

Reading Women's Stories

*Female Characters
in the Hebrew Bible*

John Petersen

Fortress Press
Minneapolis

the mighty figure of Sisera. After mention of the powerful soldiers (at the end of v. 23), she pales as a weak woman alone in the tent (v. 24). Following commands immediately, she offers more than he had asked. The physical contrast with her imposing visitor heightens her audacity. Without seducing Sisera,⁶⁹ she acted with ingenuity and skill. Risking her life to raise a hand against the mighty demigod, her raw courage and risky action enabled her to do what no Israelite soldier could accomplish on the field of battle. Neither Deborah nor Jael sought power or fame. But, endowed with the full freedom and authority of worthwhile, valued members of society, they were free and able to deal with immediate problems. The lack of official status or community sanction was no deterrent to their ability to act. When the times thrust horrendous challenges on their struggling tribes, eluding out a living in a hostile environment, they responded to the needs of their people. And in their responses we find the heroines their society lifted up as people of vision, courage, and action.

4

Redeeming a Patriarch

Plotting in the Tale of Judah and Tamar

In Genesis 38 a short story develops in time, both in portraying the events and in the process of reading those events. Characters and events take unexpected turns and tensions increase as the narrative proceeds. With curious twists, the plot builds suspense through the interactions of two protagonists working at cross purposes until their conflicting goals converge. As the story unfolds, information comes bit by bit to the reader, even as it comes to the characters, revealing a finely crafted tale. However, a sense of mystery and incompleteness remains, even beyond the many-layered meanings of Tamar's shrewd seduction of her father-in-law. Critics have noted the story's uncertain location in the Joseph cycle, Judah's ambiguous role, and problems in dating the story. In the words of Esther Meen, there remains "a persisting instability" deriving from "loose play between plot and perspective . . . characters and narrative . . . narrative and law,"⁷¹ as well as between story and context. Some of the mystery derives from the artistic construction of a sophisticated plot crafted by a skilled ancient storyteller. The tools of plot analysis, with a focus on temporal manipulations and subtle characterization, offer the means of penetrating the mystery.

Reading about the Story: Interpretive Issues

Modern interpretation has focused on three major issues that illustrate the enigmatic character of this story and pose challenges for the serious reader: the story's relation to its surrounding biblical chapters, the significance of the story, and the characterization of Judah. The first two issues relate to the immediate literary context. Martin Noth considered Genesis 38 an independent narrative crudely inserted into the running sequence of Joseph stories.² Because the setting and events of this tale relate only indirectly at best to the Joseph novella, he and many others following his lead have neatly separated this episode from its context.³ Indeed, one must question whether the chapter forms any meaningful ties with the turmoil in Jacob's family, other than the coincidence of making one son a main character. The question subdivides into two specific problems: (1) the placement of this story in the time frame of the surrounding chapters, and (2) the relevance of this story to those contextual events. Most commentators have doubts about both problems, and thus have accepted Noth's conclusion that Genesis 38 is an independent narrative with only peripheral ties to the stories of Jacob's family.⁴

The problem of time frame arises from the length of Judah's sojourn in the Shephelah. His extended residence covering more than one generation: taking a Canaanite wife, having three sons, arranging marriage for Er and levirate obligations for Onan, together with the pregnancy, birth, and naming of Tamar's sons. Some twenty years must have passed—a period that does not easily fit the events and time frame of Jacob's family story.

As for its biblical context, the Judah–Tamar story does appear irrelevant to the story line of Jacob's family, with its breakdown of relations. For the reader, Judah's encounter with Tamar is an entertaining diversion and offers anecdotal notes for the family genealogy, but its connection with the family problems and ultimate reunion in Egypt is tenuous at best. Commentators thus de-

teach it completely from the larger story, viewing it as an artificial interpolation. Walter Brueggemann clearly summarizes the common view, stating that "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."⁵

The final issue is the characterization of Judah: is it negative or positive? Scholars differ in this assessment. Avigdor Shinar and Yair Zakovitch state that Genesis 38 presents an anti-Judah story, one that negatively depicts his behavior: leaving his brothers and grieving father, not mourning for his sons or wife, being used by Tamar as a tool to realize her plan, impetuously sentencing his daughter-in-law without examining the charges against her, and performing the function he prevented his son from doing—caring out the levirate responsibility. For these critics, this chapter mocks the father of the southern tribe, showing his sins against God and people and the ways in which both outsmarted him, even portraying him abysmally and shamefully. Judah's fate is determined the moment he departs from his classic role and deceives Tamar, they say; the one who sinned against his father and daughter-in-law and acted against the law was finally undone. As a result, he suffers—by contrast with Tamar—and is justly ridiculed, while Tamar gains the sympathy of the reader through her cunning initiatives.⁶

But Dalia Kavid disputes this assessment, finding a basically positive picture of Judah, based on several factors. First, the fivefold disclosure of Judah's inner life (vv. 11, 15, 16, 23, and 26) presents him sympathetically, pointing out his ignorance of the prostitute's identity and justifying his behavior.⁷ Second, Judah enacts the five stages of an Aristotelian tragic character: fatal mistake, awesome act, change, recognition, and suffering.⁸ Finally, Judah undergoes an arduous learning process by passing difficult tests required of the hero: tests that equip him to take a major leadership role in restoring the unity and wholeness of the family.⁹

Both studies are right in isolating significant positive and negative factors in the construction of Judah's character. Indeed, these conflicting elements need to be balanced with each other—and against the contours of the plot—to assess Judah's ambiguous character.

These three enigmatic issues—placement, significance, and character—are interrelated and depend on analysis of plot construction. Let us turn, then, to the dynamics of the story and approach these interpretive issues by undertaking a six-step sequence.

We will (1) review the temporal shape of the story, noting the manipulations of time—order, duration, and repetition—that shape the narrative movement and regulate the reader's progress through the story; (2) survey the sequential buildup of tensions, both obvious and hidden; (3) assess the major plotting strategies, noting the play of curiosity, surprise, and suspense, especially in the highly charged and pivotal dialogic scenes; (4) evaluate the modern interpretive issues; (5) analyze the roles of the main characters; and (6) assess the overall significance of the story. The six steps reveal the artistic poetics of the story and probe its mystery, for the narrator crafts a subtle tale of deception, intrigue, and transformation.

The Temporal Shape of the Plot: Reading the Story

Literary devices throughout the chapter focus attention on the principals and their interactions. Judah initiates the plot by his dominating activities, but as Tamar becomes an active player she contests Judah for the leading role. When he stumbles in his own provocations and Tamar emerges as a worthy protagonist, the reader follows their conflicting courses. The temporal shape of the plot moves on two levels: the plotting construction of the events and the plotting reconstruction by the reader. By tracing both lines the reader can uncover hidden sides of the plot and discern their impact on both Judah and the reading process.

The following discussion moves through the story of Judah

and Tamar scene by scene. As the scenes progress and the pace adjusts to the shifting personal interactions, readers undergo the same process of learning and discovery as do the characters. Characters and readers struggle with questions of motive and meaning, so that both must reframe earlier events in the light of new interactions. The reader encounters their personal conflicts and hidden agendas as a surprising swirl of cross-purposes and actions. Complicating points of view, ironized characters, and sudden twists add to the intrigue and gradually rising suspense.

1. At that time Judah went down from his brothers and camped next to an Abimelech named Hirah. 2. There Judah saw the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua; he took her and had sex with her. 3. She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. 4. She conceived again and bore a son, and she named him Onan. 5. She did it again and bore a son, and she named him Shelah; and he was in Cheziv when she bore him.¹⁰

The opening exposition reports Judah's settlement in the foothills, quickly surveying his first two to three years there. Judah has made a second rupture in Jacob's family (following the sale of Joseph in the previous story), this time involving a leading son among the brothers (37:26-27).

Judah's movement receives double emphasis: "going down from his brothers," and camping near a local inhabitant. Previous associations of the verb "encamp/turn" suggest a serious break with the family.¹¹ Earlier references to a trip to Egypt (Gen 12:10; 26:2) underscore ethnic differences; and Jacob's prospective "descent" to Sheol (37:35) raises a sense of foreboding. But the shorter distance and friendly locals calm fears about this sojourn. The traveler impregnates a woman and settles down, his sojourn drifting imperceptibly into permanent residence.

The woman is unnamed (his perceptual point of view?), in marked contrast with her father Shua and his new friend Hirah. Judah departs from earlier family precedent in seeking wives from

Mesopotamian relatives, as Abraham (Genesis 24) and Jacob (Genesis 30) had done. Breaking the family custom of avoiding local women (Gen 24:3, 37), he plunges headlong into an ethnically mixed family, perhaps simply to satisfy his physical appetite. Judah impreregates the same woman two more times, and although he names his first son, she names the next two. This fact, coupled with the odd notice that he was in Cheziv when she bore their third son, suggests a disinterest in his new family. Six consecutive verbs of vv. 4 and 5 describe the woman's actions, conceiving-bearing-naming, with the sequence repeated. Following his initiative in vv. 1-3, she takes over the active role, leaving him passive and detached.

The initial exposition reports no inner life or speech for Judah; indeed, it raises more questions than it answers. Does his departure from his family of origin signify a casual trip or a permanent break? Do his sudden actions betray the impulsive behavior of a dominating person who takes what he wants and leaves the fallout to others? The reader is uncertain whether these gaps imply questions about his motives or merely reflect a restrained narrative style. How will the patriarch fare in foreign territory? And what will become of his ethnically mixed children?

6. Judah took a wife for his first-born Er, whose name was Tamar. 7. But Er, Judah's first-born was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord killed him. 8. Judah said to Onan, "Go to your brother's wife, and do the brother-in-law's task, and raise up offspring for your brother." 9. Onan knew that it would not be his offspring, so whenever he had sex with his brother's wife, he spilt on the ground to prevent giving offspring to his brother. 10. What he did was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord also killed him. 11. Judah said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law, "Stay as a widow in your father's house until Shelah my son grows up," for he thought, "lest he die also like his brothers." So Tamar returned and stayed in her father's house.

Following a narrative jump of some two decades, this second expositional block slows the pace to cover a period of a few weeks or months. Character portrayal develops through the contrasting and decisive actions destabilize Judah's family and energize the plot: the Lord kills the two oldest sons, Onan subverts his levirate duty, and Judah manipulates Tamar.

Judah assigns Tamar as wife for his oldest son, Er, and she begins a series of shifting alliances with him and his three sons. Concerning Judah, his prolonged residence and arrangement for his son's marriage confirm his acceptance of Canaanite customs. Concerning Tamar, narrative description contrasts her triply with the mother of Judah's three sons: he formally takes her as wife; she is named; and she receives no ethnic designation. The contrasts raise questions about Judah's motivation and her status. In taking her formally as wife (which he had not done with the daughter of Shua), does he alter his behavior with women or accept local practice? By naming Tamar, is the narrator making her more important to Judah than his wife—or perhaps foreshadowing her portentous role in the story? Are Tamar's parents' names and ethnic status insignificant, irrelevant to Judah, or intentionally omitted? The lack of clear answers to all these questions foreshadows Tamar's paradoxical role. Indeed, she will continue in an unclear, liminal state, suspended between two families and among the men of Judah's family.

Judah's arrangement for Tamar and Er is short-lived, as the Lord quickly judges and executes Er. Although reversal of the letters of Er forms "evil," no offense is mentioned, unless it was for marrying a foreigner (actually Judah's responsibility) or accepting the local lifestyle. Only in the times of the flood and Sodom's wickedness had the Lord become so personally involved in negative evaluation and judgment (Gen 6:5, 8; 18:20-21; 19:7, 9). Judah immediately directs Onan to fulfill the levirate obligation with Tamar: "go . . . do . . . and raise up!" (v. 8). Onan's response

is clear, but concealed from his father by subterfuge. Presumably, Onan would have followed the command if the child and inheritance had been his: "Onan knew that it would not be his offspring" (v. 8). But in refusing the assigned role, he opposes his deceased brother, Tamar, and Judah. His ruse fools Judah, who does not inquire about Tamar's lack of pregnancy, but the Lord acts. The penalty is full and final, and Judah loses another son. The deaths have dire long-term effects, leaving Er childless, Tamar a widow, and Judah without heirs.

Then Judah also acts with duplicity ("like son, like father"), telling Tamar to return home to her own family. He divulges to her only the first of two reasons: (1) to wait for Shelah to grow up and (2) to prevent Shelah from dying as his brothers had and put her in a safe distance. His command appears heavy-handed, insensitive to her widowed status.

Yet Tamar acts explicitly as Judah directs, even to the extent that the same verbs, "sit, stay, dwell," specify his directive and her response, indicating her literal compliance with his command. However, his secretive scheme in sending Tamar home sets them on opposing courses through the rest of the story. For Tamar might have chosen to make herself available for remarriage and relieve him of his worries about Shelah, if he had inquired. The Lord's actions and Judah's modus operandi have complicated the plot. Curiosity arises over the evil and death that have plagued his sons. Suspense ferments: Will Judah reconnect with his family in Hebron? Will he bring Tamar and Shelah together? Will his diminished family survive?

12. Some time later Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah died, after Judah received comfort, he went up to his sheep-shears at Timnah along with his Adullamite friend, Hirah. 13. Tamar heard, "Look, your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep." 14. She took off her widow's clothes, put on a veil, wrapped up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah had grown and she had not been given to him as wife.

15. When Judah saw her, he considered her a prostitute, who had covered her face. 16. Then he turned to her alongside the road and said, "Come now, I will enter you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. And she asked, "What will you give me to enter me?" 17. He replied, "I myself will send you a kid goat from the flock." But she asked, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal, your cord, and your staff in your hand." He gave to her, had sex with her, and she conceived by him. 19. She rose, left, removed her veil, and dressed in her widow's clothes.

The narrative tempo slows as Tamar's actions introduce the story's first scene in the narrative present and make her a main character. The ironic encounter skillfully employs dialogue to disclose the personal interests of the two protagonists. The interaction lasts only minutes, including the viewing and turning aside, dialogue and negotiation, payment and sex. But those actions constitute the longest real-time scene of the story. The mother of Judah's three sons dies and then is called his "wife," a status not mentioned while bearing and raising three sons.¹² With this passing notice her role in his life and in the story ends; she leaves as abruptly as she had entered, living unnamed and dying unmentioned.

Judah is unencumbered and free to move on after the deaths of his wife and two oldest sons, perhaps free to leave the scene of his personal loss. But he continues with life as usual, making a business trip with Hirah. The narrator mentions his energetic movement in three ways: first, he returns to work, shearing the sheep; second, the Adullamite has become "his friend"; and third, Timnah becomes the third local village of interest. When Tamar hears of Judah's activities, she too springs into action and choreographs an intimate rendezvous with him. Each acts furtively to meet personal needs and their cross-purposes dominate the action. Tamar intercepts Jacob and takes an active role,

breaking from her perfunctory movements thus far. The first two words addressed to her, "Look, your father-in-law," retrace the message from her point of view.¹³ Immediately, four verbs portray her new resolution: removing, covering, wrapping, and sitting. Her motivation is clear, but not her intention: Shelah has grown, and she has not been given to him. Judah's command continues in effect, but his promise is unfulfilled and Tamar remains a barren widow. Her abrupt change from passive agent to active character piques curiosity: why has she changed her appearance, and why has she stationed herself alongside Judah's road to Timnah? The widow and the widower leave Adullam separately and rendezvous in an unscheduled encounter.¹⁴ At Petach Enaim—the name means "opening of the eyes"—Judah sees only a veiled prostitute, opening a series of ironic jabs at his clouded perception. Surprise and suspense coalesce: if Judah approaches the woman, what will she do?

While Hirah politely remains offstage, Judah courteously solicits the prostitute. Tamar amazingly accepts his offer, closing the negotiator's earlier knowledge gap about her intention. Shrewdly she negotiates the business deal, redirecting the discussion with her own questions. In lieu of full payment later on from her deceptive father-in-law she cleverly manages to obtain even more valuable personal items as a deposit. He gives her a herding staff and a sash and seal for business dealings, tying the two characters together more closely.

Four verbs again depict Tamar's movements, effecting her full return to normal status and yielding new information: (1) her incognito life as a prostitute was temporary, and (2) her disguise was aimed at insemination by Judah. Reverberations from the affair at Enaim only begin to make their impact through her pregnancy, postponing major revelations for both characters and for the reader. The narrator fittingly follows Tamar at the close of the scene. Having orchestrated the encounter and directed the discussion, she becomes the counter-protagonist to Judah, returning home to let events simmer.

Full of live action and hidden agendas, the chance meeting at "the opening of the eyes" provokes bewilderment about what might happen. Will Judah find out how he has been duped? In exchanging payment and pledge will he recognize the new "prostitute"? And what will be the fate of his widowed daughter-in-law who has become pregnant?

20. Judah sent a kid goat by his friend the Adullamite to take the pledge from the woman, but he didn't find her. 21. He asked the men of her place, saying, "Where is the hierodule, the one at Enaim, along the road?" But they replied, "There was no hierodule there."

22. He returned to Judah and reported, "I didn't find her. And the men of the place even stated, 'There was no hierodule there.'" 23. Judah responded, "Let her take them for herself, lest we be ridiculed. Look, I sent this kid, and you didn't find her."

Three complications remain following Judah's stopover with the "prostitute": payment, prostitution, and pregnancy, each of which requires a full scene to unpack. Although they look like minor snags, they are more like submerged mines waiting to explode. In a pair of brief scenes, each taking only a few minutes, the narrator carefully crafts a subtle plotting strategy here through the artful change from "prostitute" to "hierodule." The narrator reports that Judah "considered her a prostitute," selling sex for money. In the following scene Judah dispatches Hirah to find a hierodule—a cultic worker—revealing a new or revised consideration on his part. The plot plays on his change of label for her role, the difference in the two roles, and their possible overlap. Judah dispatches Hirah to find the "unknown" whore and prostitute to pay for his brief liaison, Judah resigns himself to fruitless, so he returns and reports his failure to Judah. With no Hirah's explanation. Two possible tensions seem resolved. The loss

of personal items is an insignificant business expense, and he

avoids ridicule and loss of face.

It appears that all's well that ends well, for Judah and for the reader. Hirsch's fruitless search for the woman seems to end the affair. Even though the privileged reader realizes Judah's ironized role, this pair of scenes builds no suspense and seems optional. But, unknown to Judah and the reader, this sedate scene contains the story's most volatile dynamics, whose charges are set to explode in the next scene. For the sake of Tamar and the suspense she has generated, the tale continues.

24. After three months Judah heard, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has worked as a prostitute, and look, she has even become pregnant through prostitution." Judah replied, "Bring her! Burn her!" 25. While she was being brought, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, "From the man to whom these belong I am pregnant." Then she added, "Notice please. Whose seal, cords, and staff are these?" 26. When Judah recognized them he said, "She is (has acted) more righteous(ly) than I, for I did not give her to Shelah my son." He didn't have sex with her again.

An anonymous report to Judah specifies two charges against Tamar, listed according to his sense of their increasing gravity: prostitution and pregnancy. Judah's immediate verdict and her presentation for punishment escalate the pace and heighten the tension. Judah's instantaneous decision brings the conflict to a flash point. The clear-cut verdict leaves no room for further deliberation. The drama reaches the breaking point as Tamar is brought out according to his command.

Now the breathless reader expects the second shoe to drop: "Burn her!" But the double nominal sentence—two consecutive rare sentences beginning with nominalatives—literally, "she was being brought out, and she sent," stays her execution and brings a dramatic pause.¹⁵ Tamar sends a message and personal items to Judah, and the second order is averted. Once again she redirects the course of events, changing expectations with her surprising genuity. The three items of pledge become judicial evidence, as she asks for the identity of the owner, leaving her fate in his hands. Judah recognizes his possessions and immediately acquits her. With his second verdict the conflict subsides.

Judah demonstrates new sexual restraint following the trial: he has no further intimacy with Tamar. The resolution of interpersonal tensions between the protagonists leaves suspense only about the future of the Er-Tamar line, and about Judah's line as well.

27. At the time of her delivery, behold, twins were in her womb. 28. As she was giving birth, one stuck out his arm, and the midwife held it and tied a crimson cord on it, saying, "this one came out first." 29. But he withdrew his hand, and behold, his brother came out, and she said, "how you have breached a breach for yourself!" And he called his name Perez [Breach]. 30. "Then his brother came out, who had the crimson on his arm, and he called his name Zerah.

The final scene reports the birth and naming of Tamar's twins, lasting a few hours. The double birth removes the final tension, relating the birth of Tamar's twins, new sons replacing those killed earlier. The struggle in the period of their delivery recalls the earlier one between their grandfather Jacob and his brother (Gen 25:22-26), also beginning in the womb. The three generations of family conflict, including that between their uncles (in which their father participated), raises the specter of continuing family turmoil, a plot for later stories. In a surprisingly low-key final appearance, Judah names each son. He even defers to the midwife

by naming the first son with her term—stated twice—to describe the breach. The subsequent opposing fates of the family appear in their best-known offspring, the Boaz-Obed-Jesse-David line coming from Perez (Ruth 4:12, 18–22) and the line of Zerah yielding up Aachen (Josh 7:1).

Tracking the Developing Tensions

The temporal shape of the plot line regulates the progressing tensions and impacts both the characters and the reader. Judah introduces the initial tensions by leaving his brothers, settling with Hirah in Adullam, taking a Canaanite woman, and having three sons with her. No reasons explain his abrupt departure, although the previous family conflicts may provide contextual motivations.¹⁶ Indeed, from the first migratory sojourn of Abraham and his family into Canaan, the patriarchal families had to live as a minority among a dominant native population. Divergent social practices (the Sodom and Gomorrah events, Gen 18:16–19:29) and conflicting economic claims (Isaac in Gerar, Gen 26:33) had been open to negotiation and resolution in contrast with insoluble issues of intermarriage and religion (the rape of Dinah, Genesis 34).

Surprise at Judah's quick break with the patriarchal family quickly turns to mild suspense as he assimilates among the Canaanites. As an isolated Israelite he is vulnerable to Canaanite customs and influence. "Beneath, turn" in v. 1 raises the question of how far he will go in adopting the customs of the local population; its second occurrence (v. 16) answers that question as he propositions a local prostitute. Taking a Canaanite woman and having a family make him a permanent resident. Business and pleasure with his Adullamite friend show full acceptance of the local mores. His stay has all the appearances of long-term settlement: friends, marriage, family, and business—and yet the reader senses there may be a price to pay.

Dramatic irony conceals important information from all parties (both characters and readers), destabilizing Judah's family and

increasing the tension. Hidden from Tamar were the reasons for her two husbands' deaths—and Judah's reason for withholding Shelah. Judah was unaware of Onan's subversion of his levirate command, Tamar's seduction and pregnancy, and why the prostitute disappeared. The reader is correspondingly left in the dark about Judah's reasons for leaving his first family, Er's wrongdoing in the eyes of God, Tamar's planned disguise, and Judah's original perception of the prostitute (to be discussed below). Some of these knowledge gaps are only temporary, being closed through later events. The lack of full disclosure effectively adds to the building tension.

The loss of Judah's sons and wife produces another broken family and creates further strain. Although Judah is unaware of the details surrounding the deaths of Er and Onan, he again experiences the breakup of his family. He deals with the perceived threat from Tamar by withholding her from his last son, a temporary expedient to save his life. Yet after three deaths in his Canaanite family he still does not return to his Israelite home, clearly demonstrating his ethnic preference.

Tamar's changing role provokes tension, for herself first and then for her unwitting father-in-law. She assumes a liminal status by returning to her father's home, separating her from the women's normal social roles. As Susan Niditch states, she is "neither a virgin nor a wife nor a mother. She is on the fringes of the Israelite social structure, for nowhere does she properly belong."¹⁷ However, she pushes her unresolved marginal role further and acts up a prostitute to end her dilemma. Her surprising strategy sets up the crux of the story.

Tamar further upsets the status quo by seducing her father-in-law to become pregnant. Ravid lists several rhetorical devices that give the reader a close feeling for the action in the seduction scene: progress through dialogue, revelation of Tamar's inner life, concealing Tamar's trick until the end, double disclosure of Judah's inner life, and clarification that Judah was innocent.¹⁸ These devices also raise the level of tension for the amazed reader, for Tamar

gives up her widow's garb, travels alone on the open roads, meets Judah, bargains about a prostitute's fee, obtains a down payment as collateral, and then consummates the deal.

Questions might arise about her chosen means of approaching Judah or even of receiving a down payment for her services. But more pressing are the explosive potentials of three related issues: payment, prostitution, and pregnancy, in rising order of importance. Ignorance of each of these issues lends irony on all sides: Judah's ignorance will nullify his efforts to make payment, Tamar's "prostitution" will ironize the reader's ignorance, and Tamar's own ignorance of the fallout will threaten her life. These issues load the plot with flammable materials for Judah and the reader, in addition to high risks for Tamar. By shrewdly subverting the understanding of all three parties on the road to Enaim, the narrator deftly tightens the major tensions of the narrative. Only subsequent events will be able to integrate the divergent viewpoints and fill the gaps in understanding.

Judah's nonpayment to the prostitute appears to be a minor annoyance. Later rereading and reconstruction of Judah's point of view disclose the broader problem. Three minor sidelights seem strange in this double scene. First, the reference to the "prostitute" changes to "hierodule." Second, Hirah repeats the words of the men at Enaim: "There was no hierodule there," a very rare repeated verbatim quotation. Third, the dual scene is unnecessary, for the first sentence summarizes Hirah's trip and its result. Thus, the payment is not made, Judah's ironic ignorance continues, and the double scene merely takes up time and space in a laconic narrative. Reporting these events generates no curiosity, surprise, or suspense; thus, it seemingly fills no plotting function, other than to prolong the suspense of the previous scene. Later events will make it possible to reframe this ostensibly superfluous scene and recover its concealed impact.

The crossed perspectives, drives, and tensions finally come to the point of explosion in a double confrontation between Judah and Tamar. The dual charges against Tamar, prostitution and preg-

nancy, ignite the bomb that had been lying dormant in the last two scenes. Tension stretches taut as the results of Tamar's seduction are brought to her ignorant father-in-law. The unknown reporter couches the news in terms of Judah's perspective, stating that "your daughter-in-law" has sinned, giving it a personal tone. Or, as is more likely, the indictment may betray Judah's own reaction of the report, disclosing how he has personalized the accusations and feels compelled to defend the family honor. These subjective touches presage his judicial role and harsh verdict. Although he was unwittingly involved in her prostitution and pregnancy, his ignorance now threatens to destroy her plan to fulfill the levirate obligation on her own. His ironic role in her plan renders him incapable of dealing with the charges against her. Yet the asymmetric "court appearances" stack the case against Tamar, as the hearing is conducted and judgment rendered in her absence. Judah's summary verdict shocks the reader with visions of Tamar's impending execution and creates the tautest tension in the story: The rush to judgment—"Bring, burn"—eliminates time for question or debate. But suddenly Tamar reopens the trial, sending belated evidence to the judge, "to her father-in-law" (v. 25). Her regard for him remains familial, not judicial. The second stage of her "trial" moves quickly. Her prosecuting attorney, Judah, and jury, all in the person of her father-in-law, reverses the verdict. She is acquitted, and the tension subsides.

The series of increasing tensions fulfill several functions. First, they draw out the polar profiles of the conflicting protagonists by revealing their hidden motives. Second, they highlight the partial views of characters and reader, as the characters party and thrust and all parties try to interpret the events. And third, they engage the reader through curiosity about what has happened, surprise about what is going on, and suspense about what might occur. But, to more fully examine our three enigmas—the story's location, Judah's character, and the overall significance—let us turn now to the devices and dynamics that generate the tensions and propel the plot.

Analyzing the Plot: A Temporal Process

The Dynamics of Curiosity, Surprise, and Suspense

The temporal form of the Judah and Tamar story, and its rising tensions, follow the master narrative strategies of surprise, curiosity, and suspense. These strategies also created the plotting dynamics in the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. There, Elkanah surprised even those familiar with the barren-wife type-scene by callously neglecting his first wife. The reproach of the aging priest and Elkanah's later interest in Hannah also surprise the reader, both turning the plot in new directions. Curiosity is piqued by what might lie behind people's words: Elkanah's defensiveness and Hannah's assertive response to the priest, for example. Finally, suspense arises early on as Hannah endures the verbal assaults of her rival co-wife, her husband, and Eli. Her solitary quest for redress deepens the suspense: what might happen to a barren woman who rises above her own victimization?

In the poem of Deborah delayed disclosure of crucial information (to pick one device) illustrates how these strategies operate. The temporary gap about the identity of the subject in the introductions of Jael, and of Sisera's mother, generates both curiosity and suspense. The relevance of Jael and the unknown reason for blessing her initially raise curiosity about her presence in a concise text. Suspense increases quickly with the appearance of Sisera and sharpens with Jael's sudden attack on her visitor. The mention of Sisera's mother right after his assassination increases curiosity and suspense, about her role and relevance and also about the thunder of hooves bearing the grisly message of death.

In the story of Judah and Tamar these master plotting strategies engage the reader through continual ploys and counterploys. Curiosity arises about the reasons for unexpected events: Judah's departure from his first family and the death of Er. Surprising events occur: Tamar's disguise, her incognito negotiation with Judah; then Judah's fierce verdict and his refraining from further

sex with Tamar. The developing suspense, climaxing in the presentation of Tamar for execution, shocks the sensibilities.

Three Dynamic Dialogues

The scenic mode of storytelling moves the plot, as verbal interactions generate the main dynamics. Direct discourse facilitated Hannah's progress from helpless victim to proactive heroine. Elkanah's words to her (1 Sam 1:8), her emotional outburst to the Lord (v. 11), her dialogue with Eli (vv. 14-18), her interchange with Elkanah (vv. 22-23), and her concluding words to Eli (vv. 26-28) mark the main steps in her personal growth.

The Judah-Tamar tale moves similarly, as scenic developments propel the plot. Several truncated scenes include brief speech by one character:

- v. 8: Judah's directions to Onan to carry out the levirate role;
- v. 1a: Judah's directions to Tamar to remain at home until Shelah grows up;
- v. 13: the report to Tamar about Judah's travels to shear the sheep; and
- vv. 28, 29: the midwife's outcries.

These mini-scenes provide information about character and slightly alter the direction of the action, evoking curiosity along with surprise or suspense.

But of course the three primary interactive scenes, centering in the dialogue of the main characters, create the sharpest tensions of the story and constitute the heart of the plot:

- vv. 15-18: the bargaining and sexual relations between Judah and Tamar;
- vv. 20-21, 22-23: the fruitless search and report of its failure; and
- vv. 24-26: Judah's verdict and Tamar's exonerated.

These scenes carry the main freight of plotting tension, creating surprise and suspense for characters and readers. Conflict between the two counter-protagonists takes dialogic form in two of these scenes and alters the direction of the story line.

Furthermore, whereas Judah's character emerges in all scenes in the story, these three interactions contain the revelations that will subvert his sojourn in the Shephelah. These dialogues expose levels of conflict deeper than those shown in the previous narrative exposition. Let us consider these three interactions—the affair at Enaim (vv. 15–18), the search (vv. 20–23), and Judah's judgment (vv. 24–26)—and unpack their progressively complicating role.

The Affair at Enaim

New entanglements arise in the “chance” meeting at Enaim, where Tamar provokes a new pattern of roles and relationships that re-

shapes the future for each of them. Through metaphorical play on the verb “turn,” the narrator accentuates Judah's personal interests and values. By “turning” toward the “prostitute,” he repeats his first action of the story (v. 1). There, the verb's primary sense was “to encamp,” but the repetition in v. 16 suggests double entendre. Judah's behavior in the Shephelah shows that he was no young innocent naïvely “turning” to meander through the foothills. The term associates him with foreigners and prostitutes, making an ethnic break with his family. Judah's assimilation of native folkways progresses through easy stages until he accepts the everyday life of his new environs in a milieu that redefines his identity. The subtle seduction reveals two native parties: Judah, who doesn't see beneath the disguise of his own incognito daughter-in-law, and the reader, who doesn't realize the full extent of Judah's intended prostitution. The interchange with Tamar at Enaim subverts Judah's authoritarian role. The “prostitute” has no name, as he seeks to use another anonymous woman sexually. Yet his veiled perception of the veiled prostitute ironically symbolizes his own seduction. Whereas he leads by making the opening gambit, she smoothly

redirects the questioning, reverses their roles, and takes control of the bargaining. In the words of Folkein Van Dijk-Hemmes, “Judah's desire makes him dependent on Tamar. She is the subject of the speech, action, and focalization in this scene. In contrast to Judah she acts on a correct analysis of the situation. She makes sure that Judah *gives* something. Only when he has yielded the signs of his masculine dignity and thereby given himself up to Tamar, can we speak of a fruitful communication.”¹⁹ They negotiate, then consummate the deal, two verbs depicting Judah's inordinate haste: “He gave, he entered.” His lack of suitable payment requires additional bargaining and demonstrates his impulsive need for immediate gratification. His lust and her cleverness give her control of their relationship during and after the encounter.

The Search

Technically, the report of Hiram's fruitless search requires only the first sentence of the paragraph (v. 20); vv. 21–23 only add superfluous specifics that retard the story line. Menai states that this four-verse passage “appears to be a digression, since it does not forward the plot.”²⁰ Hiram's innocuous words conceal the most damning information of the story: Judah intended to have sexual relations with a hierodule—not a mere prostitute. She appeared to him to be a hierodule also functioning as a prostitute. The delayed release of vital information leaves reconstruction of its meaning to the reader and convolutes the plot. The narrator buries the explosive revelation—Judah's intended sex with a hierodule—in the following ways:

1. The slow pacing of the direct discourse monotonously prolongs this scene;
2. The repeated verbatim report of the men at Enaim seems redundant;
3. The double scene of search and report is superfluous;
4. The scene of Judah's prostitution is separated from the scene of Hiram's mission by time, location, and participants;

5. The tension about Tamara's pregnancy in the previous scene distracts attention from this seemingly sedate scene; the "live" confrontations in the bracketing scenes (sex and trial) absorb the reader's attention and make Hiram's search and report appear as an inconsequential interlude; and
7. The reader is left to reconstruct the overlap and similarity between Judah's "prostitute" and Hiram's "hierodule" through a step-by-step process by comparing the two scenes.

Thus, Hiram's conversation with distant, unnamed locals in the quiet eddies of the story line appears irrelevant in contrast with the whitewater rapids foaming around the previous issues of prostitution, pregnancy, and paternity, not to mention the impending trial and sentencing. Yet Hiram's brief visit and inquiry lay Judah open to scrutiny and evaluation more than all his inner life, actions, and discourse, and all the revelations of the bracket-

ing scenes. The explosive news hinges on Judah's original perception of the veiled woman, not revealed until he accepts Hiram's report.²¹ Did he think he was having relations with a prostitute or a "hierodule"?²² Judah's first reading of Tamara's appearance as a "prostitute" suggested a strictly business transaction. For the inclusive term *zonah*, "prostitute," can refer to either commercial sexual dealings or to the activity of a hierodule connected with Canaanite worship. Without definite textual markers requiring cultic associations, the reader takes dealings with a prostitute to signify strictly commercial dealings, sex for money.²³ Judah appeared ready to solicit a prostitute after his wife's death. The haggling over payment also leads the reader to a strictly commercial reading of the transaction. Furthermore, the appearance of "hierodule" in Hiram's search seems to be a mistaken shift in terms, and the reader may not realize this term actually reflects Judah's original perception of her role. However, the term *qadeshah*, "hierodule," the search, and the

woman in question betray Judah's original perception, as Hiram reports his lack of success.²⁴ In totally redundant reporting, Hiram repeats the exact words of the locals' reply, "There has been no hierodule there."²⁵ Such verbatim repetition in biblical reportage is so uncommon²⁶ that when it does occur it begs for explanation.²⁷ As perspectives converge, that of Hiram on the search with that of Judah in the initial encounter and subsequent dispatch of Hiram, we wait for Judah to clear up the mystery. However, the noose closes fully around Judah as the reader connects the dots: from Judah's original perception of the woman's role, to Hiram's question to the locals, to the locals' words of reply, to Hiram's report of the locals' reply, to Judah's acceptance of Hiram's report, confirming Judah's original perception of the woman as a "hierodule." The consistent point of view at all levels of reporting finally establishes Judah's original view of the veiled woman and his highly inappropriate arrangement with her: payment for sex with a sacred prostitute.

Had he thought her to be merely a common prostitute and not a hierodule, Hiram would have searched for a prostitute and asked for a prostitute. But Hiram asked for a hierodule, because Judah initially saw her in that role. If he had had sex with a common prostitute and Hiram had searched for a hierodule, Hiram looked for the wrong woman. Hiram sought a hierodule, because they both originally perceived her as a hierodule. Judah accepts the search as complete, Hiram had looked for the right person: Judah had considered her a sacred prostitute!²⁸ The narrative plotting strategy on shifting from "prostitute" to "hierodule" becomes clear. The delayed information revealed in the search scene becomes the most damning evidence against Judah. He originally intended to have sexual relations with a hierodule. Judah's first offer of payment, "a kid goat," now takes on new meaning. That offer (in v. 17) and the subsequent kid sent with Hiram were not merely a common prostitute's fees for services rendered. Rather, a kid goat was a legitimate sacrifice to one of the Canaanite fertility deities' working priestesses.²⁹ Judah had been

using the occasion of satisfying his sexual drive as an opportunity to worship foreign gods, or perhaps vice versa. In either case his indiscretion constituted idolatry—the final step in assimilating the local lifestyle.

In the sex-cum-sacrifice connection, the narrator portrays the rural cultic activity at work and the full extent of Judah's absorption of Canaanite life. A prostitute "working" for the local cult needed not stay at the neighborhood shrine, but might ply her wares wherever she could attract business and "worsheppers." Perceiving Tamara as a hierodule who was working for but not at a local shrine, Judah (or any local resident) could worship the gods of fertility while simultaneously satisfying his sexual drive. How convenient and appealing!

The combined business-sex-worship role of the hierodule carries over to the term "prostitute." This text may well supply one of the first uses of the term to refer to both sides of the activity, literally sexual relations and metaphorically worshipping local deities.³⁰ In the seemingly innocent dealings with the very available prostitutes, the Israelite "john" was not only satisfying personal urges and paying the negotiated rates, but also presenting offerings to the ruling fertility deities. The verb "to prostitute" functions to describe both physical and religious realities, literal and symbolic meanings, combining sex and worship in a seductive, multisensory appeal. The economic, personal, and religious functions combine in the prophets' later blanket denunciations of whoring after foreign gods.

For knowledgeable readers, the two discoveries, fertility overtones and sacrifice to local gods, disclose the perceptions of the protagonists, shocking the reader's sensibilities and heightening the suspense. But as the ironic gap closes between the reader and the two principals, it increases between Judah and Tamara, adding to the suspense about what will happen to them and between them. What will befall Tamara, who has become pregnant impersonating a Canaanite priestess? Will Judah pay a price for his sacrifice to the local deities as a cover for his sexual gratification?

Judah's Judgment

The hidden motivations and ironic ploys of the two principals clash finally and fully in Judah's threat to execute Tamara. Plotting sidelihts in the trial scene illumine hidden moves of the two protagonists. First, Judah heard the charges against Tamara after three months, before her pregnancy became obvious. This information could only come from someone aware of her situation, possibly from Tamara herself. She may have secretly passed word of her situation to Judah in order to force a conclusion to their conflict. Second, Judah took no time to deliberate, although the hearsay charges and the time remaining until Tamara would be visibly pregnant gave him time to explore other options before acting. He might have checked the accuracy of the source, verified the charges with Tamara, discussed the issue with her father, consulted local officials, and sought proper redress. The additional time for deliberation could lead to reasoned judgment, collective decision, and appropriate action. Judah's immediate decision seems unnecessary and extreme. Without inquiry or consultation, he immediately accepted the charges, judged Tamara, and handed down his verdict. Two words summarize his deliberation and evaluation, if not to tally dispensing with them: "Bring her, burn her."

Third, Judah and Tamara did not meet at her "trial"; the accused did not face either an accuser or a judge. Judah handed down his verdict in absentia, forcing her to respond to both charges and sentence after the fact. The charges become a convenient pretext for Judah; he could solve Shehah's problem by eliminating Tamara. Her removal would cover his deceit and negligence in not sending her to Shehah, as only she could provide evidence of his unfulfilled promise. Nevertheless, on the way to her execution she "sent" her evidence to Judah in a last-ditch attempt to reopen the proceedings.

Fourth, Judah's claim of exclusive authority to pass sentence on Tamara after she had returned to her father's home seems extraneous and highly questionable.³¹ He had arranged her marriage to her and prescribed Onan's levirate role, and Tamara acquiesced to

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 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 hypocritical 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 phraseologically for Judah's ear—reflects on both characters. The personalized reference to Tamar, implying

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.

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.

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