

Judah's directive to return to her family and wait for Shelah. But her return home palpably restored her to the supervisory authority of her father. Furthermore, Tamar as a widow may have had the right to become a prostitute, an income-producing role her father might have requested of her. Thus, Judah's unilateral decision appears to have exceeded the limits of legitimate recourse open to him, even while living among the Canaanites.

Fifth, Israelite law does not appear to have permitted the penalty he handed down. Later sanctions did assign burning as the penalty for a man who had sexual relations with his mother-in-law (Lev 20:14) and for a priest's daughter who defiled her father through prostitution (Lev 21:9). Further, it forbade a priest or high priest from marrying a prostitute (Lev 21:7, 14). However, the latter two laws assume that prostitution was practiced in Israelite society and that marrying a prostitute was acceptable for nonpriestly Israelites. Whatever the Israelite limitations on prostitution, if they applied to this situation, Judah took the strictest possible construction of the law and applied the maximum penalty, possibly surpassing the legal limits.³²

Sixth, the height of Judah's presumption appears in his hypocrisical stance. What was legitimate for him was not so for her. Moreover, although her behavior was not prostitution, he didn't consider it worth discussing it with her, his own daughter-in-law, or with anyone else, to determine her specific offense. By contrast, his own behavior was far more questionable: he had not only used a prostitute, but also made a sacrifice to foreign deities. He pushed the double standard to the extreme in evaluating her. Yet he accepted this totally inequitable set of norms as his own right and privilege, while he simultaneously condemned her for living by the standards of her own people and culture.³³

Seventh, these judicial events do not occur between judge and prisoner, but between "your daughter-in-law" (v. 24) and "her father-in-law" (v. 25). The familial tone of the information—the first reference couched phrasologically for Judah's ear—reflects on both characters. The personalized reference to Tamar, implying

Assessing the Issues: Placement, Character, and Significance

The plotting dynamics of the story of Judah and Tamar provide the means for responding to the three issues of interpretation raised in scholarly discussion. Let us turn now to these issues: the story's placement in its biblical context; the character of the principals, especially Judah, whom we now need to reconsider in light of Tamar's role; and the purpose and significance of the story.

Placement in the Joseph Novella

Many scholars agree that this story is unrelated to the events of the Joseph novella, citing lack of relevance and conflicting time frames. The major discrepancy derives from the seeming irrelevance of Judah's sojourn in the Shephelah to the events disrupting Jacob's family.³⁴ A more minor problem arises in integrating the story into the chronology of the Joseph novella. Most commentators consider the minimal time span required for the events of Genesis 38—some twenty years—too long to integrate into the contextual events occurring in Jacob's family.³⁵ However, close analysis can resolve this conflict, even if the ages and dating parameters of the Joseph story are taken literally. The maximum contextual period of time allowable for the events of Genesis 38

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that she leaked the information, invites Judah to deal with her as a member of his family. But by dismissing the familial ties and even after hearing his verdict, delivered impersonally at a distance, Tamar continued to relate to him in familial terms, sending personal items and a message to "her father-in-law." On her way to execution the sentenced daughter-in-law disarmingly asks if Judah might recognize the items she obtained from her partner in crime. She astutely phrases her last sentence as a question, calling for a direct reply that would identify both possessions and possessor.

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Let us examine the minor problem first; in fact, the major one belongs more properly in the discussion of Judah's character. Most commentators consider the minimal time span required for the events of Genesis 38—some twenty years—too long to integrate into the contextual events occurring in Jacob's family.³⁵ However, close analysis can resolve this conflict, even if the ages and dating parameters of the Joseph story are taken literally. The maximum contextual period of time allowable for the events of Genesis 38

is twenty-two years, from the time of the sale of Joseph until the descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt.³⁶ The events of the Judah-Tamar tale in themselves require about two decades, so that the story itself fits into the contextual time frame.

The bind arises when one adds another fifteen to eighteen years for the birth of Perez's sons Hezron and Hamul to the Genesis 38 time span. Hezron and Hamul appear in the list of seventy who immigrated to Egypt (in Gen 46:12), and so some add their births to the length of the Judah-Tamar story. Umberto Cassuto resolves this issue by arguing that the later reference identifies them as Perez's sons, but not as among the seventy who descended to Egypt. They were listed with Perez for convenience and completeness, but they were born later.³⁷ Meir Sternberg considers this argument unlikely, even though it may provide a chronological loop-hole.³⁸ More likely, he states, is the probability that the sale of Joseph and Judah's encounter with Tamar were roughly simultaneous, one of the common patterns of chronological ordering in Hebrew narrative.³⁹ Thus, Judah's descent into the Shephelah occurred some two decades before the events of Genesis 37, but the sale of Joseph and the threat to Tamar are contemporaneous. This correlation links the ironic recognitions by Jacob and Judah thematically and temporally. Either option—removing Perez's sons from the list of Hebrew immigrants to Egypt (à la Cassuto) or considering Joseph's sale and Tamar's near execution as simultaneous (à la Sternberg)—resolves the problem of the time frame. Each integrates the events of Judah's sojourn among the Canaanites into the time frame of events in the larger family.

What of the larger issue, that of the relevance of the Judah-Tamar story to its context? This depends on our evaluation of Judah's changing character and relations with Tamar. Therefore let us now turn to the complex narrative construction of Genesis 38 relates to its context on the basis of Judah's changing role in the family, a change that occurs in his encounter with Tamar.

Interpreting Character

of the two main characters and then to the integral relations between the Judah-Tamar tale and the Joseph novella. Ultimately, this story's contextual placement and its significance are two sides of the same coin.

Interpreting Judah's Character: The Issues

The polarized interpretations of Judah's character, as advanced by Shinar and Zakovitch and opposed by Ravid, demonstrate different readings of the available information. All elements of character and plot development become important in assessing Judah's character, including the portrayal of his rival Tamar. Shinar and Zakovitch came to a negative assessment of Judah by concentrating on his actions. Ravid used narrative comment and references to his inner life to read his role more positively. However, his mode of interaction with others and his assimilation of the Canaanite lifestyle must also bear on our assessment of his character.

First, Judah's heavy-handed actions and commanding tone epitomize the breakdown of relations in his new family. As he becomes more impetuous and distant, the family disintegrates and the tensions increase. Earlier, too, his dominating qualities were evident: after crudely taking a local woman, he runs roughshod over everyone and "dominates his family without compunction."⁴⁰ Three successive verbs describe his interactions with Shua's daughter: he "sees," "takes," and "enters" her.⁴¹ Only the intervening mention of her ethnic identity and father breaks up the abrupt three-verb sequence and tones down the implication of rape. Besides skipping discussion with the family,⁴² Judah disregards a formal marriage arrangement, as would have been stated with the formula "he took her to himself as [his] wife."⁴³ The quick sequence of the three verbs and the lack of formalities suggest he acted immediately out of lust.⁴⁴ Without formalizing family ties, he lived with her conjugally, giving them a marital relationship in fact, if not through design and arrangement.

Other danger signals arise from previous warnings against exogamous relations, of which both Judah and the reader are aware.

Judah's hasty action overrides the family precedent: the refusal of Abraham (Gen 24:3) and Isaac (28:1-2, 6, 8) to take Canaanite wives for their sons. He ignored the risks accompanying previous intermarriages: Esau's problematic marriages with Hittite women (Gen 26:34-35; 27:46—28:9), and the dangerous confusion of marital and economic issues in the encounter between Jacob's sons and the Shechemites (Genesis 34). Benno Jacob notes that Genesis 34, 36, and 38 all deal with the problems of mixed marriages.⁴⁵ Judah's actions appear as an arbitrary impulse, which drifted into an unplanned family life in a foreign community, or worse, full acceptance of the Canaanites and their lifestyle.

Judah dominated his family through his abrupt commands,⁴⁶ his later sentence of Tamar simply followed his previous pattern. His response to Er's death was to issue a triple directive to Onan. His response to Onan's death was to send Tamar home to her own family. His response to the charges against Tamar contained two words, both commands. In three utterances he gave six commands, his only mode of direct discourse besides his negotiations with the unrecognized prostitute. He was the commander of his family—an authoritarian patriarch.⁴⁷

Judah's word carried the force of law for those around him, and both Onan (v. 8) and Tamar (v. 11) obeyed him formally. Onan subverted the command with partial obedience, what some today might describe as a passive-aggressive reaction against a dominating father. Tamar also obeyed partially, following his directions until she became aware of his deception. Although Tamar is usually described as the trickster in this story, Mike Bal has pointed out that "her trick is a *response* to the trick played against her, not an *initiative* of trickery." Judah is the dishonest party, for "this opposition between willing deceit and unwilling 'deceit' is what the story displays; not verbal deceit and counter-deceit, for Tamar does not lie."⁴⁸ Anonymous responded to his sentence of execution for Tamar, just as an anonymous word had come to him of Tamar's

guilt. He evidently had created an image of power such that all people heeded his directions, even to the extent of bringing a naive widow out from her father's house to be executed under his decree. In stark contrast, Judah courtously solicited the prostitute, dramatically dropping his authoritarian tone with people outside the family.

Second, the story turns on a religious sense of character. Here the Shinar-Zakovich and the Ravid interpretations are both right about the negative and positive portrayals of Judah, each on the basis of selective criteria. His religious prevarications and his facing saving change at the end of the story both become determinative for fully assessing his character. Judah's full assimilation of the Canaanite lifestyle becomes insidious when coupled with an accommodating mutual acceptance of people and religious customs—insidious because he appears to have unthinkingly abandoned his roots.

Remarkably absent from the narrative is any hint of hostile social, economic, or military opposition to Judah from the local Canaanites. Could any appeal be more innocuous than his idyllic move into the pastoral foothills and amicable settling among the indigenous population? He faces no question about his manner of taking a wife, or his later decree of death for Tamar, disclosing the oddly asymmetric ties between him and the local populace. His easy integration contrasts sharply with the various risks—military, social, economic, personal—that faced earlier patriarchal encounters with local inhabitants.⁴⁹ But Judah acts decisively, and the locals passively accept his mode of relating. The open Canaanite acceptance of an Israelite sojourner heightens the degree of seduction for Judah, and perhaps also for the reader. His apparent rationale for accepting the Canaanite lifestyle and values was not based on external enticements or pressures, but derived from his own mentality (largely hidden) and behavior (more obvious). His gradual and effortless melding into local patterns moves through locating housing, making friends, finding a woman, hav-

ing children, intermarriage of his children, and economic absorption, to favoring with a local prostitute—with no danger signals issued by the narrator. The risks become noticeable after the fact, if and when the reader decides to reread and reframe important earlier passages to gain fresh nuancing. The climax comes subtly as the narrator misleads the reader through delayed disclosure and hidden information. But by offering sacrifice to the Canaanite fertility gods in payment for the services of a prostitute, Judah breaks his covenant commitment to the Lord and his family. He forsakes his Israelite identity and becomes a Canaanite. Thus, the negative picture of Judah is even worse than that proposed by Shinar and Zakovitch.

Interpreting Judah's Character: Transformation

Judah's full assimilation of the Canaanite lifestyle leads to a revelation of his recognition and reversal in the pivotal, penultimate scene. Tamar leads him to recognize his personal items and, through them, her clever and righteous role in bringing heirs to both of them. Yet her actions and his recovery of lost possessions merely symbolize deeper movements on Judah's part, recognition and reversal that go below the initial surface changes. His transformation becomes more significant in the light of his previous easy acceptance of Canaanite life. The story itself metamorphoses into one of transformation and redemption, including the reformation of Judah, the catalytic work of Tamar, and the redemption of the family. Each of these calls for specific discussion. Genesis 38 tells of the compearance of a haughty patriarch through his twisted relations with his daughter-in-law. However, even with an expose of his character faults, Judah was not irredeemable. His straightforward manner of relating and personal honesty served him well, allowing him to begin dealing with the problems he brought on himself. When he became aware of Tamar's deception to get pregnant, he avoided blame and denial, immediately accepting his own role and responsibility. When she

respectfully (re)connected him with his immediate past, he could only justify her action, declaring her more righteous than he. For the first time in the story he recognized before evaluating, and thought before commanding. His words and behavior departed from his previous self-indulgence (vv. 1, 2, 12, 15, 18), commands (vv. 8, 11, 23, 24), sexual overtures (vv. 16, 17), and sexual conquests (vv. 2, 18). He responded as quickly as he had commanded earlier, "she is [has acted] more righteously than I." The ethical impact of his declaration matches its legal force. In the words of Zvi Jagendorf, his acquittal of Tamar "is a scene of true moral recognition, for in its course Judah recognizes his own guilt in his failure to provide the widow with a husband and justifies the woman whose apparent sexual sin was to be punished."⁵⁰

By canceling Tamar's death penalty, Judah not only acknowledged his own personal responsibility for failing to give her to Shelah, he ended the tension that had been building through the previous dialogic scenes. His admission also signaled his first conscious recall of important previous events and relationships. He necessarily made the connection between his possessions and his affair with the prostitute, but also connected her barrenness and his discernment since settling in the Shephelah, his new perception of his command-promise to her. In view of his behavior and gaps of

and understanding were remarkable.

Judah demonstrated additional signs of change; he had no further intimate contact with Tamar. In the light of his preoccupation with his sexual desires, the new restraint was worthy of mention. His own family had already suffered from abuse of kinship obligations, and the incoherent trust did not convey full marital rights and restraint, especially self-limitation on free association with the native population and assimilation of their way of life. Not only did Judah attend the birth of the twins, he also named them (vv. 29, 30). These details stand in pointed contrast to his earlier lack of interest in Onan and Shelah—he named neither,

nor did he attend Shelah's birth (v. 5), perhaps suggesting a renewed interest in family and future. The sons he names continue his line, in contrast with the first three sons whose lines all ended. This reading of Judah's character clarifies some textual oddities that have puzzled early versions and later commentators. First, the inconsistent references to the parent naming Judah's five children (vv. 3, 4, 5, 29, and 30; he naming the first, fourth, and fifth and she naming the second and third) has raised questions and spawned numerous "corrections." Translators and commentators have not only thought the namings were highly irregular: the masculine appearing in vv. 3, 29, and 30 and the feminine in vv. 4 and 5. Although they are the best-supported readings, they appeared to be textually fickle, and so early Hebrew manuscripts and versions attempted various means of forcing a more uniform pattern. Yet narrative poetics suggests a meaningful reason for the irregular naming pattern. His naming of the twins at the end of the story balances the two earlier namings by his wife, reconnecting him with the family. In a small way his two final namings mirror his transformation.

The same poetics adds subtle shadings to punning names in the story. Franz Delitzsch related the name of Judah's Canaanite colleague Hilarah to "freedom,"⁵¹ perhaps signifying Judah's freedom from ties with his family. The name of Judah's firstborn may derive from "awaken," as in Job 14:12, voicing a parent's hope for the well-being of the new son,⁵² suggesting either potency or impotence,⁵³ or hinting at his demise through relation to "barten."⁵⁴ Onan's name may reflect a mother's joy and hope for a healthy son, relating to "vigor" and "strength."⁵⁵ It may signify reproductive capacity,⁵⁶ or it may refer to the language of grief and mourning, as in Gen 35:18; Deut 26:14; Hos 9:4.⁵⁷ Shelah's name may play on the root "deceive," as in 2 Kgs 4:16, 28, and suggest Judah's deception of Tamar.⁵⁸

City names also assume plotting significance. The statement "and he was in Cheziv when she bore him [Shelah]" is the best-attested reading, but another questionable difficult reading,⁵⁹ Yet

Interpreting Tamar's Character

the root for Cheziv not only becomes a synonym for Shelah,⁶⁰ both meaning deceptive, but Cheziv may also subtly suggest that Judah was deceiving himself. The site of the tryst, Petah Enaim (v. 14a), plays on the *Leitwort* of seeing: Tamar sees (realizes) that she had not been given to Shelah (v. 14b), and then Judah sees the prostitute, the first word in v. 15. The placename plays out in her seeing and realizing, and then mocks Judah's seeing and not perceiving, "knowing" and not understanding.⁶¹

These odd textual readings reflect on the character of Judah and dynamics of plot. They satirically reflect Judah's progressive detachment from his family. In some cases the reading may not need replacement but actually derives from a sophisticated and intentional poetics that creates unusual textual twists to subvert Judah's authoritative role. Strange readings may not require correction at the hand of translators or commentators so eager to make better sense of the text. Rather, they intriguingly supplement the subtle reversal of character and plot, beginning with hints of Judah's arrogance and concluding with clues to his reversal.

Judah's recognition and reversal came about during two close encounters with a very engaging Canaanite maiden. Deft narrative crafting moves her from passive agent to antagonist to counter-protagonist to catalytic reason for Judah's transformation, as a result, "she is in a sense the heroine of the story."⁶² Although she is only "a poor, diminished female," the role she plays defines "a new understanding of righteousness."⁶³ She becomes the only woman in the Bible who is declared righteous.⁶⁴ She interacts with all the other characters in the story, gaining positive depth in roles that run the gamut for a female caught between two families: wife and widow, prostitute and family planner, trickster and redeemer. "Unlike Leah, who is passive and manipulated by Laban, Tamar is the sole arbiter of her own fate, the prime mover and protagonist of her own story."⁶⁵

Narrative handling of Tamar's behavior discloses important facets of her redemptive role. Her inner life spurs her initiative. Tamar realized Judah's ruse after Shelah matured; Judah had not fulfilled his promise, so Tamar acted. Carrying out the levirate obligation would depend on her own planning and not on Judah. But the narrator veiled her scheme and initially mentioned only her motivation and actions. Delayed disclosure of her plan leads the reader through a merry chase for meaning, until her plan becomes clear through her actions.

In the secret rendezvous Tamar completed the transaction without removing her veil or revealing her identity. She became the prostitute he saw and propositioned. After returning home pregnant, she leaves all parties—Judah, the reader, and herself—to learn how the affair will develop. Her contingency plans become apparent later.

Tamar exploits the trickster role to achieve Judah's and her own needs. Susan Niditch states that "this trickster's disguise is an excellent symbolization of her status . . . at a geographical border . . . at a transition point in . . . her life . . . dressed as a prostitute . . . neither virgin nor wife."⁶⁶ An unassuming widow who had been deceived and manipulated, living as a marginalized commoner, found the resources to change her status. Responding to her husband's demise, she led Judah to resolve his own problem. In the guise of a local hierodule she took the lead in two dramatic encounters with Judah, led him to fulfill the levirate role, and brought him personal insight, graciously allowing him to save face and execute justice.⁶⁷

Men summarize Tamar's accomplishments by stating that she twice manipulated Judah and the plot to conceive biologically and to save her life socially and legally. Since all her conventional sanctioned means for protection had failed, "only the clever, but scandalous and risky initiative of Tamar depicted here guides the narrative to its fortunate ending."⁶⁸ She sensitively redeems Judah from his own blunders, enabling him to experience a new form of acceptance and commitment, basic human virtues missing in the

No natural connection between Genesis 38 and the family events of the surrounding chapters is apparent—neither historical, geographical, legal, social, economic, nor religious. Therefore, few scholars have attempted to find substantial ties between the Judah–Tamar affair and the bracketing breakup of the family (chapter 37) and dramatic reconciliation in Egypt (chapters 39–47). Yet this serious of text from context has eliminated one of the most fruitful areas for examining the role of the story, shortchanging it by the dual lack of literary analysis and absence of attention to its function in context. And on the relationship between literary analysis and function in context hangs the significance of the story.

Interpreters have commonly read this tale for its (1) tribal associations, (2) emphasis on the levirate,⁷⁰ (3) genealogical function, or (4) thematic associations. The first three interpretive lines set the story in its broader cultural context, but assume that it has no ties to the Joseph cycle. The fourth line suggests a few lexical and thematic ties to surrounding stories. Let us examine each of these lines.

First, since the beginning of the twentieth century many commentators have found important information in the story relative to the tribal history of Judah, with implications for settlement in the Shephelah and relations among the Judaite clans. For example, Hermann Gunkel⁷¹ stated that the Tamar legend partially reflects early Judaite tribal relations, a view that continues to be very influential. North states that the chapter is "an etiology

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patriarchal family.⁶⁹ Through her personal dedication to husband and self, to Judah and his sons, to family and future, she leads her adversaries to find a way out of the family dilemma. She becomes the redeeming kinsperson needed by Judah and his family, the one who resolves Judah's forgotten problem, accomplishes her goal, and reshapes the way of relating in his family. Following the self-giving model of this shrewd maiden, Judah learned to act righteously in the conflicting pressures in his own family.

Significance of the Story: Out of Context

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personifying the relations that continued to exist between tribes and clans,⁷² one that "provided an explanation for all sorts of unusual relations between the Judeans and the Canaanites in the Shephelah."⁷³ Nahum Sarina states that this story and the other contextual references point to Judah's ascendancy and that his role becomes a "foil to the Joseph-centered episodes."⁷⁴

The second line of interpretation finds this story valuable for its promotion of levirate responsibilities, also accentuated in Deut 25:5-11 and Ruth. S. R. Driver notes that a secondary purpose of the story is to emphasize the duty of marriage with a brother's widow.⁷⁵ Donald Redford states that the story gives moral emphasis to the levirate requirement.⁷⁶

In the third interpretive vein (related to the first), some consider the story important in establishing the role of Judah within his own family and as a precursor to King David. Judah Goldin examines the issues of succession and qualification for leadership in Jacob's family after Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, Jacob's first three sons, were disqualified in previous stories. As the next son, Judah first appears to fail but finally qualifies. Following his unsuccessful portrayal in the earlier stages of his encounter with Tamar, he changes through the admission that he is the father of Tamar's offspring and that she was righteous. Once again the younger brother supplants the older, and Judah begins to assume leadership of his generation.⁷⁷ However, Goldin does not examine the degree or further significance of Judah's reversal. In other interpretations, John Emerton suggests that the story was told because of its appeal to the Yahwist in providing background concerning David. Clues to that significance appear in the Eastern Shephelah setting where the tribe settled, the etiology of the Judah clans, and the role of the Perez clan.⁷⁸ Gary Rendsburg discerns a series of satiric parallels mocking several counterparts: Judah-David; the royal family, noting several counterparts: Judah-David; Hiram-Hiram, bat Shua-Bath-Sheva, Er-Bath-Sheva's first son; Onan-Amon, Shelah-Solomon, and Tamar-Tamar. Other similarities include the Abilamite locale; shepherds in power; the

tricking, sin, and embarrassment; and the declaration of righteousness,⁷⁹ leading to his conclusion that "the author's motive is clear: to poke fun at the royal family."⁸⁰ Meanwhile, Menn suggests that the chapter may be "a double tale of procreation in vv. 1-5 and 6-30," which twice overcomes biological and social discontinuities.⁸¹ Unfortunately, none of these studies has carried out a literary examination of this chapter, especially the dynamics that construct its plot.

The fourth line of interpretation isolates important motifs in the story, some with thematic connections to similar tales. Gunkel separates a central saga in the Tamar narrative from the bracketed interwoven motifs about the origin of Judah's family. For him three rewarded with a child for her deceased (later reflected in Ruth), a daughter giving evidence of a child contrary to the will of the father (in-law) (also found in the saga of Lot's daughters), and a wife convicted of adultery whose innocence is made known at the last instant.⁸² C. A. Simpson finds that three motifs compose the story: the suspicious deaths of a woman's husbands, heroic incest, and the twins' struggle at birth. They allegedly allow the story to justify the incorporation of alien clans into Judah and the elevation of the clan of Perez.⁸³ Peter Ellis isolates three motifs in the story: an "antifertility cult polemic," the "genealogical legitimization of David's claim to the throne," and the choice of the second-born son.⁸⁴ These collections of motifs demonstrate possible later usage of this story and ties with other stories, but they do not unpack the dynamics of the story itself or grasp its character development and plot.

The common tendency to detach this chapter from its context, only occasionally relating it to remote people and events, has meant that interpreters have only considered its meaning as a separate unit. Moreover, the lack of attention to the story's plot and dynamics has further shortened the possibilities for reading and interpreting it. Because of these egregious omissions, most studies have overlooked character development and interaction,

temporal manipulations, scenic focus, and other plotting elements. As a result, they provide no basis for analyzing the poetics or projecting the significance of the story as story.

Significance of the Story: In Context

What of the relation of the Judah-Tamar episode to the contextual events of Jacob's family? A few studies have noted lexical and thematic ties. Early midrashic comments link key words and themes in the story to its context, such as: "went down"; sequential falls from glory; the roles of Tamar and Potifar's wife; two men who are wicked, destructive, and full of pride; the use of a down payment; deception; the role of the kid goat; and self-recognition.⁸⁵ Donald Seybold finds deep structural themes of preservation and conservation in the tension between the acts of wasting (Joseph in prison, Olan's *corvus interruptus*, and the butler and the wine) and preserving (Joseph's abilities, Judah with Tamar, and the butler and the wine).⁸⁶ Also, Judah later acts as radically as Tamar had, by offering to be a hostage for Benjamin.⁸⁷ James Ackerman adds the parallel themes of alienation, favoritism, deception, reconciliation, and preservation of life, culminating in Judah's leadership of the brothers in relating to Jacob (Genesis 43) and Joseph (Genesis 44).⁸⁸ These studies discern literary connections between text and context, but the links are more suggestive than conclusive. The joint words and themes do not unpack the dynamics of plot in chapter 38, nor the possibilities of fully integrating the story into the Joseph cycle.

The issue of integral relations between text and context hinges on the role of Judah, the one common character in both. His reform in this chapter provides important clues for understanding his transformed role later in the family. The personal clashes in the Judah-Tamar story epitomize issues of kinship values and leadership that were already problematic in the larger family. During Judah's sojourn in the Shephelah, deceptive maneuvers, a crisis of responsibility, and the need for personal change mirror the same issues in his family of origin.

Genesis 38 relates a tale of recognition and reversal—and also one of redemption. Through the brilliant deception and self-giving efforts of Tamar, Judah was able to gain personal insight and change his decree of death. His change in relating to Tamar leads to a changed role in the family and the subsequent reunification of his father and brothers. His transformation responds to the dysfunctional behavior in both families. In this way the plot construction of the Judah-Tamar tale relates directly to the plot tensions and resolutions of the Joseph cycle. Four literary studies have explored these relations between text and context.

Shinan and Zakovitch state that Genesis 38 contrasts Judah unfavorably with Joseph in the following chapter. He falls at the hands of a woman—in contrast to Joseph, who passes a woman's test in the following chapter. Judah falsely accused the innocent Tamar in 38, whereas in 39 another foreign woman accuses Joseph of a crime he didn't commit. Tamar is justified and Joseph is wrongly sent to prison. Personal possessions testify to Tamar's innocence, but Joseph's possession becomes evidence against him. The sibling contrast demonstrates Joseph's suitability to be "set apart from his brothers" (Gen 49:26).⁸⁹ The ominous connection between lost and living sons that Judah mentions to himself, "lest Jacob die like his brothers" (37:11), echoes in the words of Jacob, "my son will not go down with you, for his brother died" (42:38).⁹⁰ However, for Shinan and Zakovitch this chapter casts a shadow on the patriarch and becomes an anti-Judah story, even though he is leader of the eleven and supports the transmission of the leadership mantle to Joseph.

Ackerman describes how Judah's incident with Tamar brought personal growth that enabled him to take a leading family role before Joseph, admitting family guilt, pleading the case of his aged father, and working to preserve life (the lives of father, sons, and grandsons).⁹¹

Sternberg lays out two major ways in which the tale of Judah and Tamar is integral to the contextual events in the life of Joseph and family. First, the trickster theme movingly juxtaposes this tale with the previous events of chapter 37. Judah's role ironically reverses "from trickster of his own father . . . into tricked father with a vengeance."⁹² Second, Judah's transforming in his dealings with Tamar constitute "the only intervening drama" that can account for his change of character: from selling a brother as slave (37:26-28) to volunteering as a slave to rescue a brother—not once but twice, saving both Joseph and Jacob (43:8-9; 44:27-34). Judah loses two sons—as his own father did—and then sees Jacob reenact his own unwillingness to hand over his youngest son. As history repeats itself and ironically turns on him, Judah learns to empathize with his own father.⁹³ Reversals between his earlier and later life appear on several levels as "the analogy in part-entire thus extends from the metaphors to dramatics—from hidden commentary on the plot to the workings of the hidden plot itself, from heavenly judgment to self-judgment, from punitive to redemptive irony, from the reader's eyes to Judah's."⁹⁴

Ravid builds on the two previous literary studies to demonstrate the role of the Judah-Tamar tale. The crucial issues of family leadership involve personal responsibility, understanding the reality of the family problem, accepting it, and acting justly. Judah becomes accountable by accepting full responsibility for Benjamin (Gen 43:9).⁹⁵ He stood in the same position before Joseph that he had imposed on Tamar, innocent and accused. He revised the proposed death penalty (offered by the brothers in 44:9) in replying to Joseph's charge of theft (Gen 44:16). He learned the need for the accused to speak and be heard, a way of understanding Tamar's feelings and the injustice he had brought on her.⁹⁶ Finally, Judah recognized the family reality of different status and roles for different brothers, and he made peace with it. Once he empathized with Jacob, he could see Benjamin through his father's eyes and accept him as his brother (Gen 44:20, 22, 30, 31-34). As a result, Jacob recognized Judah as leader of the brothers and

chose him to oversee the emigration to Egypt (Gen 46:28).⁹⁷ Judah underwent a long and difficult learning process. Indeed, he followed the four stages of becoming a hero as outlined by Campbell, Raglan, and Rank. In this sequence, the candidate (1) begins untested, but with leadership potential (Genesis 37); (2) undergoes painful personal tests that bring understanding (Genesis 38); (3) has a painful final ordeal that proves him suitable for leadership (Genesis 43-44); and finally (4) functions as leader—of the brothers, in this case (Genesis 46).⁹⁸

Other interpreters offer different views. Shinar and Zakovitch point out other elements that adversely portray the character of Judah. Ackerman shows that Judah's growth in the Tamar tale becomes a basis for understanding his later behavior. Sternberg notes Judah's dramatic reversals of character and action (thanks to Tamar), enabling him to speak movingly to Jacob and Joseph. Ravid conducted the only detailed literary analysis of the story and effectively demonstrated integral ties of character transformation and plotting dynamics between the Judah-Tamar events and the surrounding tensions in Jacob's family. The last three studies build on Judah's recognition and reversal in which he personally experiences the need for accountability, gains insight into the future and past of the family, and learns the meaning of down payment, commitment, and reconciliation, all of which serve him well. He becomes personally instrumental in repairing the breakdown of relations in his family of origin. Through the lessons learned with Tamar, Judah becomes a family spokesperson and agent of reconciliation, speaking out for life and redemption for Judah's character development has important implications for the status of the final issue, the relation of Genesis 38 to its context. As mentioned above, modern studies have concluded that this chapter is an independent unit, with no significant ties to the Joseph novella in which it is embedded. However, as we have seen, Judah's role in this story is an integral link to his portrayal from Genesis 37 through Genesis 47. The strong link between his role in this text and its context demonstrates that this chapter

is not an independent unit. Chronologically, the story fits easily into the time frame of the bracketing Joseph cycle, which some have questioned. Further, the tale integrates thematically and conceptually into the ongoing events in the family of Jacob, which many have disputed. The differences in characters, setting, and plot distinguish Genesis 38 as a separate story, but not as an unrelated independent unit. Judah's change of character in Genesis 38 integrates closely with the dynamics of family breakdown and restoration in contextual events. Tamar gently leads him to sense the importance of family ties, and family commitment becomes crucial in his later portrayal as leader of the eleven brothers. He responds redemptively to the challenges of Jacob and Joseph, as his own transformation leads to the transformation of the family.

Redeeming Judah

Later Israelite readers of this tale might enjoy hearing about Judah's life among the native population in the foothills. Those who descended from the protagonist and lived in the environs of Jerusalem could revel in a tale of their forebear's foibles and exploits, and would pass it quickly from clan to clan and generation to generation. There is universal appeal in the story of the shenanigans of an independent cuss who receives a well-deserved come-uppance from a local maiden. Judah offers future descendants a personal paradigm and cautionary tale about casual acceptance of the prevailing lifestyle in the promised land. Gradual assimilation of native customs and mores leading to full assimilation of a foreign lifestyle was never so easy or innocent. Although the new Hebrew settler needed to learn how to farm the land and pasture the flocks, this land did not come without its own people, nor its enticements without a price.

In the course of this entertaining tale, the Lord and the narrator recede into the background and the reader experiences events with Judah and Tamar. The cascading events engage later generations in the surprises and suspense, deceptions and revelations.

As the story ebbs and flows, characters and readers learn the meaning of words and actions after reflecting and unpacking their significance.

As a young man, Judah tried to put the past behind him and get on with his life in a new setting. But in doing so he stumbled through events, lurched drunkenly ahead, and finally fell on his face for all to see. In establishing a new family, he created a host of loose ends that the story wove together into a dramatic plot. Even though he intended to spend some leisure time with a prostitute at the cost of a sacrifice to the local gods, he ended up having sex with a woman already available to him as father of her deceased husband. Thus, he only appeared to commit idolatry, but was innocent in fact. His justification of Tamar and return to his are family to name his children foreshadows the later return to his family of origin. His haughty tone and controlling commands give way to something new as he commits himself to his family and its future. The transparent, flawed protagonist is educable, learns to care for others in need, and becomes a family leader and redeemer.

Tamar complied with her circumscribed, marginal role as barren widow, but also devised a way to resolve her family's needs and Judah's forgotten dilemma.⁹⁹ She and the plot build on Judah's ignorance and foibles to create an intriguing story of discovery. Her sophisticated ploys and his ironized role extended and deepened the opposition between them. He simply interrupted business for a little R & R with an appealing prostitute. She simultaneously used his sexual appetite to perpetuate seed for her deceased husband. In the process, he ended up paying for sex with his son's widow, unwittingly fulfilling his own directive to provide for and Tamar with offspring. Amazingly he became both father and "grandfather" of the same children.

These counter-protagonists resolve the growing tensions between them, ending their polarized points of view and the yawning gap of dramatic irony between them. Each responded to the other's manipulations, eventually accepting the full consequences

of their startling new relationship. As von Rad¹⁰⁰ summarizes well, the reader of the tale is struck by "its wonderful openness to what is human—passions, guilt, paternal anxiety, love, honor, chivalry, all churning up in the narrow circle of one family in labyrinthine entanglement." "Through the twists and turns of the plot, some obvious and others hidden, family obligations were met in a round-about way so that finally "all's well that ends well." The plot concludes with a new generation in the family and a patriarch ready to return home.

Conclusion *Women's Stories Speak*

Three women transcend their traditional roles. Although they begin within the narrow boundaries assigned them, they work through broken relationships and social problems to transform the roles of wife, mother, and daughter. Facing heavy obstacles in turbulent times they act decisively to change the course of events for their families and their people, building hopes for a meaningful future.

Their stories pose specific interpretive problems for readers today. Modern studies have read the three chapters as raw materials for reconstruction of history, but not as narratives. The first challenge, therefore, is to read them as stories. The three stories develop in time, both in telling their tales and in the reading process, and call for reading in ways that recognize their temporal character. These stories develop plots that exploit the temporal medium and develop the master strategies of curiosity, surprise, and suspense. Stories call for reading as stories, and plots require attention to their temporal dynamics—not only in their construction but also in the reading process.

Second, these texts pose the problems of unpacking the concepts of character, point of view, and plot—building blocks of the