

○ LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

TAMAR IN THE JOSEPH CYCLE

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The interruption of one story by another, abrupt endings without explanations, and disregard for narrative continuity are the unfortunate characteristics of biblical narrative. Gen. 38 is treated as an interpolation because it interrupts the 'continuous' narrative of the Joseph story. This paper examines the placement of the Tamar story in the Joseph cycle and argues that the expectation of a continuous, straight-forward text that represents a coherent perspective is ill-suited to the Bible. On the one hand, if the message of the text is to be conveyed via a single voice or perspective, then chapter 38 is a diversion. Or if resolution to Joseph's situation at the end of chapter 37 is the goal of the reader, then chapter 38 is a deterrent. On the other hand, a reading that resists such a linear approach comes with a different set of expectations. Using Bakhtin's notions of dialogue and the motifs of meeting and recognition/nonrecognition in chronotope, this paper will argue that Gen. 38 is not an interruption in the narrative, but an interpretive lens that provides keys for understanding the larger narrative. Because of the thematic links between the Tamar story and the surrounding material, chapter 38 functions as a 'play within a play' that is in dialogue with the other story. Moreover, terminology, and wordplay in the dialogue of the narrative form a rubric that functions as a reader's guide for Joseph's story.

The Joseph cycle stands in contrast to the material that precedes it in Genesis because it is carefully crafted and intentionally literary. This beautifully composed narrative, which is classified as a novella, portrays Joseph in chapter 37 as the dreamer of dreams and the delight of his father Jacob. Joseph's dreams and the obvious favouritism of his father create tension among his brothers to the point where they conspire to kill him. Two of the brothers, Reuben and Judah intervene. Instead of murdering the beloved son of Jacob, the sons of Leah sell Joseph into slavery for 20 pieces of silver. They take the coat of Joseph, the one given to him by his father as a symbol of his special status in the family, dip it in blood and deliver it to Jacob, saying, '...see/recognize now whether it is your son's robe or not'. From the bloodied robe, Jacob concludes the inevitable. 'It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.' (vs.33) The chapter concludes with Jacob in mourning while Joseph is sold to Potiphar and an uncertain future. What will become of Joseph? Will he survive? Will his father ever discover the truth? It is with anticipation that the reader turns to the following chapter only to discover that the narrator has shifted gears and is now telling what appears to be a completely different story – one having to do with Joseph's brother Judah.

Scholarship has been fairly consistent in its characterisation of Genesis 38 as a separate unit that interrupts the surrounding narrative:

Every attentive reader can see that the story of Judah and Tamar has no connection at all with the strictly organized Joseph story at whose beginning it is now inserted (Von Rad 1961: 351).

This narrative is a completely individual unit. It has no connection with the drama of Joseph (Speiser 1981: 299).

This peculiar chapter stands alone, without connection to its context. It is isolated in every way and is most enigmatic (Brueggemann 1982: 307).

Gen. 38 is treated as an interpolation because it interrupts the ‘continuous’ narrative of the Joseph story. If the message of the text is to be conveyed via a single voice or perspective, then chapter 38 is a diversion. Or if resolution of the situation at the end of chapter 37 is the goal of the reader, then chapter 38 is a deterrent.

The interruption of one story by another, abrupt endings without explanations, and disregard for narrative continuity are the unfortunate characteristics of the Bible. The text in its final form is a composite. It originally existed in oral form and was edited over time. Contemporary readers tend to sift through the various strands in the hope that by isolating the individual voices of the narrative we can find respite from the cacophony of voices that contribute to the text. Unfortunately, this expectation is rarely met in the Bible.

Some literary readings offer an alternative by demonstrating ways in which chapter 38 is related to the surrounding narrative. In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter uses Genesis 38 to demonstrate not only that Genesis 38 employs literary artistry to convey meaning but that the independent unit inserted into the Joseph narrative ‘interacts’ with the surrounding material. The interpolation and the surrounding material are connected by ‘motif and theme’, conveyed by a ‘whole series of explicit parallels and contrasts’ (Alter 1981: 4).

My use of a dialogic approach, based on the work of M.M. Bakhtin, goes further in asserting first that Gen. 38 is not simply related, or secondary to the surrounding narrative, but forms a dialogue with chapters 37, 39–50. Second, our understanding of Gen. 38 is impossible without a discussion about the relationship, i.e., dialogue between this chapter and the surrounding narrative. Moreover, this approach will argue that the meaning of the surrounding material would be limited with the omission of chapter 38 in much the same way one’s understanding of a conversation is limited if only one conversation partner can be heard. Third, I will use the concept of chronotope, or ‘time-space’ that offers insights into how meaning is built into the very structure of the narrative.

For the purposes of this study, I will offer a working definition of language as ‘dialogic’ and chronotope based on Bakhtin’s theory of language. Central to Bakhtin’s thinking is the concept that language is dynamic and dialogic in nature. Every word carries a multitude of possible meanings, and perception or understanding is affected by the presence of another:

... regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression) the world behind his back... are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes... to annihilate the difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person (Bakhtin 1990: 22–23).

Bakhtin’s theory assumes that the individual in isolation has limited perception. The other sees, completes the individual in a way she could not do herself. Similarly, a word in isolation is

limited in its ability to realise its fullness of meaning. Meaning in language is achieved as a result of words, phrases and other units of language in dialogue with each other. Each written and spoken word exists for the purpose of working towards meaning *in dialogue* with other words. Spoken and written language is *inherently* dialogic. The dialogic nature of language creates on-going possibilities for new meaning. This is known as ‘unfinalizability’.

For this reason, the hearer/reader can never completely understand an utterance in isolation. Meaning can be achieved only as the result of words, phrases and other units of language are in dialogue with each other. Each word exists for the purpose of working towards meaning in dialogue with the other words. For the purposes of our analysis of Gen. 38, this means our understanding of the passage can only result from the dialogue between this chapter and the surrounding narrative.

The dialogue between Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 demonstrates another aspect of Bakhtin’s theory of language, namely that language contains two forces; the official voice and the ‘other’. One force seeks unity. The other is disruptive and challenges the assumptions of the official voice. In Gen. 38, Judah hears and understands the official voice and Tamar exploits the ‘other’. Judah and Tamar’s encounter and dialogue takes place within a specific contextual framework or field of parameters that highlights the two forces in language and all its possibilities. This specific moment in a specific space is what Bakhtin refers to as chronotope.

Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope is also of tremendous use because it seeks to redefine the ‘interruption’ instead of attempting to explain it. The term chronotope literally means, ‘time-space’. It is the ‘organizing centre for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of the narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes the narrative’ (Bakhtin 1981: 250).

Bakhtin contends that every genre of literature has a different understanding of space and time. With each genre comes a field that determines the parameters of events and possibilities for action. We expect certain things from an adventure or romance and different events in history. The field that determines these parameters is the chronotope. It is a field of possibilities.

Bakhtin identifies certain motifs, such as meeting/parting, loss/acquisition, search/discovery, recognition/nonrecognition as chronotopic in nature. Of these motifs, the motif of *meeting* is dominant and it is closely related to the motif of *recognition/nonrecognition* (Bakhtin 1981: 97). The presence of these motifs in Gen. 38 invite us to think about the role of chronotope in understanding this narrative.

These definitions of dialogic language and chronotope have tremendous implications for Genesis 38. First, I will focus on the dialogue within the chapter itself. Who speaks to whom? What are the disruptive and unifying forces at work in the dialogue? Who understands and who is deceived by the dialogue? What meaning can be found in the exchange between Tamar and Judah? Second, I will examine the dialogue that is created between Genesis 38 and the larger Joseph narrative into which it appears to be inserted. Third, I will explore the extent to which the narrative is temporally structured and how an understanding of chronotope assists our navigation of this passage. Specifically, I will focus on the motifs of *meeting* and *recognition/nonrecognition* in the narrative.

GENESIS 38

After reading the first chapter of the Joseph cycle, the reader comes to chapter 38 anxious to find out what will happen next and encounters these words, *wayhi ba'et*, 'At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua'. True to its inimitable style, the Bible shifts to what appears to be a different story. The narrative moves swiftly in the first 11 verses of the chapter. In verses 1-5, Judah marries and has three sons who are named Er, Onan, and Shelah.

The sentence structure is simple, and as we would expect, the verbs direct the action. In the first verse Judah 'leaves' his brothers and 'spreads out' with Hirah. In verse two he 'saw', 'took', and 'went into' bat Shua. From that point on, the verbal action includes her. She conceives and bears a son. In verse 3, Judah 'names'. In verse four, bat Shua conceives, bears, and names. In verse five she conceives, bears, and names the second and third sons.

In verses 6-11 Tamar is introduced to the narrative as the wife procured for the oldest son Er. Based on what precedes, the reader anticipates more of the same. Er, like his father, should 'take' and 'go into her'. Tamar should then conceive and bear sons. The *waw* that begins verse seven is the break with what has preceded. 'But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of God and YHWH put him to death'. Verses 6-11 move in rapid succession like verses 1-5, but the narrative is off course. The line of succession, the taking of a wife and producing of children, is detoured with the death of Er. In response to this detour, Judah speaks in the narrative for the first time. He tells his son to perform the duty of a levir for his brother's widow. Judah speaks to Onan, but we do not have a record of Onan responding in words. Instead the narrator speaks to the reader and informs us that Onan did not want to cooperate and devised a plan whereby he appeared to perform the duty of a levir but 'spilled his seed on the ground'. Onan's action was displeasing in the eyes of YHWH and he too was killed. In verse 11 Judah speaks again, this time to Tamar. In verse 8 he commanded Onan to 'go'. Here in verse 11 he commands Tamar to 'return' to the house of her father. Tamar enters the narrative in verse 6 as the wife of Er. By verse 11 she has been married and widowed twice with no heir to show for it.

Up to this point the reader has few indicators regarding the passage of time. The narrative moves with such speed so as to suggest things happen in rapid succession. The first 11 verses of the text seem to be rushing towards some unknown destination when, in verse 12, we encounter these words, *wayyirbu hayyamim*, 'after some time', literally, 'many days'. It is after this period of time that the two women mentioned in the narrative will affect the course of action, one intentionally and the other unintentionally. First bat Shua, wife of Judah, dies. In response to her death Judah goes through the period of mourning. This parallel action of mourning alerts the reader that Tamar has been in mourning 'many days'. What has happened to Shelah? Is he of age? Will Judah keep his word? Will the promise be fulfilled?

In verse 13 it was 'made known' *nagad*, to Tamar that her father-in-law was going to Timnah for the sheep shearing. Tamar removes her widow's clothing, which mirrors what Judah does at the end of his mourning period. Her action alerts the reader to the fact that Tamar's period of mourning has gone on for quite some time. She then covers herself with a veil and, like Judah, takes a trip. Her journey takes her to the entrance to Enaim, *bpetah 'eynayim*, literally, the 'opening of the eyes', on the road to Timnah. Verse 14 is beautifully crafted in that it first describes Tamar's actions, which only imply her intention, and then provides the motive. She did these

things because, she ‘saw,’ *ra’ab* ‘that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife’.

Certainly the events that will take place are set in motion by Tamar, whose eyes have been opened. And her actions will result in an eye opening experience for Judah. Tamar’s two actions, the removing of one type of clothing and the putting on of another type, not only mark a transition in Tamar’s status from one who mourns to one who is ready to act, but is symbolic of the activity in this story. Judah and Tamar’s interactions take place around prescribed roles and identities and the uncertainty and deception around those roles. Some roles are associated with clothing. Judah is responsible for Tamar once she becomes a part of his household, but out of fear for his youngest son’s life, he sends her back to her own father’s house. In so doing, he abandons his role as her provider and he does so deceptively, inasmuch as he promised Tamar she would someday marry Shelah. Similarly, by changing her attire, Tamar abandons her role as widow and daughter-in-law for another role. She is intentional in her selection of clothes. The text states, ‘she covered herself with a veil to cover herself’, *wattit’allaf watkhas batsa’if*. Covering oneself is often associated with mourning. Here Tamar’s covering works toward a different purpose, to end the period of mourning and to continue the line.

As is the case in the surrounding Joseph narrative, garments convey status, position, favour, or role. They also have the power to conceal or reveal identity. In the story of Joseph, the robe his father gives him is a visible sign of favour, and that same robe is used to deceive Jacob about his beloved son’s death. Upon hearing of Joseph’s demise, Jacob tears his clothes and replaces them with sackcloth, the garb of mourning. In Egypt, Potiphar’s wife uses Joseph’s robe to connect him to an offence he did not commit. When Joseph is restored in Pharaoh’s house he receives a new wardrobe of fine linen, and Joseph’s appearance keeps his identity hidden from his brothers when they encounter him years later. Similarly, Tamar’s new garments apparently conceal her identity from Judah, who mistakes her for a prostitute, *zonah*. Upon seeing her he initiates a business transaction. We assume from the sparse details of the narrative that Judah deduces Tamar is a prostitute because of her location (why else would a woman be sitting alone outside the entrance to a city) and her attire (the veil). The only other mention of this term for ‘veil’, *tsa’if*, comes in the story of Isaac and Rebekah. Rebekah dons a ‘veil’, *tsa’if*, before she meets Isaac. The point here is the veil is heretofore associated not with prostitution, but with marriage. Thus in one verse, Tamar’s action of changing her attire is simultaneously associated with mourning, covering for mourning, marriage, and *possibly* prostitution. The uncertainty around the purpose of the veil directs the reader to all the possible roles associated with this woman. Tamar uses perceptions and misperceptions about who she is to achieve her goal. That she is associated with a number of roles is further substantiated by the text’s reference to her in verse 16. When Judah saw her, he did not ‘know’, *yada* that she was his ‘daughter-in-law’. Here the term for ‘daughter-in-law’ *kallah*, also means bride. Tamar is a daughter-in-law about to become a bride, and although Judah does not ‘recognize’ *yada*, her, he is about to *know* her in a most intimate way.

The words function like garments in the Tamar narrative. They convey meaning and have the ability to reveal and conceal. And the reader, like Judah, will only understand the fuller meanings of the words in a dialogical process.

Now we move to the encounter and dialogue. Until verse 16 Judah speaks and there is no verbal response in the narrative. In other words, Judah’s communications are commands (verses

8, 11 & 13) or internal thoughts (verse 11). In verse 16 Judah speaks, but this time he is answered by the veiled woman. Her voice in the text changes the course of action.

Judah: Come, let me come into you.

Tamar: What will you give me that you may come into me?

Judah: I will send you a kid from the flock.

Tamar: Only if you give me a pledge until you send it.

Judah: What pledge shall I give you?

Tamar: Your signet and your cord and the staff that is in your hand.

The dialogue consists of three verses. Judah initiates the conversation and Tamar responds with a question (vs. 17). Judah responds and Tamar issues a rejoinder (vs. 18). Judah asks a question in response to the new demand and Tamar answers (vs. 19). The pattern of the exchange is as follows:

Judah makes a proposition Tamar asks a question

Judah answers the question Tamar makes a different proposition

Judah asks a question Tamar answers a question

Judah initiates the dialogue, but it is the veiled woman who has the last word in this exchange. Moreover, as a result of this verbal exchange the business of procreation that was detoured in verses 6-11 resumes. The phrase, *wayyabo' 'eleyha watahar lo*, that we saw in verse 2 is repeated in verse 18, 'he went in to her, and she conceived by him'.

Having completed her mission, Tamar changes clothes once again, removing the veil and returning to the widow's garb, but nothing is the same. The changes that have taken place will not be hidden by her clothes for long. The repetition of the phrase, 'he went in to her, and she conceived by him', *wayyabo' 'eleyha watahar lo*, is like Tamar putting the widow's attire on again. The words and the clothing look the same, but everything has changed. Language in repetition, like the clothes to which Tamar returns, hold much more than the earlier meanings, and it is the repetition itself that serves to highlight the polyphony. The dialogue that takes place between Tamar and Judah is central to the narrative and now nothing, not the same clothes and certainly not the same words, has the same meaning.

The following verses detail Judah's attempt to send payment to the 'prostitute'. He sends his friend, Hirah the Adullamite, but Hirah was unable to locate the shrine prostitute. The term here for cult or shrine prostitute is *qadeshah*. This term stands in contrast to, *zonah* a common prostitute that was used earlier to describe Tamar. The cult prostitute was condemned as a corrupt Canaanite practice. However, it is condemned with such frequency that we can infer that it was pervasive. The harlot, or run of the mill prostitute, if you will, was tolerated as long as she was not married (Jeansome 1990: 104). When Hirah reports that the men of the city said, 'no harlot has been here', the reader sees the irony that Judah still doesn't get. There never was a harlot, only a widow securing her right to progeny (Jeansome 1990: 104). Judah decides that the prostitute should keep his personal items lest they become a laughingstock. That Judah wants to

make sure the prostitute gets what is owed her stands in stark contrast to his lack of concern over Tamar who has not received her due. Ironically, in ‘playing the harlot’, Tamar secures for herself what she was unable to obtain as a daughter-in-law.

In verses 24-26, a final albeit indirect exchange occurs between Judah and Tamar. Here we see the phrase, ‘it was made known’ or ‘told’ *nagad*, to Judah, which mirrors the same phrase from verse 13, where Tamar was told about the activities of Judah. In both cases the agent of the information is unknown. In both verses the information is the basis for action. In verse 24 Judah hears of Tamar’s pregnancy and orders her death. Unlike Judah’s commands issued in the earlier part of the chapter, the command to have Tamar stoned is met with a response. Tamar sends Judah’s personal effects with the message, ‘it was the owner of these who made me pregnant... take note/*recognize*, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff’. Judah’s response to seeing his personal effects forms a corrective dialogue with Jacob’s response to Joseph’s bloodied coat. Jacob sees the bloodied coat and forms the wrong conclusion. Judah sees his signet, cord, and staff and *recognises* that Tamar is ‘more in the right than I’. Judah is able to move from non-recognition to recognition after his encounter with his personal items sent by Tamar. In verses 27-30 the text discloses that one long-awaited pregnancy produces two sons. Perez breaks forth into the world in much the same way that the Tamar narrative breaks into Joseph’s story. The crimson thread tied on the wrist of the second-born son symbolises the blood line that continues through Tamar and Judah.

Tamar’s pregnancy does more than resolve the tension in the narrative. The revelation of her pregnancy forces the narrative into real time. Verse 24 begins with a specific temporal reference: ‘three months later...’ This reference marks the time when Tamar’s pregnancy would have become evident. In this sense it stands in contrast to the other references to time up to this point in the narrative. For example, it is not clear how much time passed in the first section of the narrative (verses 1-5) where Judah marries, has three sons, and Er is eventually old enough to take a wife. Nor is it clear in verses 6-10 how long Tamar was married to Er before God takes his life or how long Onan pretends to act as levir before God takes his life as well. In verse 11 Judah asks Tamar to remain at her father’s house for an unspecified length of time, ‘until my son Shelah grows up’. In verse 12 we have the reference, ‘a long time afterward’, to mark the time of the death of Judah’s wife. Time moves at its own pace in this narrative, but the specific time marker in verse 24 introduces the resolution of the story.

The temporal shift introduced in verse 24 is followed by another specific time reference in verse 27, ‘when the time came for her to give birth...’ which brings us to the climax of the narrative. The birth of the twins, Perez and Zerah, assures the continuation of the line and offers a foreshadowing of the fulfilment of the promise in the Joseph cycle. Although the story ends structurally in much the same way it begins, with birth and naming, in this final segment of the narrative, it is not Judah who names the first-born son. Here the midwife’s comment about the second-born that makes himself first, ‘what a breach – *perez* – you have made for yourself’, becomes the name of the child. The red cord the midwife ties on the would-be first-born becomes the basis for his name as well. The story in chapter 38 achieves resolution, but the path by which the promise is fulfilled is unconventional. The reader will return to the Joseph narrative, but the lesson in Genesis 38 is that the path to God’s promise is a circuitous one. Joseph’s path to the fulfilment of God’s promise to Abram will be one of delays, imprisonment, exile, and reversals.

In its final form, Genesis 38 functions as an interruption only when we read the entire story chronologically. If one sees Genesis 38 as a chronotope, a play within a play that contains the thematic elements of the surrounding narrative, we can make the following conclusions. First, garments are key to understanding the Tamar/Judah story and the surrounding Joseph narrative. In both stories the garments have the potential to conceal/deceive and reveal. Second, words in both narratives function like the garments. They contain unifying and disruptive forces that have the power to conceal/deceive and reveal. Third, the heroine/hero in the two narratives is the individual who is able to ‘perceive’, *nakar*, (or recognise) rather than simply ‘see’, *ra’ah*. Fourth, the ones who perceive, Tamar and Joseph, are the ones who take the necessary steps to preserve the line. They function as the links between the promise of God and the fulfilment of God’s promise.

Moreover, the motif of encounter, recognition/nonrecognition functions not only in chapter 38, but between chapter 38 and the surrounding narrative. The location of the Tamar story forms a meeting/encounter with the Joseph story and it is up to the reader to recognise the function of the narrative. The Tamar/Judah story alerts the reader to the fact that those things that appear to stand between the promises of God and the fulfilment of those promises are illusions. The chronology of the narrative is not the only way to follow the narrative. To the contrary, the story of Joseph and that of Israel, for that matter can be characterised as a series of encounters and meetings. The motif of encounter/meeting creates opportunities for the exploitation of language in dialogue. Tamar and Judah speak the same language, but they use language differently. As is the case in this narrative, the meeting/encounter brings with it the possibility for recognition. The exchange between Judah and Tamar demonstrates that the existing power structure can be challenged by the one who can *recognise* or *perceive* new possibilities within the existing language.

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