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Judah and Tamar: A missiological study of Genesis 38 in its redemptive-historical context

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In this article, Genesis 38 was researched with missiological interests in mind. Using the redemptive-historical reading strategy, the importance of the Bible, and especially of the Old Testament, for missions has been stressed, based on the analysis of Genesis 38. Attention was paid to the literary framework in which Genesis 38 appears, constructed around the 11 *toledōth* statements in Genesis. The results of this literary analysis were used for a thematic reading of Genesis 38, focusing on some central issues such as the theocentric character of redemptive history, the interconnectedness of the editorial and divine communicative intentions with the inclusion of Genesis 38 in the established literary tradition of Genesis 37–50, the significance of the three-fold promise of God to Abraham (Gn 12:1–3)[1] for the interpretation of Genesis 38, and the impact of Judah and Tamar on Israel's ancient history. Next, the redemptive-historical analysed text was missionally re-read to show the present Christian community of faith how important this narrative could be for its missiological reflections and missional praxis, with attention paid to three central missiological issues: the *missio Dei*, the *missiones ecclesiae*, and corporate worship for missions.

Contribution: This article, based on the redemptive-historical reading of Genesis 38 as an example, shows that the Old Testament, in its own right, is missionally relevant for the present Christian community of faith.

Keywords: redemptive history; *toledōth*; Judah and Tamar; Israel in Canaan; missional hermeneutics; Bible-reading strategy; *missio Dei*; *missiones ecclesiae*; worship for missions.

Introduction

This article proposed to read Genesis 38 within its direct literary context of Genesis 37–50, stressing its significance for the progress of the redemptive-historical narrative, as recounted in the canonical Bible book of Genesis. This shameful[2] episode in the patriarchal history of ancient Israel has been studied with missional interests in mind.

The redemptive-historical context of Genesis 38 has been studied in analysing the 11 texts where the term *toledōth* appears in Genesis.[3] Genesis 38 has been included in the last section of Genesis, opening with a reference to the *toledōth* of Jacob (Gn 37:2). The 11 *toledōth* texts form the literary structure of the redemptive-historical narrative in the canonical book of Genesis. The question was how this context could help to clarify the editorial intention, by including Genesis 38 in the established Joseph narrative (Gn 37–50). The redemptive-historical analysis of Genesis 38 created space for looking for a divine intention with this inclusion as well.

The much-debated issue of the date of the inclusion of Genesis 38 in the Joseph narrative could also be solved in the redemptive-historical context of Genesis 37–50.

This article did not follow earlier historical-critical diachronous research that reached the negative conclusion that this narrative is an unexpected, unnecessary interruption in the flow of the Joseph narrative (Brueggemann 1982:308). More recently, this negative perception of Genesis 38 has been replaced with a much more positive one, using a canonical-synchronous[4] approach. It fits within its direct (Gn 37–50) and broader (Gn 1–36) literary context (Adelman 2013; Bekins 2016; Fokkelman 1996; Labuschagne 2008; Leuchter 2013; Mathewson 1989; Smith 2005; Tan 2017;

1.The promise of becoming the ancestor of a numerous nation that would inhabit a land of its own, where they should become a blessing for all the peoples on earth.

2.Shameful: sex between father-in-law and daughter-in-law.

3.Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:20; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2.

4.In this article, canonical-synchronous refers to a more literary and theological-oriented approach to the final text.

Wenham 1994; Wünsch 2012). Despite differences between these scholars concerning the reasons why this chapter was inserted just at this specific point in the Jacob *toledōth*, all agree that this location makes good sense, literary and thematic.[5] This article followed these authors' conclusions without delving into their literary and thematic arguments in support of their specific positions. Just a redemptive-historical reading of Genesis 38 has been argued for in this article.

The significance of Genesis 38 for the present-day Christian community of faith has been addressed from a missional perspective, based upon the supposition that this community is the proper locus for missional redemptive-historical Bible reading.[6]

Outline

The first section of this article deals with the redemptive-historical context of Genesis 38. The term *toledōth* is the focus here. The question of what the editor's communicative intention including Genesis 38 might have been, was considered as well. This central issue has been discussed together with the question of the date when Genesis 38 could have been included in the Joseph narrative by the editor. The choice of date affects the editorial intention, and, consequently, the missional relevance of Genesis 38.

The second section focuses on missional hermeneutics, stressing the importance of choosing a correct Bible-reading strategy to read the Old Testament missionally. Next, attention was given to some missional issues (*missio Dei; missiones ecclesiae*; corporate worship for missions) from a redemptive-historical reading of Genesis 38 that could assist the present-day Christian community of faith in fulfilling its missional mandate (Gn 12:1–3; 18:18–19; Mt 28:16–20).

The redemptive-historical context of Genesis 38

Attention will be paid to the 11 verses where the term, *toledōth*, appears (Gn 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2). Next, within this context several issues will be investigated. Firstly, the universal focus of the redemptive-historical meta-narrative in Genesis will be examined. Secondly, its particular focus will receive attention, with special consideration of the choice of the head of the patriarchal household, the bearer of the divine promise (Gn 12:1–3). Lastly, attention will be paid to the chronological location of the land of Canaan and its original inhabitants in redemptive history, suggesting that this location is the interim between God's promise of the land to Abraham and his fulfilment of this promise to his descendants, liberated from their bondage in Egypt. In this article, the concept of *redemptive history* is understood as referring to the saving acts of the God of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth, in the history of mankind from the beginning to the end, as described in Scripture.

Toledōth

The canonical book of Genesis has been divided into 11 sections, each one of which opens with the same words (NIV2011): 'This is the account of'. The Hebrew word *toledōth* refers to begetting, procreation, birth, offspring, and therefore refers to 'the results that came from'. One could render it as 'the history of' or 'the genealogy of' (see Van Selms 1967:46; Wünsch 2012:780–782).[7,8] The 11 sections are interconnected. Each section continues the history narrated from the previous one, creating a unified narrative that reflects the unity of redemptive history as recounted in the canonical Scriptures. It was certainly the intention of the original author of Genesis to communicate to his audience this integrated view of redemptive history, progressing through time towards its destination set by the Lord, the God of Israel. While the term, *toledōth*, was used to interconnect the 11 sections of Genesis, the original author created a structural framework that comprised a 'theocentric narrative' (Mathewson 1989:389–391; Smith 2005:169–172). The editor included Genesis 38, making it a part of the last section which began with Genesis 37:1.

The universal focus

In this narrative, right from the beginning (Gn 2:4), God is called by his name revealed to Moses: Yahweh (Ex 3:15). The God worshipped in Israel is the Creator of heaven and earth who made mankind in his likeness (Gn 1:26; 5:2). From Genesis 2:4 onwards, the focus of the narrative is upon the disastrous role mankind played on the earth. The people jeopardised God's creation project (Gn 1:26–28; 2:15–17) by disobedience, choosing the side of God's opponent in redemptive history, symbolised by the snake (Gn 3:6–9). Despite the Lord's promise to restore the damage done to his creation project and to redeem mankind from the bonds of their common enemy (Gn 3:15), it went from bad to worse and it looked as if the end had come: God's judgement over thoroughly corrupt mankind through the Flood (Gn 6:1–8). Still, according to Genesis 6:9 and 10:1, the Lord God did not break his promise made in the beginning (Gn 3:15) and continued to be with the survivors of the Flood, Noah's descendants (Gn 9:1; 10:32), the ancestors of the Hebrew nation of Israel (Gn 10:25; 11:16). But a new crisis had to be solved by the Lord (Gn 11:5): mankind decided to develop the world as one united nation, but without acknowledging the Lord as Creator of this world (Gn 11:4). He issued a restraining order (Gn 11:6–7) to prevent that from happening. But beyond his judgement, He kept the future open for

5.See, for instance, Leuchter 2013:210-212; Mathewson 1989:382; Smith 2005:158-159.

6.See Greidanus (1988) and Dekker and De Graaf (reds. 2024) for the present hermeneutical discussions around the redemptive-historical reading of the OT. A missional redemptive-historical Bible reading assumes that mission and redemptive history are interlinked and reciprocally influencing each other.

7.See as well: Clifford (2004:521); Leuchter (2013:210–212); Mathewson (1989:389), Vogt (2009:146–147).

8.The NIV2011 translates Genesis 37:2: 'This is the account of Jacob's family line'; the RSV: 'This is the history of the family of Jacob'. The NASB: 'These are the records of the generations of Jacob'; NBV2021: 'Dit is de geschiedenis van Jakob en zijn nakomelingen.'

mankind created in his likeness. The Lord was committed to his goal: a renewed mankind in a restored creation where people would call upon the name of the Lord (Gn 4:26).[9]

The particular focus

The next section (Gn 11:10) narrows down the focus of the narrative to only one genealogy, that of Noah's son Shem, concluding with Terah, the father of Abraham (Gn 11:24–27). Redemptive history moved forward in the direction of Abraham and his descendants, who in the future would live in Canaan, the land God had promised to them, but that was still inhabited by other nations (Gn 10:15–18). God's redemptive intentions to restore creation and renew humankind overcame the continuous human-made crises and remained firm in the face of sinful, rebellious behaviour. Evidence of this can be found in Genesis 11:27, where Terah's *toledōth* opened a new stage in redemptive history in which Abraham and his descendants were to play a vital role (Gn 25:19; 37:2). God chose them as his agents of change, charged to fulfil his plan to save humankind and creation from a final divine judgement (Gn 12:1–3; 18:18–19). The nation born out of Abraham should have become a blessing to all the peoples on earth, reconnecting them with their Creator, the Lord God of Israel. They would receive a land of their own as the location where this blessing was to be realised and could be found by all the peoples on earth. It should be mentioned that Abraham started building altars in this land where he called upon the name of God (Gn 12:7–8), an example that his descendants should have followed if they wanted to become a blessing to the nations.

A principle issue mentioned time and again in the patriarchal phase of redemptive history was the question of who in the next generation would be the head of the household,[10] being responsible for the implementation of the divine mandate entrusted to his family. In Abraham's family line, it was mostly not the eldest son, holding primogeniture, who became the heir of his father, the bearer of the divine promise, but the younger one (Gn 25:23). This was the source of heartbreak and internecine hatred among Abraham's descendants (Gn 25:27–34; 27:41).[11] In Genesis 37–38 and 48–49, this issue was again the source of misunderstanding and confusion. Jacob knew what he did when he chose to bless Joseph's youngest son, Ephraim, as the future head of the household after the death of his father Joseph, who himself was one of the youngest sons of Jacob and chosen to become the bearer of the divine promise (Gn 37:5; 48:14–20). The choice of the new head of the household, the bearer of the divine promise, was made by God in his grace and was not dependent on human customs and traditions. Later in Israel's history, in the promised land during the pre-monarchical era, the tribe of Ephraim was considered to be the leading tribe which always looked after its concerns (Jdg 8:1–3; 12:1–6; Dt 33:7).[12]

Another issue is raised in Genesis 15:12–16 (Wielenga 2023:3–4): God promised Abraham to give his descendants a land of their own in the future where they as a numerous nation, would become a blessing to all the peoples on earth. The promised land played a decisive role in God's redemptive plan with the world. But before they would receive this land as their inheritance out of God's hand, Abraham's descendants would first have to face a future full of hardship and suffering as strangers in a foreign land (Egypt). In this in-between time, lasting 400 years, the existing inhabitants of this land were allowed to continue their existence as independent nations. God postponed his judgement of them till their sins had reached their full measure (Gn 15:16). Until that time, the patriarchs and their descendants were not allowed to harm them in any way. They would only receive the divine permission to exterminate these original nations after entering the promised land (Dt 7:1–6).[13]

The land would not become theirs before the time sovereignly set by God. Hence, they had to treat these original inhabitants decently in this in-between time, in which the nations were not yet excluded from God's grace and blessing (Wielenga 2023:6). Announcement of the judgement was followed by its temporary postponement, as is usually the case in the Old and New Testament (Wielenga 2018:5, 2021:4). In this in-between time, Israel lived for 430 years in Egypt (Ex 12:40).

The author did not overlook the failures of God's chosen people right from the earliest stages of their history. Too often they were not a blessing in the promised land to the other peoples on earth, starting with their fellow inhabitants of Canaan during the first stage of the in-between time (Gn 34). It was only by divine mercy and grace that God kept to his decision to work redemption through this specific family and nation. As will be argued later, Genesis 38 seamlessly fits into this redemptive-historical context.

The *toledōth* of Jacob

The last section of this redemptive-historical narrative opens with a reference to the *toledōth* of Jacob (Gn 37:2). The narrative continues to focus on the core problem of who would become the heir of Jacob as the head of the household, and the bearer of the divine promise, responsible for the implementation of the divine mandate entrusted to them (Gn 12:3; 18:18). Judah was the first one who, by custom, qualified to become his father's successor. His older full brothers, sons of Leah, Jacob's first wife, who was not favoured by him, were excluded: Reuben (Gn 35:22; 49:3–4), Simeon and Levi (Gn 34:30; 49:5–7), because of their serious misbehaviour that

9.See Wielenga (1996) about the place of creation in redemptive history (in the context of the covenant with Noah).

10.For the position of the head of the household (family) in ancient Israel, see Block (2003:33–102) and Tan (2017:20–33).

11.Esau's descendants originally weren't excluded from redemptive history: notice the use of the term *toledōth* in Genesis 36:1, 9. Esau left Canaan freely for Edom (Seïr). See Wielenga's (2022) notion of Esau/Edom in the Old Testament.

12.See De Jong (2016) for a comprehensive biblical-theological discussion of Ephraim's position among the tribes of Israel before the rise of the Davidic monarchy.

13.See for instance Peels (2024:67–73) for the relation between God and violence in the OT.

made them unfit for this position. However, the focus is on Joseph, the son of Rachel, the wife favoured by Jacob. There are indications in the narrative that Joseph was also God's choice to succeed his father as head of the household (Gn 37:3–7; 50:22). But Joseph's misbehaviour, overlooked by Jacob who loved him more than any of his other sons, caused a serious family crisis that threatened the divine mandate entrusted to the family. Jacob's household had become dysfunctional at that time, wrapped up in internal strife without paying any attention to the people of Canaan for whom they should have been a blessing. The author completes his narrative on a positive note: Joseph is at last acknowledged as the heir of Jacob (Gn 50:19–21), the new head of the household responsible for the implementation of the divine mandate entrusted to them. Joseph became a true blessing, to the people of Egypt, helping them to survive a devastating famine that threatened their continued existence. He was promoted to become second-in-command over Egypt (Gn 47:23–27). The Lord was with him in Egypt (Gn 39:2, 5, 21; 41:25, 28, 32; 48:9; Vogt 2009:80). God's redemptive plan was initially on track during the in-between time of 400 years in Egypt (Gn 15:16).

It is significant that the editor would include the Judah-Tamar story just at this point in the narrative. Despite the unassailable position of Joseph in the patriarchal narrative, being chosen as Jacob's heir (Gn 48:19), Judah too is being pushed forward by the editor, by creating space for him as a future ruler in Israel's earliest history over the 12-tribe nation (Gn 49:10).[14] For the actual audience of the editor, this was an important factor in the violent times of tribal strife, as was the case during the transition from the time of the Judges to that of the Davidic kings. But he did not forget to mention that Judah, too, was initially moving in the direction opposite to the one pointed out by God. He followed his uncle Esau (Gn 36:1–5) rather than his father Jacob. Judah proved to be as unfit to succeed his father Jacob as head of the household and bearer of the divine promise as his previously excluded older brothers.

The question now is: what was the editor's exact motivation to include Genesis 38 in the fixed narrative tradition of Genesis 37–50? What purpose did this inclusion serve in the editor's updating of the Joseph narrative?

Whose intention?

To discover the message the editor intended to communicate to his actual audience, a decisive point, made before, has to be stressed again.

Theocentric narrative

It should be noted that from the first to the last *toledōth* section in Genesis, it is the Lord, the God of Israel, who is the main actor in the redemptive history and he determines its course and moves it forward to its eschatological destination, the renewal of mankind and the restoration of creation for the sake of the completion of his creation project.[15] This article contends that the editor of the Genesis narrative included chapter 38 to disclose and emphasise that God is involved in the history of his chosen people for good reasons. Even though human interests did play a crucial role in the redemptive history recounted in Genesis 12–50, the editor wanted his readers to look at them from a divine perspective. The editorial intention with this narrative opened a window on this perspective.[16]

Albeit morally questionable, Tamar's handling of the family crisis could be understood from a feminist perspective, as a story focusing on the ill-treatment of a woman in a patricentric culture (Claassens 2012:660–661; Niditch 1979:143–149; Tan 2017:117–118). Tribal politics could also have played a role in the editor's decision to include Genesis 38 in the redemptive-historical narrative of Genesis 37–50 (Amit 2011:15–17; Bekins 2016:384; Viljoen & Breytenbach 2002:1813–1815). Nevertheless, as has been argued above, Genesis 38 can be best identified as part of a 'theocentric narrative' (Mathewson 1989:389–391) with a distinctively divine outlook. The following arguments intend to strengthen this proposition, clarifying the communicative intention of the editor, in this way disclosing the divine perspective that lay behind it.

Divine concern

Firstly, the editor highlights the divine concern about the continuity of the *toledōth* of Jacob (Gn 37:2) for the sake of the progress of redemptive history to its destination, determined by God. At the end of this section of the original narrative, all seemed to be well. It ends with Joseph who will inherit the seat of his father Jacob as head of the household and bearer of the divine promise. Retrospectively, one can see God at work in the narrative of Jacob's *toledōth*, providentially taking precautions against threats to his salvation plan in the future by his people with whom He was covenanted (Gn 15). This certainly occurred during the transition from the time of the Judges to the rise of the Davidic monarchy. After his spiritual turnaround (Gn 38:26), Judah returned home to his family and emigrated with them to Egypt, having played a central role in the reconciliation process between Joseph and his brothers (Gn 43:8–10; 44:14–34; 45:1–20). Joseph had already pointed to God's providential interventions in his family's history (45:8; 50:20). Therefore, in the time of the dominance of the tribe of Ephraim, when there was not yet a king in Israel (Jdg 17–21), and when Israel failed time and again to worship God and to observe his laws, the inclusion of Genesis 38 could have been intended by the editor to demonstrate God's gracious intervention in the history of his people in the past, that should raise their hope for his intervention in the present, when the movement of redemptive history to its divine

14.See here Van Bekkum (2024:81-85).

15.See Wielenga and König (1999:257–259) for a discussion about God's creation project from a covenantal perspective.

16.For the theological context of these statements, see Dekker and De Graaf (reds. 2024). About revelation and history, see Van Bekkum (2024:85–8 8).

destination stagnated during the dominance of the tribe of Ephraim in Israel (Ps 78:56–64; Hs 7:8–10, 16). Hence, the tribe of Ephraim was removed from its leading position and replaced by the tribe of Judah: Saul was succeeded as king by David from the tribe of Judah which took over as the leading tribe in Israel (Ps 78:65–72), as was already implied by the blessing Jacob gave his son Judah (Gn 49:8–12).[17] One could indeed use the term 'hidden polemic' here (Amit 2011:1–17) to describe the relationship between Judah and Joseph or Ephraim, which was only exposed when the editor included Genesis 38 in the *toledōth* of Jacob. He certainly wanted to convince his audience of God's trustworthy supervision of their history. The editor served God's intentions with his chosen people in the promised land.

Judah's behaviour

Secondly, the editor's actual audience, learning about the Judah-Tamar narrative, must have been struck by the behaviour of Jacob's son Judah, as described in Genesis 38. He did not only go away from his family home, which at that time was caught up in turmoil after the alleged death of the favoured son, Joseph (Gn 38:1). He went to stay with a Canaanite friend in his hometown, Adullam, where he met a Canaanite woman whom he married and with whom he started a family (Gn 38:2). He followed in the footsteps of his uncle Esau, who took his wives from the women of Canaan; he would have fit seamlessly in Esau's *toledōth* (Gn 36:1). Without the knowledge of Jacob, the head of his family, Judah was married, had three sons and he was integrated into the Canaanite society and its culture. Nothing in the narrative indicates that Judah's wife, or later his daughter-in-law, Tamar, joined their new family's religion. It seems that, rather, the opposite happened: Judah joined their culture including its religion (Emerton 1979:414).

The first thing the editor's audience should have noted then was the apparent absence of the Lord, the God of Judah's ancestors, in this narrative. God's name is once mentioned in Genesis 38:6 –10, where He punished the two eldest sons of Judah because of their evil ways.[18] One could say that the Lord was present but in anger. Next, the absence of his family in Judah's life must be noted as well. He broke the unity of his father's household and weakened its already vulnerable position in Canaan (Gn 34). What the story further tells about Judah's behaviour exposes a lifestyle not to be expected of people chosen by God. His morally irresponsible behaviour (Gn 38:12–18) could link to his religious indifference towards the Lord, the God of his fathers. An all-time low was his treatment of his daughter-in-law, Tamar, after the death of her husband, Judah's eldest son Er, and of her levirate husband (Dt 25:5–10) Onan, Judah's second son. Blaming her for their deaths, he refused to let her marry his last son Shelah and condemned her to a lifelong existence as a childless widow in her own father's house. He did not even shy away from condemning her to death, when he learned that she, who was officially still promised in marriage to Judah's third son Shelah, was pregnant (Gn 38:24). He, who had a short while ago slept with a prostitute, had no moral problem with condemning Tamar to death for adultery, without even investigating the accusation. For him, she was a problem to his family that now could be solved.

At that time Judah was not the right man to succeed his father as head of the family, although Joseph was. But when Joseph's descendants in Israel, the tribe of Ephraim, failed to live up to their calling to lead the nation in the implementation of their God-given mandate, the editor reminded his audience that there was an alternative to Ephraim: Judah! Their ancestor did not qualify to become the successor of his father Jacob, but God intervened and used Tamar, Judah's Canaanite daughter-in-law, to turn him back to his family as a changed man (Gn 38:26).[19] At the same time, God compensated Judah for the loss of his two sons through Tamar: she gave birth to twins (Gn 38:27–30). God assured the future of Judah's household and turned him into a leading tribe in the promised land. The included narrative reminded the editor's audience of God's providential intervention in the life of their ancestor in the past, to keep the redemptive history moving forward into the future, to its divine destination.[20]

The date of inclusion

The issue of the date of the inclusion of Genesis 38 in Genesis 37–50 must now be clarified. As already mentioned, a date in the late pre-monarchical era seems to be the most plausible one.

In this era, Israel found itself in an extremely inconvenient situation – between internal strife and external hostility. As the book of Judges describes (Jdg 2:6–3:5), for a long time Israel was attacked from all sides by foreign peoples; during the time of king Saul, the Philistines had a free hand in the country. The mighty position of Ephraim was weakening and also, in their opinion, threatened by other tribes (Jdg 7:22–8:3; 12:1–6). Spiritually, Israel had wandered far off course in this era, and there was no sign at all that the divine mandate entrusted to them since the time of their ancestors played any role at all in the nation. In this context, the inclusion of the *toledōth* of Esau (Gn 36:1) in the Genesis narrative makes sense. Esau married Canaanite women and had children with them (Gn 36:2–5). This mention could have been intended as a warning to the audience of this narrative: do not follow Esau's example. That will lead to

17.For a thorough study of the changing of the guard between Ephraim and Judah, see De Jong (2016) and Van Bekkum (2024:81–85).

18.Could one therefore conclude that Judah was also punished in this way by God, for the misbehaviour of his sons as the head of his household? Judah, however, did not consider his own behaviour the cause of the Lord's punishment, and he blamed Tamar instead.

19.Tamar's morally reprehensible behaviour towards her father-in-law, seducing him as if she was a prostitute (Judah was far from sober returning home from a sheep-shearer's festival), was not censured by anyone, not even by God who did not hesitate to use her initiative to further his own redemptive historical plan.

20.One could refer here to Ruth 4:18; 1 Chronicals 2:3–5; Matthew 1:3 for the genealogy of Judah via Perez via Boaz via David via Joseph to his adopted son Jesus Christ. See Van Bekkum (2024:85–88) and Dekker (2024:23–26) about the question of Christocentric or christotelic reading of OT narratives.

the loss of the promised land.[21] In this pre-monarchical time, this was a real problem: mixed marriages with Canaanite partners with syncretism as a result (Jdg 2). Ephraim failed in its role as the leading tribe of Israel; its dominance ended. It was during this period that Judah's power and influence among the tribes was growing. Genesis 38 must have been included in this time and place to support the position of the tribe of Judah, by pointing to their ancestor, who acknowledged his unrighteous behaviour (Gn 38:26) and was also richly blessed by Jacob (Gn 49:8–12). The failure of king Saul the Benjamite opened the door for David, the Judahite. The message the editor wanted to communicate to his audience was relevant: the Lord, the God of Israel, who had been with their ancestor, was now with them, his descendants. They should follow his example. God had already chosen a successor for the tribe of Ephraim: Judah, and for King Saul: David. Redemptive history was moving into a new phase full of divine promises (2 Sm 7:11 – 16; 8:1–14). The divine intention with this narrative was not less convincing: the God of Judah is in full control of the redemptive history. In his providence, his plan to overcome the present crisis is ready to be implemented.

Missional redemptive history[22]

In this section, a missional biblical hermeneutic will at first be discussed to pave the way for drawing missional inferences from the redemptive-historical reading of Genesis 38 – this is relevant for the missiological reflections and the missional praxis of the present Christian community of faith.

Secondly, three of these missional inferences will be briefly addressed: at first the *missio Dei*, next the *missiones ecclesiae*, and, lastly, the corporate worship for missions.

Bible-reading strategy

Biblical scholarship contributes more and more to a missional reading of the Bible with special attention paid to hermeneutical questions.[23] Following authors like Wright (2006, 2016) and Goheen (ed. 2016), some remarks will now be made regarding a responsible biblical hermeneutic for the sake of a missional re-reading of Genesis 38. The Bible-reading strategy that should be employed is an important issue.

A missional reading of the Bible should employ a dual reading strategy, based upon the kerygmatic unity of the meta-narrative of the canonical Scriptures.[24] Firstly, a forward reading movement should be followed from the Old into the New Testament before the backward movement can be made, from the New Testament into the Old Testament. This retroductive reading strategy should prevent a 'Christianised' reading of the Old Testament from a prejudiced New Testament perspective (Wielenga 1994:228–232). Such a way of reading cannot do justice to the historical context and theological content of the Old Testament itself. The reading strategy proposed here follows the flow of redemptive history from the Old into the New Testament, drawn towards the eschatological destination determined by God the Lord Almighty, the main actor in this universal history. It is He who chooses people to be his agents in an asymmetrical but mutual partnership. In this article, Genesis 38 has been read, using the forward leg of this Bible-reading strategy, be it from an explicit missional reading location,[25] the Christian community of faith. Hence, the way back from the New Testament into the Old Testament will be utilised next.

One should now note another reading presupposition. Wright (2016:109–111) correctly points out (see also Hunsberger 2011:311–312) that the Old Testament, just like the New Testament, has a missional origin, inaugurated by the Lord, God Almighty of Israel. The narratives contained in the Old Testament have been kept alive in the memory of the people through the oral and literary traditions, to reveal to them why and how they should be involved in God's redemptive history. One should therefore acknowledge the divine origin of Genesis 38 from a missional perspective and look for the divine intention of preserving it for the audiences at the time, and for later audiences. The editorial intention with its historical focus is a prelude to the divine intention with its messianic-eschatological focus.[26]

Genesis 38 and the *missio Dei*

In missiology, the concept[27] of the *missio Dei* refers to God, the Lord Almighty, as the sole initiator of the mission. It is He who sovereignly maintains its progress through history, despite serious setbacks as recounted in the Bible and known from church history. His purpose with his mission is to establish the Kingdom of God (Mt 4:17), the renewal of mankind and the restoration of creation, which will be accomplished at the end of times beyond the final judgement (Ml 3:20–24; Mt 24:14). This occurs following the biblical teaching about the redemptive history with its strong theocentric emphasis and eschatological scope. Mission history and redemptive history are two sides of the same coin: the *missio Dei* is the engine driving redemptive history forward, and redemptive history is the way along which God fulfils his mission. The universal focus of redemptive history corroborates the eschatological purpose of the *missio Dei*.

The Lord Almighty, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was present in Genesis 38, although not in love but in anger

21.In Malachi 1:2–5 the reference to God's hatred for Esau (Edom) functions as a warning for Jacob (Israel) in the post-exilic era: do not be like Esau (Edom) (Wielenga 2022).

22.See Jongeneel (1991:68–71) for a short introduction to missional redemptive history.

23.For the OT, see Wright (2016:107–123) and also Wielenga (1998:45–120). See Van Engen (1997:28 –32), Wright (2006:33–74), Barram (2007:48–52) and Hunsberger (2011:309–321) for missional hermeneutics.

24.See Peels (2009:236–259) for the kerygmatic unity of the canonical Scriptures.

25.See Barram (2007:44–45) and Hunsberger (2011:315–317) about the missional church as the social location for missional Bible reading with the purpose of equipping the church missionally.

26.See for instance Genesis 12:1–3; 18:18–19 and Galatians 3:14; Romans 4:16–17.

27.See Bosch (1991:389–393); Scherer (1997:82–88); Wielenga (2018:6–8).

(Gn 38:6–10). Judah followed in the footsteps of Esau and not in those of Jacob. Two of his sons followed him. The unity of God's chosen people, Abraham's descendants, was weakened by Judah who joined the Canaanite culture. The divine mandate entrusted to them, to be a blessing to the nations (Gn 12:3; 18:18), was ignored. But God not only intervened in anger but also in mercy, through Judah's Canaanite daughter-in-law, Tamar. Judah turned around spiritually and went back home to the household of Jacob, together with Tamar and her twins (Gn 38:26; 43:3). The editor included this narrative, which was made available to him to support the tribe of Judah against Ephraim at the crossroads of the redemptive history in the late pre-monarchical era. Retrospectively, later audiences could point to the divine intention with the inclusion of this story in the Joseph narrative. The progress of the missional redemptive history could not be destructed by human failure, it was moved forward to its eschatological destination (Mt 1:3). This sequence can also be traced from the history of missions, right from its beginnings. The eschatological drive of God's mission cannot be stopped despite the failures of his mission partners, the internally divided church. The narrative's intention served the interests of the *missio Dei*.

Genesis 38 and the *missiones ecclesiae*

Mission as *missio Dei* is not in the first instance an action of the church but an attribute of God (Bosch 1991:390). Nevertheless, the missional God does not act alone without people chosen and prepared by him to be his partners in the *missio Dei*. As has been argued above, God has unilaterally initiated the redemptive history but He bilaterally maintains and completes it in partnership with his chosen people (Mt 28:19). In missions as in redemptive history, God and his chosen people are involved as partners in an asymmetrical but mutual relationship.[28] One can draw from Genesis 38 inferences relevant to the modern *missiones ecclesiae*. Judah's misbehaviour hindered the progress of redemptive history. It should be noted that, at the same time, God used Tamar to keep the redemptive history moving forward. Her questionable behaviour did not disqualify her from the role God had in store for her (Mt 1:3).

Highlighted in Genesis 38 is Judah's failure to live as a member of his family, chosen by God for a specific purpose: to be a blessing to all the peoples on the earth. He followed in the footsteps of his uncle Esau; he failed as the head of his household, especially ill-treating his daughter-in-law. His personal life was not up to the standards of God who was worshipped in his family; no mention of the worship of God is made at all. Several inferences can now be made. During the history of the *missiones ecclesiae*, too often individual missionaries followed in Judah's footsteps, not living up to the moral standards set by Jesus Christ, their missionary leader: 'To obey everything I have commanded you' (Mt 5–7; 28:20). Another example is the corporate failing of the church in mission.

28.This relationship is referred to as a covenant in the Bible. For the correspondence between *covenant* and *mission*(*s*) see Wielenga and König (1999:263–269).

The progress of the *missio Dei* through redemptive history has too often been hindered by the mission paradigms used by the church in the course of her history (Bosch 1991:181–348). One of the oldest missional fiascos of the Western church from the days of the Roman emperor Constantine onwards was the cooperation between the church and the state (Bosch 1997:89–95), turning the Christian faith into a state ideology.[29] In the era of colonial missions, it was this ideology that was exported to the mission fields in the non-Western world. The worship of God functioned too often in a political context serving the interests of the colonial masters. In cases of conflict of interest between the colonial authorities and the missionising church, too often the interests of the first outbalanced those of the last.[30] But the failing colonial *missiones ecclesiae* could not derail the *missio Dei* on its way to its divine destination. The missional seeds sown by God's failing mission partners nevertheless brought forth fruit. The Lord Almighty providentially maintained control over the progress of the missional redemptive history, even using missionary negative attitudes and paradigms to advance the *missio Dei*. The corporate worship for missions plays a crucial role in the cooperation between both mission partners.

Genesis 38 and the corporate worship for missions

The absence of corporate worship in Genesis 38 and its consequences demonstrates its importance for the *missio Dei* and *missiones ecclesiae*.

Corporate worship takes place where the Christian community of faith renders to God the worth due to Him at the location chosen by Him. God's redemptive work in the past is remembered and celebrated there with prayer and praise. The hope for the eschatological future of mankind and creation in the realised Kingdom of God is strengthened by listening to the preaching of his Word, empowered by the Holy Spirit (Ac 2:42–47). Both mission partners are involved in worship, if not on equal then on mutual terms. The missional intention of worship is to bring glory to God and to pave the way for the *missiones ecclesiae* among the nations. In the early church, the commissioning of missionaries took place right there in the worship service (Ac 13:1–4). It was not by accident that the growth of the early church happened in the context of corporate worship (Ac 2:47).

In this context, Jesus promised his disciples, who were sent out to the nations just after having worshipped him (Mt 28:17): 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'. He could make this promise because '[a]ll authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Mt 28:20). In worship this promise and assurance will be strengthened and celebrated to the benefit of missions.

Corporate worship services are also the places where human failure is confessed, and forgiveness is requested and

29.See Goudzwaard and Bartholomew (2017:56–72) about ideology.

30.See Giliomee (2003:123–128, 459–464) and Wielenga (1990:122–208) for the church–state relationship in colonial South Africa.

celebrated. The God who initiates the *missio Dei* in his grace is the one who sustains in grace the *missiones ecclesiae* in good and bad times. This sustenance starts right there where the Christian community of faith gathers in worship. It could be said in one sentence: No missions without worship, no worship without missions! The significance of worship for missions becomes clearer against the background of the absence of worship in Genesis 38.

This centrality of corporate worship is also true for the history of mission: worship anchors the *missio Dei* in missional redemptive history, while it is the starting point of the *missiones ecclesiae*, sustaining and shaping it (Kemp 2003:102–107; Wielenga 2019:3–4). The flow of the patriarchal narrative in Genesis is interrupted twice by the editorial inclusion of stories about the sons of Jacob who failed to observe the instructions of God regarding his mandate to be a blessing to the nations, starting with the Canaanite nations they were living among (Gn 34; 38; Wielenga 2023:3). As argued above, there is no mention at all that Judah worshipped the Lord, the God Almighty. It is not too far-fetched to link Judah's behaviour with his negligence of worship of God. No corporate worship, no redemptive history unless the Lord graciously intervenes, as He did (Gn 35:5; 38:13–19).

In conclusion

This article examined the significance of Genesis 38 in its redemptive-historical context. One may conclude that its significance is considerable in the historical circumstances of ancient Israel but no less in the messianic-eschatological situation of the missionising church in the 21st century. Throughout missional redemptive history, the story of Judah and Tamar intends to assist God's mission partners, to stand firm to the eschatological end, 'preaching the gospel of the kingdom in the whole world as a testimony to all nations' (Mt 24:13–14).

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