebrew word is used.

We can therefore conclude the following: Gen 37 and 38 together serve as an introduction to the story of Jacob, which will eventually become the story of the people of Israel, represented specifically by their Judean kings David and Solomon.<sup>31</sup>

This leads to an aspect which is often completely overlooked. Gen 38 asks the question whether or not Judah is qualified for taking such a leading role amongst his brothers, especially since his character is anything but commendable. This is exactly the place where Gen 38 receives its importance and function. This chapter shows the starting point for a change in the character and mind set of Judah. Fischer<sup>32</sup> thinks this chapter to be the crucial

... Kapitel für die Charakterisierung Judas ... Nur Gen 38 vermag den Wandel bei diesem vierten Sohn Jakobs zwischen seinem Verhalten in 37,26f. und dem in 43-44 zu erklären.

Cowan<sup>33</sup> states it like this:

Judah's ability to recognize the injustice of his own actions, to admit publicly that he was wrong, and to correct the situation reflects an important change in his character.

Salm<sup>34</sup> as well shows this change in the attitude of Judah reported in Gen 38.<sup>35</sup> She writes:

<sup>31</sup> In this respect, the genealogy in the book of Ruth is of major importance (Ruth 4:18-22). Starting with Perez, a line is drawn down to King David. In the light of the NT, this line continues down to Jesus Christ, the Messiah (cf. Matt 1).

<sup>32</sup> Georg Fischer, "Die Josefsgeschichte als Modell für Versöhnung," in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction and History* (ed. A. Wénin; BETL 155; Leuven: University Press, 2001), 244.

<sup>33</sup> Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 142.

<sup>34</sup> Salm, *Juda und Tamar*, 211.

<sup>35</sup> Compare also Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure?*, 39: "Ein ‚continuous reading‘ von Gen 37-50 lässt eine charakterliche Entwicklung Judas erkennen, an der Gen 38 einen wichtigen Anteil hat. Juda scheint durch diese Erfahrung gelernt zu haben und gelangt von einer anfangs stark egozentrischen Handlungsmotivation zu einer uneigennützigen Selbstlosigkeit, die von tiefer Verantwortung und einem gefestigten Charakter geprägt ist – Voraussetzungen für seine spätere Priorität unter den Brüdern und schließlich sogar über Josef (vgl. Gen 49,8-12.22-26)."

Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 35-36 formulates it like this: "Genesis 38 is a key to understanding the growth of the character of Judah and the role that he is able to play in bringing the entire cycle to a fortuitous ending. Because Judah learns the lesson that he threatens the continuation of the family by protecting his own offspring and must act for the benefit of all, even at risk to his own son, he is able to bring Jacob to this same understanding." In the same way Bryan Smith, has shown these changes in the character of Judah between Gen 38 and Gen 42 very clearly. See Bryan Smith, "The

Im Rahmen der Josefsgeschichte bereitet Gen 38 die Umkehr Judas vor und unterstreicht sie als den Weg zum Heil.

It is one of the aims of this article to make clear the changes in the character of Judah which start in Gen 38. This will help to show the place of this chapter in the whole of Genesis and the history of Israel. We will now move to do this in a step by step analysis.

## 2 Analysis

### 2a Structure

Genesis 38 as a whole can be structured according to the temporal indicators in v.1 ("It happened at this time"), v. 12 ("After many days"), v. 24 ("And it happened after three months") and v. 27 ("And it happened at the time of"). But this can only be a preliminary grouping. Hilbrands<sup>36</sup> shows that Gen 38 can be viewed as "eine konzentrische Ringkomposition."<sup>37</sup> The chapter can be structured as follows:

A – Judah starts a family (vv. 1-5)

B – The sons of Judah are dying because of their wickedness (vv. 6-10)

C – Judah sends Tamar back home (v. 11)

D – Tamar helps herself to get her rights (vv. 12-19)

C' – Judah sends Hirah to Enaim (vv. 20-23)

B' – Judah condemns Tamar to death, but she proves to be righteous (vv. 24-26)

A' – Judah's family is continued through Tamar (vv. 27-30)

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Role of Judah in Genesis 37-50: Tangential or Central?" *Biblical Viewpoint* (April 2003): 77-78.

<sup>36</sup> Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure?*, 14-15. Hilbrands refers to Fokkelien van Dijk Hemmes' article, "Tamar und die Grenzen des Patriarchats; zwischen Vergewaltigung und Verführung: Zu 2 Samuel 13 und Genesis 38," in *Und Sara lachte ... Patriarchat und Widerstand in biblischen Geschichten* (ed. M. Bal, F. van Dijk Hemmes and G. van Ginneken; Münster: Morgana, 1988), 51-75.

<sup>37</sup> This article follows his structuring of the chapter, but differs from Van Dijk Hemmes in the naming of the respective units, "Tamar und die Grenzen des Patriarchats," 63. There are different ways to portray this "Ringkomposition" (or chiastic composition), but the centre remains the same, narrowing in on vv. 12-19. Labuschagne, for example, finds the centre in vv. 15-19, although he follows a slightly different structural setting of the chapter as a whole (Labuschagne, "The Story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38," 3).

Each one of these units is structured in itself. The first (A) and last (A') units are parallel to each other and do not follow a concentric (or chiastic) structure themselves. They form an *inclusio*<sup>38</sup> with a significant alteration. While the story starts with Judah and his sons, it ends with Tamar and her sons. In the final unit Judah is not mentioned at all.

The second (B) and third (C) units are parallel to each other regarding content. They also have no concentric structure. Together they portray Judah thrice as the active one (vv. 6, 8,11a) whose deeds are leading to unexpected outcomes. First of all Er, his firstborn, dies because he is evil in the eyes of Yahweh (v. 7). Then Onan also dies, because he refuses to act as *levir* for his brother (vv. 9-10). Finally Judah sends Tamar back home (v.11b). The unexpected outcome in this case is the rest of the story as a whole. While therefore viewing the vv. 6 to 10 and v. 11 as two different units (due to the concentric structure of the chapter as a whole), they nevertheless form a coherent context, preparing for the shift from male actors (mainly Judah) to the female heroin of the chapter, Tamar. These two units are therefore dealt with together in this article.

All other units follow a concentric structure in themselves, which will be made clear in the treatment of the respective units. Before doing this, the following gives an overview of the chapter as a whole:

- **A – Judah Starts a Family (vv. 1-5)**

1. It happened at this time that Judah went down, away from his brothers. And he turns to a man, an Adullamite, whose name was Hirah.
2. And Judah saw there the daughter of a Canaanite man, whose name was Shua. And he took her and went in to her.
3. And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. And he called his name Er.
4. And she became pregnant again and gave birth to a son. And she called his name Onan.
5. And she became pregnant once again and gave birth to a son. And she called his name Shelah.

But he was in Chezib when she gave birth to him.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure?*, 24.

• **B – The Sons of Judah are Dying because of their Evilness (vv. 6-10)**

6. And Judah took a wife for Er, his firstborn son. And her name was Tamar.

7. But Er, the firstborn son of Judah, was evil in the eyes of Yahweh, and Yahweh let him die.

8. And Judah said to Onan: Go to the wife of your brother and fulfil the levirate with her and raise seed for your brother.

9. But Onan knew that the seed would not be his. And it happened when he went to the wife of his brother, that he spilled it on the ground, not to give seed to his brother.

10. And it was evil in the eyes of Yahweh what he did, and he let him die too.

• **C – Judah Sends Tamar Back Home (v. 11)**

11. Then Judah said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law: Stay in the house of your father as a widow, until Shelah, my son, is grown up, because he said (to himself): Lest he die like his brothers.

And Tamar went away and stayed in the house of her father.

• **D – Tamar Helps Herself to Get her Rights (vv 12-19)**

12. After many days the daughter of Shua, the wife of Judah, died. And Judah was comforted and went up to the shearing of his sheep, he and Hirah, his friend the Adullamite, to Timnah.

13. And it was reported to Tamar: Behold, your father-in-law goes up to Timnah to shear his sheep.

14. Then she laid away the garments of her widowhood and covered herself with a veil and disguised herself. And she sat down at the entrance of Enaim, which was on the road up to Timnah, because she had seen that Shelah had become grown up, but she was not given to him as a wife.

15. Judah saw her and thought her to be a prostitute, because she had covered her face.

16. And he turned to her at the road and said: Come! I will come in to you. Because he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she said: What will you give me for coming in to me?

17. And he said: I, I will send a young goat from the flock to you. She said: If you give me a deposit until you send it.

18. And he said: What is the deposit I shall give to you? And she said: Your seal and your cord and your staff, which is in your hand. And he gave it to her and went in to her and she became pregnant by him.

19. And she stood up and went and laid away her veil and put on her widow's clothes again.

• **C' – Judah Sends Hirah to Enaim (vv. 20-23)**

20. And Judah sent the young goat through the hand of his friend, the Adullamite, to take back the deposit from the hand of the woman, but he did not find her.

21. Then he asked the men of the village: Where is the sacred prostitute, she, who was in Enaim on the road? And they said: There is no sacred prostitute here.

22. And he returned to Judah and said: I did not find her,

and also did the men of the village say: There was no sacred prostitute here.

23. Then Judah said: She may keep it for herself, so that we will not be ashamed. Behold, I have sent this young goat, but you, you did not find her.

• **B' – Judah Condemns Tamar to Death, but She Proves to be Righteous (vv. 24-26)**

24. And it happened after three months that it was reported to Judah: Tamar, your daughter-in-law has gone prostituting, and behold, she also became pregnant through her prostituting.

Then Judah said: Bring her out and burn her.

25. She was brought out and she, she sent to her father-in-law: From the man, whom these things belong, am I pregnant. And she said: Look closely, to whom the seal and the cords and the staff belong.

26. And Judah looked closely and said: She is more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shelah, my son.

And he did not know her again.

• **A' – Judas Family is Continued through Tamar (vv. 27-30)**

27. And it happened at the time of her giving birth, and behold, twins were in her womb.

28. As she was giving birth, he (one of them) put out his hand and the midwife took it and tied a scarlet thread unto his hand and said: This one came out first.

29. But when he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out first, and she said: What a breach did you make for yourself! And he (they) called his name Perez.

30. After this his brother came out, who had the scarlet thread on his hand, and he (they) called his name Zerah.

A clear rhythm can be identified in the timeframe of the story.<sup>39</sup> The story starts with breath-taking speed. In only five verses we hear about the moving down of Judah, his marriage, the birth of three sons, who are in v. 6 old enough to marry. Then, in vv. 6 to 11 the speed reduces somewhat (but nevertheless probably also encompasses a few years), until it is reduced to the events of one day in vv. 12 to 18. In the dialogues the narrated time and the narrative time are almost identical. Starting from v. 19 the time speeds up again. Three months are covered very fast, even when the story of Hirah, trying to get back the deposit, slows the time down a bit. In vv. 24 to 26 narrated time and narrative time are brought into line once again, while between v. 26 and v. 27 there is a gap of many months. The birth of the twins is then told at great length and very slowly. Cowan<sup>40</sup> concludes:

Thus an analysis of the rhythm of the Story of Judah and Tamar reveals that the greatest amounts of story time are focused on Tamar's negotiations with Judah and the resulting control over his marks of identity which leads to the fulfillment of her goal and, secondarily, the birth of two sons with the reversal of birth position, which leads to the fulfillment of Judah's goal.

## 2b The Units in Detail

### • Unit 1: Judah Starts a Family (vv. 1-5)

(a) Analysis: The introductory verses develop the antecedent of the main story of Judah and Tamar. This development happens in three steps. First we hear about Judah going away from his brothers, down to Hirah, a man from Adullam. Adullam was a town in the south of the later area of the tribe of Judah. A more precise location of this town is not possible. The second step is the marriage with the daughter of Shua, who then – in the third step – becomes pregnant and gives birth to three sons. The final v. 5b seems to be out of line somehow and acts as a kind of conclusion. Its concrete function remains unclear at first and must be looked at again in the analysis of the narrative techniques.

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 131-133.

<sup>40</sup> Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 135.

The unit starts and ends with Judah going or being at a certain place. Both of the central reports about Judah's descendants in this chapter start with Judah moving somewhere. Here he goes "down," in v. 12 he goes "up." He is a man of action who sets things in motion, a man who does not like staying in one place. The unit itself is open-ended, except for the static end: "But he was in Chezib when she gave birth to him." Things happen, children are being born. The same events repeat at the end of the chapter in vv. 27-30. These two units form an *inclusio* around the whole chapter. Both units are about the offspring of Judah.

The introductory word "it happened" (וְיָהִי) serves as a structuring element in this chapter (as is often the case). It is found in vv. 1, 7, 24 and 27-30. In v. 1 and v. 27 it stands together with the additional phrase "at the time" (בָּעֵת נָהָרָה resp. בָּעֵת לְרָאָה). This also shows that these two units form an *inclusio* around the chapter as a whole. They mark two important turning points regarding the descendants of Judah. In v. 1 his "first life" starts. He marries and gets three sons. Two of them die (v. 7 starts with the second "it happened"). In v. 24 the second line starts (Tamar is pregnant and Judah hears about it). Then, in v. 27, the second line of descendants starts. Instead of two dead sons, the twins of Tamar are born. They step into the family line and finally become so important, that in the book of Ruth the elders of Bethlehem bless Boas and Ruth with the words: "May your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah" (Ruth 4:12a).

(b) Connections: The connection to Gen 37 starts with the introductory words, "At this time." This term does not have primarily a temporal function,<sup>41</sup> but connects the story of Judah and Tamar to the surrounding story of Joseph with regard to content. The same term is found in Gen 21:22. Here it follows the story of the birth of Isaac and the decision to send Ishmael and Hagar away. Between this story and the story of the temptation of Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen 22) we find the interjected story of the alliance between Abraham and Abimelech. As is the case in Gen 38, there appears to be no direct connection between these stories.

In cases like this, the inserted story has at least the function of slowing down the time of the main story into which it is inserted.<sup>42</sup> It shows that there is a time separation between the events before and after the insertion. Furthermore, the term "at this time" in both cases (Gen 22 and 38) does not primarily signify a stringent chronological sequence of time, but roughly places the reported events in about the same time as the events reported before and after.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Salm, *Juda und Tamar*, 98; Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 34-35 and J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and all the Families of the Earth. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12-50* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 151.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure?*, 16.

wards.<sup>43</sup> Something similar is true for 1 Kgs 11:29, where the same term is found. As in Genesis, it does not mean a direct chronological sequence, but a rough placement in the overall time frame.

The connection to Gen 39 is built up using the words "Judah went down" (וַיָּמֵן, 38:1). The same root is used in Gen 39:1, where we read "Joseph was brought down" (וַיָּמֵן).<sup>44</sup> The verb "to go down" (יָמֵן) also connects the chapter to Gen 37, where we read in v. 25 about the caravan of merchants, that they are on their way "down" (לִהְזֹרֶד) to Egypt. A little later Jacob believes his son Joseph to be dead and mourns: "Grieving I will go down (אָמֵן) to my son into Sheol" (Gen 37:35). Later on he will actually go down to his son, not into Sheol, but into Egypt.

Also very interesting in this respect is the unusual phrase שָׁדַּא-אִישׁ שָׁדַּלְתִּי. The word נָתַת is generally used in Genesis together with the word "tent" (meaning "to pitch a tent," 12:8; 26:25; 33:19; 35:21). The basic meaning of this verb is "to stretch out, to deviate." This leads us to the translation "to turn (left or right)."<sup>45</sup> Two of the nine passages in Genesis where that root is used are found in Gen 38 and in Gen 39. In 38:1 Judah turns to a man called Hirah. In 38:16 he turns to his daughter-in-law, whom he thinks to be a prostitute. In 39:21 God turns the favour of the prison officer towards Joseph. This use of the same term also connects the story of Judah to the story of Joseph. It depicts Joseph much more positively than Judah.

(c) Narrative techniques: As is already made clear, this whole chapter characterises Judah. It shows him to be a man of action, who is mainly interested in himself. Just as he was fast to sell his brother to slave dealers (37:26), so he acts here – without any regard for others. We read:

And Judah saw there the daughter of a Canaanite man, whose name was Shua. And he took her and went in to her (v. 2).

This is told with very few words. He sees, takes and goes in to her. It seems as if Judah does not really care for his fellow man. His relationships are formed according to what he gets from others. This is made clear through a combination of facts: the name of his wife is not even mentioned (as is the case in the whole chapter). The words used (see, take, go into) are the same words

<sup>43</sup> As Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure?*, 19, shows, it is very difficult to situate the events reported in Gen 38 into the time between the selling of Joseph down to Egypt and the moving of Jacob's family down to Egypt (where not only Perez and Zerah are found, but also their children Hezron and Hamul amongst the family members; cf. Gen 46:12). Nevertheless it is not impossible altogether. Cf. also Cowan, *Genesis 38, 5.*

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* (3rd. ed.; vol. 1; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 654.

we also find in the story of the rape of Dinah (Gen 34). It is interesting that we do not find the typical word for marital sexual intercourse ("to know"), but only the term "to go into."

The same words are used when Judah later talks to the veiled Tamar. He wants to "go into" her. Not before v. 26 do we find the usual word for sexual intercourse, but there it is used in a negative sense: "And he did not know her again." This "not knowing" has a history in Gen 38. When Tamar was veiled at the entrance of Enaim, we read: "He did not know that she was his daughter-in-law." Judah did not know his daughter-in-law from the beginning on. He used her as he used all people around him, as he used and sold his brother Joseph. Gunn and Fewell<sup>46</sup> put it like this:

The peremptory account of Judah's 'seeing, taking, and having intercourse with' the nameless daughter of Shua, along with equally featureless reports of her child-bearing, may give the impression that Judah is mainly interested in filling physical needs and familial goals. And indeed, this hypothesis gains support as we see Judah so determined to protect his final son, so readily 'comforted' after his wife's death, and so eager to engage the services of a prostitute immediately following the woman's demise.

The framework of the story has some further important elements. Each verse in vv. 1-5 contains the term "name" and speaks of the name of a man, while the wife of Judah remains nameless. The story is a male story in a male-dominated world. Then, in v. 6, this changes abruptly. We suddenly read, "And her name was Tamar." A new leading character appears, and she is female. This is her story. In the middle of this male-dominated world she becomes the crucial person. Through her taking over her responsibility we can finally hear again in vv. 29 and 30 "And they called his name." The "names" are important for the framework of the whole chapter. The story talks about the development between the names in vv. 1-5 and the names in vv. 29-30 and the kind of change this meant for Judah himself.

Very interesting in this regard is the question of who gives the names to each of the sons mentioned in vv. 3-5, and what role Judah has in this. He is the one who names his firstborn son Er, the other sons are named by his wife. Many translations follow the proposal of BHS<sup>47</sup> in v. 3, changing the Masoretic text to "... *she* called his name Er." But according to text critical standards the state of sources does not allow for such a change<sup>48</sup> since it clearly contradicts the basic principle of *lectio difficilior*. The same is true for v. 5, where the LXX

<sup>46</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 54.

<sup>47</sup> *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (4th ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> The differing reading is only found in a few Masoretic texts, the Samaritan Pentateuch and a relatively late manuscript of the Targum.

changes the Masoretic text ("... he was in Chezib") to "... she was in Chezib" and the BHS proposes to follow this reading.<sup>49</sup> This also would be an illegitimate smoothing of the text without text critical rationale.

Judah clearly is the centre of attention in these verses, although it is his nameless wife who gets pregnant and gives birth to sons. While Judah names his firstborn (Er) himself, he leaves this task to his wife for the second son. And when the third son is born, he is not even at home.

The name of the village of Chezib, which is not mentioned elsewhere in the OT, is derived from the root צְבִּ (falsehood, lie"). There is no discernible reason for mentioning that Judah is in this village. The village itself has no meaning for the story. This makes it important to ask if the name of this village carries a deeper meaning. Presumably the author wants to point to an aspect of Judah's character, which will become even clearer in the following story: Judah is a man of falsehood and lies, without a sense of responsibility and faith towards the people belonging to him.<sup>50</sup> As Smith<sup>51</sup> puts it:

He does not value his fellow humans for what they are (even if they are members of his own family); he values them for what he can get from them or through them.

- **Unit 2: The Sons of Judah are Dying because of their Evilness (vv. 6-10); and Unit 3: Judah Sends Tamar Back Home (v. 11)**

(a) Analysis: At first glance it seems to be Judah who acts in this story. He takes a wife for his firstborn (v. 6). After Er dies, he gives Tamar as a wife to his second son (v. 8). And after he too dies, it is Judah again, who refuses to give Tamar to his youngest son (v. 11). But then the real actor is revealed: Yahweh himself. He is the one who causes Er and then later on also Onan to die, because they are evil in his eyes (vv. 7 and 9-10). It is Yahweh, who punishes Er because of his evil personality and Onan because of his evil deeds.

This structure reveals what determines the whole story: Judah, who seems to be the actor, does not really know the reality. He acts, but in reality it is Yahweh who is the final actor and who pulls the strings. Judah apparently thinks that his daughter-in-law is somehow responsible for the death of his two sons. Therefore he decides not to give her to his youngest and last son. The reader knows better: Yahweh is the real actor in the story.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See respective footnote to this verse in BHS.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Bryan Smith, "The Role of Judah in Genesis 37-50," 75.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 36.

The last sentence of the unit is parallel to v. 5b. In both cases we find a static pronouncement. In v. 5b it is Judah who is in Chezib, while his son Onan is born. Here, it is Tamar who stays in the house of her father.

At the same time the narrator leads the attention of the reader away from Judah and over to Tamar. In v. 6 we find the already mentioned break with male predominance (all male persons have names, while the wife of Judah remains nameless). Tamar is introduced with her name. In v. 11 Tamar is even mentioned twice. And as the first unit ends with the static sentence mentioning Judah, the second unit ends with Tamar who starts to take initiative.

(b) Connections: The connection to the story of Joseph is equally clear in this unit. The motif of a child, who dies, is found twice. As opposed to Joseph's case, this is not a feigned death. If we consider this, the reaction of Judah is even more distressing, compared with the reaction of Jacob. Jacob mourns many days over Joseph (37:24). He is not willing to be comforted over the death of *one* of his *twelve* sons (37:25). Alter<sup>53</sup> writes:

In two brief verses half a dozen different activities of mourning are recorded, including the refusal to be consoled and direct speech in which the father expresses the wish to mourn until he joins his son in death.

With Judah we do not even read in a side note that he mourned over the death of *two* of his *three* sons.

(c) Narrative techniques: Judah *takes* a wife for Er (v. 6), he *talks* to Onan (v. 8) and then he *speaks* to Tamar. On the surface of the story it is Judah who acts. He has everything in control. He had taken a wife for himself as he wanted to. And now he also organises everything for his sons. In both cases we read "and he took" (v. 2.6).

But while it is Judah who stands in the front of the story, it is ultimately God who really decides and acts. The things that happened were "evil in the eyes of Yahweh" (vv. 7, 10). Therefore he lets Er and Onan die. Judah is blind to this reality. In his eyes, it is Tamar who is in some unknown way responsible for the situation. Astonishingly, he either ignores the wickedness of his sons, or he does not realise it (which would be ironic for a man of control like himself).

This shows that the controller Judah, in the end, does not have everything in control. He may be able to force Onan into marrying Tamar. But he is not able to achieve the goal for doing so: making descendants for Er (meaning a grandchild for himself). Onan denies this duty and Yahweh lets him die. As readers, we know what Judah did not know: it was Yahweh, and not Tamar,

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<sup>53</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 3

who was responsible for the death of the two sons. This shows Judah as a person who does not care for others. Tamar seems to be of no importance to him.

Tamar, on the other hand, is shown as a helpless object. While we read about her mother-in-law, that she "gave birth" (וַתֵּלֶד) again and again, she can only "go" (זָלַת) and "stay" (בָּשָׂרָה). The same word used for "staying" (בָּשָׂרָה) is also found in v. 14, where it is reported that Tamar sits ("stays") at the entrance of Enaim. And then, after Judah was deceived, she again "goes" (זָלַת) and waits, until Judah starts acting again (v. 19).

#### • Unit 4: Tamar Helps Herself to Get her Rights (vv. 12-19)

(a) Analysis: This section is the central unit of the chapter. It contains the only lengthy dialogue in the whole story (vv. 16-18).<sup>54</sup> The unit itself is structured in chiastic fashion. In v. 12 we read about the death of Judah's wife, in vv. 18-19 about the new life which begins to grow inside of Tamar. In v. 13 and v. 17 animals are important (sheep, goat). In v. 14 and v. 16 family aspects are mentioned (v. 14: widowhood, Shelah; v. 16: daughter-in-law) and also the ignorance of Judah (v. 14: the veil, v. 16: "he did not know"). The apex of the unit is v. 15: "Judah saw her and thought her to be a prostitute because she had covered her face." This verse shows what the unit is all about: Judah sees – but does not know. The reality is hidden from his eyes, just like the face of Tamar. This was part of the theme of the story from the beginning: Judah, the controller, only sees what is in front of his eyes. The reality escapes him.

(b) Connections: The connection to the story of Joseph is very clear in this unit. First there is the behaviour of Judah, which is so different from that of his father Jacob. Jacob did not want to be comforted (37:25); Judah is very fast in being comforted after the death of his wife. It is only in retrospect that we hear the fact, that the (official) time of mourning was over (v. 12). Both texts use the same Hebrew word for "comforting" (נַחַת).

Then there is the young goat which is mentioned in v. 17 (גָּרִי-עַזְבָּם), which connects this story with ch. 37.<sup>55</sup> There, the brothers take the garment of Joseph, dipping it into the blood of a goat (37:31: שְׂעִיר עַזְבָּם). They then "send" (חַלֵּשׁ) the garment to their father Jacob. Here Judah promises to "send" (חַלֵּשׁ) the young goat to Tamar.

Another connection to the Joseph story is found in the sexual aspect. Judah is apparently not able to resist the temptation and contain himself. He sees a prostitute and immediately goes in to her. Joseph, on the contrary, fends

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> And also with Gen 27, where the skin of a goat is used to disguise Jacob to be his brother Esau in front of his old and blind father, Isaac (cf. Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 33).

off the temptation. When the wife of Potiphar tries to ensnare him, he resists and flees.

Also, the word for "covering" (**כָּסָה**), which is found in v. 14 ("with a veil") and 15 ("her face") connects this story with ch. 37. There it was Judah who opposed his brothers' plan to kill Joseph and instead proposed selling him to the Midianites. In this context he asks: "What profit would it be to murder our brother and *cover his blood*?" (37:26). A profit apparently can only be made through selling their brother. The word **כָּסָה** is used in both contexts with the meaning "to cover the reality."

Finally, very interesting in this context is the word "deposit" (**עַרְבָּז**), which is not used outside Gen 38 in the OT, but three times in these verses (vv. 17, 18, 20). Also very seldom in the OT is the underlying root of that verb (**שָׁבַע** - "to vow for someone/something") found. In the whole Pentateuch it is only used twice, and that only in Gen 43:9 and 44:32.<sup>56</sup> In 43:9 Judah declares to his father Jacob that he vouches for the safe return of his brother Benjamin, and then (in 44:32) he also declares the same before Joseph. There he presents himself as being prepared to be enslaved by the Pharaoh in place of his brother (v. 33).

The use of this rare root in both stories closely connects the two reports with each other. Then, Judah had only himself and his desires in mind and was prepared to give his very personal marks of identity<sup>57</sup> as deposit for it. Now he mortgages himself and is prepared to go to jail or slavery in the place of his brother (remember that he was the one who was prepared, without hesitation, to sell Joseph into slavery). What a change this is in Judah: a change that started with a deposit he gave, and which finally shows him clearly as the one who was really guilty and realised Tamar to be just.

(c) Narrative techniques: Judah's wife dies. This is the third death recorded in this story, and it looks as if it was only a marginal note. Still we do not know what her name was. And the mourning of Judah is only mentioned retrospectively by stating that the time of mourning was over. The Hebrew phrasing here is interesting. Usually the phrase "and Judah was comforted" would mean that there was a time of mourning and weeping, and that this time was now over. Here it seems as if this time period shrinks down to nothing. Many translations try to smooth this out by using some kind of temporal particle (e.g. "when Judah was comforted"). But this is not supported by the Hebrew text, which does not contain such a temporal particle. His wife dies, he was comforted, and

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Hilbrands, *Heilige oder Hure?*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 39, call them "extraordinary tokens of value and identity."

there he goes to the shearing of his sheep.<sup>58</sup> The character of Judah is clearly visible if we compare this behaviour of very brief mourning with the reaction of his father Jacob, when he hears about the death of his son Joseph.

The phrase "and it was reported" (בָּאָתִי, v. 13) is found in exactly the same form again later in this chapter in v. 24. There Judah learns of the pregnancy of his daughter-in-law. Through this phrase repetition, the narrator seemingly connects these two reports with one another. In both cases someone learns about something and decides to take action. But while Tamar acts very cleverly based on her information, Judah again shows his ignorance of reality. His plan to punish Tamar due to her supposed misbehaviour fails due to the fact that he himself is the father of the unborn child.

In this unit the motif at the start of the chapter (men are the actors, women are acted upon) is again picked up. Judah is a man. He can do whatever he wants. Tamar, on the other hand, has to do what her father-in-law tells her. Judah is comforted very quickly, then he can go back to his affairs. In contrast, Tamar has to wear the garments of her widowhood and stay in her father's house as long as Judah commands her. The laying off of the widow's garments, therefore, can be understood as an act of temporary revolt against this arbitrariness with the aim to end the arbitrary situation finally. Tamar may be condemned to inactivity, because she is a woman, but she nevertheless is able to control the situation and reach her goal – much better than Judah, the controller. This behaviour of Tamar, therefore, could well be classified as "active passivity." Actually she is not doing much. She only arranges the circumstances – and thereby manipulates the controller Judah.

With this "deceit" Tamar is responding to the "deceit" of Judah towards her. After all, he had no plans to give Tamar to his son Shelah as a wife. And she reacts in the same arena in which his deceit was situated, namely in the realm of sexuality, in order to reach her goal. But her actions have a totally different quality. For Judah, sexuality is a matter of pleasure. For Tamar, it is a matter of security and future.<sup>59</sup>

We may ask why the name of the village "Enaim" is mentioned here. It does not have any significance since this name does not appear elsewhere in the OT. And why does Tamar sit at the "entrance" of Enaim? This seems to be an example of wordplay. If we understand the Hebrew text literally (entrance - בַּיִת - of Enaim - בְּנֵי עַיִן), we could well translate this as Tamar, sitting "in the opening

<sup>58</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 37, indicate that the term "and Judah was comforted" is ambiguous and can also be understood in the sense "he was relieved." But in view of the connection between this verse and Gen 37, where we find the same Hebrew word for the sons of Jacob, who tried to *comfort* their father, this seems to be unlikely.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 38.

of the eyes."<sup>60</sup> After all, she "saw" that Judah did not plan to give her to Shelah (v. 14). Judah also "sees" (v. 15 – the same word as in v. 14), but thinks her to be a prostitute. We, on the other hand, know that he really saw someone else. His eyes were open, but he did not see. The time will come when his eyes will really be opened to the truth.

The irony is fascinating. While Tamar realises the reality, reality is hidden from the eyes of Judah. The same is made clear through other elements of wording. As with the start of the chapter, sexual intercourse is not referred to as "knowing," but as "going into." In v. 26 we then read that Judah did not "know" his daughter-in-law again. From the story itself we find that he has never really known her, at least not in the real sense of the word.<sup>61</sup>

The term "he turns to" is the same as in v. 1, where we read that Judah turns to a man from Adullam. Through this word repetition these two decisions of Judah are linked with each other. In both passages, Judah's actions result in descendants for himself.

Seal, cord and staff are, as Alter<sup>62</sup> remarks, "... a kind of Near Eastern equivalent of all a person's major credit cards." They have the ability of identifying their owner.<sup>63</sup> Here we can see that Tamar really knows her father-in-law. His words were of no value. Tamar's mistrust of Judah is made even clearer in that although Judah emphasises that he will send the young goat (the 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun is added although this information already exists in the verb, "I, I will send ..." v. 17), she still demands a deposit, a very precious and personal one.

At the same time, it is possible to see an even deeper sense in the words used here, as Gunn and Fewell have shown.<sup>64</sup> The word "staff" has two different meanings in the OT. It can also refer to a "tribe" and therefore indicates the offspring of Judah. "Give me your staff" could, therefore, carry the deeper meaning of "give me your offspring, which you have denied me." The other two words may also carry a deeper sense. The word for "seal" (סֶפֶת) sounds very much like the word for "father in law" (סֶפֶת),<sup>65</sup> and the word for "chord" (סֶפֶת) sounds like בְּתִי לְךָ, which could be translated "you (are/have) a simpleton." To put it casually, one could hear behind the words of Tamar: "Give me your offspring, father-in-law, simpleton."

- **Unit 5: Judah Sends Hirah to Enaim (vv. 20-23)**

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 171; Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Whether or not there is also an allusion to Gen 3:7 where we find the same Hebrew phrase ("and her eyes were opened"), is unclear but conceivable.

<sup>62</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 40.

<sup>65</sup> Although we do find a different Hebrew word for father-in-law in Gen 38.

(a) Analysis: This unit is also structured chiastically. Verse 20 and v. 23 are about the young goat which Judah sends and the deposit he wants to be returned. Additionally, the phrase "not finding" is stressed. Twice in v. 21 and once in v. 22b, we read about a "sacred prostitute." The apex of the unit is v. 22a, where we read, "I did not find her." At the same time this corresponds with the two verses of the frame, where we also read about his "not finding."

(b) Connections: This unit also shows connections to Gen 37. As in these verses, the word "to find" (מִשְׁׁאַת) is prominent there. At first a man "finds" Joseph on the fields, wandering around and looking for his brothers (37:15). Then Joseph "finds" his brothers at a place called Dotan (37:17). And finally the brothers send the bloody garment of Joseph to their father, reporting to him: "This we did find" (37:32). One may say that these occurrences of the word "to find" could well be coincidental. But there are other connections (e.g. the goat, or the request to "look closely")<sup>66</sup> which together show a clear picture of a close narrative connection. And this connection also goes on into ch. 39, where we read that Joseph "found" grace in the eyes of Pharaoh (39:4; again the same Hebrew word is used).

The same is true for the word used in v. 21: for "he asked" (לְאַשְׁרָא). This word is by far more seldomly used as the word for "to find," and we also see it in 37:15. The man who "found" Joseph on the fields, also "asks" him what he was looking for. We again find the same word in 40:7 where Joseph "asks" the two fellow prisoners (the cupbearer and the baker) why they are so worried. Finally, we again find in these verses the word for "to send," which was already used in v. 17 and also connects this passage with ch. 37.

(c) Narrative techniques: Now the story is told once again from the view of Judah. It is interesting that he does not send his friend to pay his *debt*, but to get back his *deposit*. And why does he send his *friend*? Maybe because he wants to save face? This would be in line with the fact that it only says "his friend, the Adullamite." In the other instances where he is mentioned in this chapter we find that this friend has a name: Hirah (vv. 1 and 12). Maybe skipping the name here is used to underscore the fact that all of this is done in great secrecy. It seems as if this is all very embarrassing for Judah.

This is further shown by the fact that Hirah does not ask for a simple prostitute (נָוָה), but for a sacred prostitute (נָשָׁרָה). Sacred prostitution was something rather accepted and honourable. It meant serving the gods with adoration. It seems most likely that it was Judah who spoke about a sacred prostitute to his friend Hirah.<sup>67</sup> If not, we would expect him to correct Hirah when he told him

<sup>66</sup> Cf. to v. 25.

<sup>67</sup> The idea that it could have been Hirah using an euphemism (as Salm, *Juda und Tamar*, 127, suggests), is not likely. It could have been true for his use of that word with the people of Enaim. But why should he use it with Judah? The same is true for

that he did not find a sacred prostitute in Enaim. The reason seems to be that Judah wanted to present himself in a better light. For him it is very important what other people think about him. This is also clear in light of his answer to his friend: "... so that we will not be ashamed." Quite subtly he includes his friend in the situation ("we"). And he is also made responsible for what happened. Judah points out: "I have sent ..." (and thereby done my part), but "you, you did not find." In the Hebrew text the 2nd person pronoun is used beside the verb which already contains that information. And it is also placed in front of the verb, which emphasises the acting person ("you") instead of the doing itself ("not find"). With this, Judah indicates that Hirah does at least have some share of the responsibility for the failure to find the prostitute.

- **Unit 6: Judah Condemns Tamar to Death, but She Proves to be Righteous (vv. 24-26)**

(a) Analysis: Again we find a chiastic structure in this unit. Verse 24a and v. 26b are about Judah and his relationship with his daughter-in-law. In v. 24b and v. 26a it is Judah who acts (he speaks, or looks closely and speaks). Finally v. 25 reports about Tamar and her clever reaction to the accusation of prostitution. The whole unit shows that Judah, who thought he had everything under control, finally realises that he was the one who was guilty.

(b) Connections: It is notable that we find one of the strongest connections to Gen 37 in this unit. As in the previous chapter, the father (in this case the father-in-law) receives something and is asked to look closely at it. In both cases (37:32 and 38:25) the exact same phrase is used: "Look closely" (**הִנֵּה**!). The same root (**הִנֵּה**) is also found in the story of the deceiving of Isaac, who did not "recognise" (27:23) his son Esau and in 42:7-8, where the brothers of Joseph did not "recognise" him as their brother.

The wording in Gen 37 is used in connection with deceit or deception. Here it is used to uncover deceit, as Alter<sup>68</sup> noted. The parallel between both stories was already recognised in Jewish exegesis. We read in *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*:<sup>69</sup> "Gott sprach nämlich zu Jehuda: Du hast einen Vater mit einem Ziegenbock getäuscht, bei deinem Leben! die Thamar wird dich auf dieselbe Weise täuschen. ... Nach R. Jochanan sprach Gott zu Jehuda: Du hast zu deinem Vater gesagt: erkenne doch! bei deinem Leben! die Thamar wird es auch zu dir sagen."

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the idea that Hirah could have used a Canaanite term while speaking with Canaanite people (cf. Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 24). Why would he also have used that term in his dialogue with Judah? Even more improbable is Cowan's idea that Judah himself could have been mistaken. Then we would expect that word already in v. 15. Cf. also Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 41.

<sup>68</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Wünsche, *Der Midrasch Bereschit Rabba*, 421f

Also very interesting is the repetition of the word "to lead/go out" (אֹצֵן). We find it in vv. 24 and 25 for the bringing of Tamar out of her house, then three times in vv. 28-30 in the context of the birth of the twins and finally in 39:12 and 15, where Joseph flees the wife of Potifar and runs out of the house. In all of these cases the context is one of a sexual relationship or the consequences thereof.

And then there is once again the word "to send" (נָלַשׁ) (cf. to v. 17), here with a strong emphasis on the active person. As it was with Judah who promised to send a young goat ("I, I will ..." v. 17) and his accusation of Hirah for not finding the prostitute ("You, you have ..." v. 23), we again find the personal pronoun in addition to the finite verb (already containing this information). Now it is Tamar who is depicted in the same way ("she, she sent ..." v25). Through the accentuation of the active characters, all three passages are connected with one another.

(c) Narrative techniques: The situation which now develops suits Judah just fine. With a good conscience and while keeping up his good reputation (even strengthening it), he can solve his problem: Tamar is going to die, his son Shelah will be free to marry whom he wants. For many years he did not attend to his duties towards Tamar as patriarch of his family. Now he is all too ready to do so. This can be shown by the short and fast reaction to the news of the pregnancy: "Bring her out and burn her." – in Hebrew only two short words: וְתַשְׂרֵף  
הַצִּיְאָה.

This also shows how Judah was concerned about himself and that he was ready to put aside his moral responsibility as father/father-in-law. In the same way, he avoided taking responsibility for the death of Er and Onan, but instead thought Tamar to be responsible and denied Shelah to her. And now again she must be guilty – naturally. He himself can stand in the background as the just and honourable patriarch who does not make a concession to justice, not even in the case of his daughter-in-law.

Once again Judah sends someone else. He does not go to his daughter-in-law to talk to her, but asks others to bring her to justice. And *vice versa*, she also answers through someone else and sends the seal, cords and staff<sup>70</sup> to him.

<sup>70</sup> It is noteworthy that instead of the masculine form of "seal" (מְקֹדֶשׁ) used in v. 18, we find the feminine form חַתְמָה. And instead of the singular for "cord" (פְּתִילָה) the plural פְּתִילִים is used. Most modern translations (along with the Samaritan Pentateuch, the LXX, the Peschitta, many editions of the Targum and the Vulgata) change these into the forms used in v. 18. But, according to the principle of *lectio difficilior* we can assume with Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 115 that BHS contains the original text. It may well be that Tamar here names the actual objects that Judah gave to her more precisely, while in v.18 it is her request that he should give these things (seal, cord and staff) to her.

And even as Judah realises that he is the father of the unborn child, he still does not speak to Tamar directly, but speaks about her: "She is more righteous than I."

Nevertheless, this admission from the mouth of Judah is striking. It is true, Tamar did deceive her father-in-law. But only because he denied her what she was entitled to. Her actions are not criticised, but defined as "just." Cowan<sup>71</sup> explicitly states that this is the only clear assessment in the whole story:

The only strong statement of opinion is made through the character Judah when he declares Tamar just and acknowledges his own failure. The uniqueness of this statement increases its impact on the reader.

Smith<sup>72</sup> describes this turning around of Judah as follows:

For the first time in his life, as it is recorded in Genesis at least, he says that somebody else is "more than" he. And instead of lying his way through another difficulty, he seems to accept with meekness that which is due him.

It is true that we cannot derive from this singular phrase a total turning around of Judah and his whole personality. But just as the relocation of his brother Joseph was apparently the beginning of a transformation from an egocentric and spoiled young man to a responsible leader, this story in the life of Judah starts a process of transformation which changes him to be a man who stands in for others and can finally be described by his father with the words: "Judah, you are the one, your brothers will praise you" (Gen 49:48).

The closing words in this unit are: "and he did not know her again." This not only speaks about not having any further sexual relations with her, but also reminds the reader that he did not really "know" her until now. He did not know her when he sent her away to the house of her father (because he thought her to be responsible for the death of his sons) and he did not know her afterwards (because he thought her to be a prostitute).

- **Unit 7: Judah's Family is Continued through Tamar (vv. 27-30)**

(a) Analysis: Structurally this unit opens like the introductory unit. Things happen, children are born, and a story begins. And even though it seemingly abruptly ends the Joseph story, the story of Judah and Tamar nevertheless has great significance for the future. Through such an open end it becomes clear that the story is not yet finished, but part of a much bigger story.

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<sup>71</sup> Cowan, *Genesis 38*, 163.

<sup>72</sup> Smith, "The Role of Judah in Genesis 37-50," 76.

(b) Connections: As already stated, the words "to take" (נָקַל, v. 28) and "to go out" (נָצַר, vv. 28-30) connect this unit (and in fact the whole of Gen 38) with chs. 37 and 39.

(c) Narrative techniques: These verses sound like a kind of aftermath. Nevertheless, they are of great significance. They clearly show that Yahweh did bless Tamar in a remarkable way. She not only gets one son, but two. The circumstances of the birth also relate this story with that of Jacob and Esau. Jacob is the grandfather of these children. And as it was with him and his brother, there are difficulties with primogeniture.

Another story is also foreshadowed by this one: the story of Cain and Abel. This story too speaks about the question of preferring one brother over another. Perhaps through this account there is an indication that the future of these two sons (and especially that of Perez) is something special. That this really was the case, is, for example, visible in the already cited verse from Ruth 4:12. It was indeed the line of Perez which led to King David (Ruth 4:18-22) and through him finally to Jesus, the Messiah.

### 3 CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Gen 38 is a chapter which is intentionally located in the story of Jacob. It shows many clear connections to the surrounding chapters, both on the level of words and motif. Together with Gen 37 it forms a double exposition of the following story, which draws to a conclusion in Gen 48 and 49.

These chapters deal with the question of which one of the sons of Jacob is going to take over the leading position and who is going to receive the blessing of the firstborn. This question is then later answered in Gen 48 and 49, so that Judah receives the leading position and Joseph as the firstborn of Rachel gets the double portion of the heritage. This is described in 1Chr 5:2 as follows:

For Judah was strong amongst his brothers and a prince came from him, but the rights of the firstborn belonged to Joseph.

Genesis 38 marks a turning point in the personality of Judah. While he was ready to sell his brother Joseph into slavery for a profit (Gen 37), a process of transformation starts at the end of ch. 38, which finally leads him to be prepared to be enslaved by the Pharaoh in place of his brother Benjamin. This transformation qualifies him to become the leader amongst his brothers.

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