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What About Judah?

Stuart Love

Judah's role in the Joseph story (Gen 37.1—50.26) is more complex than meets the eye. We encounter him five times in the course of the novella. In the first instance Judah successfully intervenes and persuades his brothers to sell Joseph to an Ishmaelite caravan (37.26–28). By doing so, Judah avoids intrafamilial bloodshed, and yet, his scheme rids the brothers of “the master of dreams” for a nifty profit. In the second example, devoted to an entire chapter (38), Judah meets his match in his duplicitous dealings with Tamar. Here, the master of deception is brought to his knees and forced to acknowledge, “She is righteous, not I” (38.26).¹

At this pivotal point Judah's deceptive, conniving conduct that seeks personal advantage ends. The proof of this affirmation is found in the last three passages. In the third example, Judah without guile convinces Israel, his father, to allow Benjamin, the only remaining son of Rachel at home, to go with the brothers to Egypt as demanded by “the man” (43.3–10). Judah gives himself as surety for Benjamin: if anything happens to him, Judah will accept the blame forever (v. 9). In the fourth occasion, Judah pleads for Benjamin to the one who is “like Pharaoh himself” (44.18–34). Consequently, Judah is willing to offer his own life for the sake of Benjamin. His behavior apparently is rewarded in the fifth instance (49.8–12) because Jacob's blessing withheld from Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, the older sons, is bequeathed to Judah. He, like his father Jacob, will have authority over his brothers (49.8; see 27.29), a social/political reality fulfilled in the Davidic dynasty.

What about Judah? His critical position in the Joseph story epitomizes the account as a whole, a story characterized by rivalries, conflicts, and deceptions on the part of Joseph's brothers, all the sons of Jacob, and Tamar, but ultimately directed by the providence of God to explain why Israel went and came out of Egypt as Yahweh's chosen people.

Let us examine more carefully Judah's part through the five instances just mentioned.

Judah Persuades His Brothers (Gen 37.26–28)

So much informs the multilayered hatred of Joseph's brothers. There is the father's doting favoritism symbolized by his giving Joseph a “long robe with sleeves,” the kind worn by leaders, symbolizing royal status that unwittingly anticipates Joseph's future. There are Joseph's two dreams of greatness that provoke further conflict. “Are you indeed to reign over us?” ask the brothers (37.8). Von Rad is probably right:

The brothers' hate in the story is motivated, to be sure, in the best possible way psychologically, but one must consider that there is more to it than annoyance at the preference given to Joseph. There is, namely, a dark knowledge about the irrevocableness of such prophetic dreams. . . . The brothers' hate is therefore a rebellion against the matter contained in the dreams, against the divine power itself, standing behind them, who had given the dreams.²

1. The basis of this translation will be made later in the article. Also, a defense of the traditional translation will be made as well.

2. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary*, trans. by John Marks (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 348.

Then there is the triggering event. Israel sends Joseph alone a distance of fifty miles or more to see if all is well with his brothers and their flocks at Shechem. Near Dothan, seeing Joseph afar, the brothers plot together to kill “the dreamer” and throw his body into a pit. Reuben intervenes, pleading that they shed no blood—“throw him into the pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him” (37.22 NRSV). Reuben plans later to deliver Joseph to his father alive. So they strip him of his robe, thinking that they are destroying the identity of their rival and cast him down into a waterless, empty hole.

While the brothers sit and eat an Ishmaelite caravan from Gilead arrives on its way to Egypt. Now Judah enters the story. Without Reuben’s presence, Judah seeks to alter his brothers’ plan to kill Joseph by appealing to their greed. There’s no profit in killing him, and Joseph’s blood would be on their hands, so Judah convinces the brothers to sell him for twenty pieces of silver, apparently the proper price for marketing a man (Lev 27.5–6). Judah’s sordid scheme, he believes, insures them of both clean hands and a pocket full of silver. The brothers agree and the deed is over. Joseph is sold to the Ishmaelites and his personal journey from a beloved, pampered son, to slave, to prisoner, and, finally, to second-only-to-Pharaoh begins.

Judah’s Conversion (Gen 38)

On first sight, what transpires between Judah and Tamar, a tale of deception and counterdeception, appears to be an interruption and insertion by the narrator to the Joseph story. One could easily move from chapter 37 to chapter 39 omitting chapter 38.³ I argue, nevertheless, suggested by the work of Clifford,⁴ that Judah’s behavioral change stems precisely from his dealings with Tamar, who is not only in the right but surely a superior match to Judah the con artist. Chapter 38, therefore, is integral to the larger narration and necessary to understanding Judah’s subsequent, exemplary behavior. Why is this so?

First, the story conforms to the opening of the larger narrative in Genesis 37.2: “This is the story of the family of Jacob,” more accurately translated, “These are the descendants of Jacob.” What happens to Judah and Tamar is part and parcel of the bigger ancestral picture.

Second, without this narrative we would be clueless as to how Tamar, a Canaanite woman, and Perez and Zerah, her twin sons fathered by Judah, fit into the royal Davidic lineage (see Gen 46.12; Num 26.19–22; Ruth 4.18–22; Matt 1.1–17, esp. v. 3). Matthew’s treatment of socially marginal women begins by citing four non-Israelites (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba) with questionable sexual histories, to ascertain the genesis of Jesus’s origins as the Messiah of Israel (Matt 1.1–6). The story in Genesis 38 anticipates a far larger context in both ancient Israel and the early church.

Third, Judah’s independent, individualistic actions are opposite to the traditional endogamous marriage practices of the fathers before him (Gen 24.3; 27.46—28.2).⁵ Judah on his own goes “down from his brothers” and settles among the Canaanites. There he saw and he married an unnamed woman, the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua (38.1–2). This exogamous marriage bypasses the traditional endogamous marriage customs of the fathers in three previous generations (Abram and Sarai, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah/Rachel). In the first generation, Abram marries Sarai in the land of his birth, Ur of the Chaldeans (11.28–29). In the second generation, Abraham has his chief steward swear an oath before the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, not to get a wife for Isaac from among the daughters of the Canaanites (24.3). He is to go to Abraham’s homeland and to Abraham’s kindred to obtain Isaac’s wife. In the third generation, Jacob flees to Rebekah’s patriarchal home to save his own life and in time to find his wives. Before Jacob leaves, Isaac charges him, “You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women.” Joseph’s example in Egypt (Pharaoh gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife) is justifiably exceptional to Israel’s traditional practices due to the circumstances of Joseph rising to power from among the ranks of slaves and prisoners to Pharaoh’s favor, and being made an Egyptian as he “gained authority over the land of Egypt” (41.45).

Thus, Judah’s marriage to a Canaanite woman separates him from the traditional marriage and family practices of the patriarchs. He seeks not his father’s direction and blessing; rather, he disconnects himself from

3. Representative of this view is Claus Westerman, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 356–57.

4. Richard J. Clifford, S.J., “Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, (66:2004) 519–32.

5. *Ibid.*, 524.

Jacob to live among the Canaanites. Judah acts autonomously, a dangerous path in his social world. He plays fast and loose with the heart of his heritage, that is, loyalty to his family interests in the person one marries. And yet, he reverts to the traditional role of *paterfamilias* in arranging the marriage of his firstborn son, Er, to a Canaanite woman, Tamar. Judah ignores traditional household and marriage practices when they don't serve his purposes but he exercises them when they advance his own household objectives. This is evident even though the text appears silent relating to any overt condemnation of Judah's marriage to a Canaanite woman as well as his own actions to arrange the marriage of his firstborn, Er, to Tamar, or later, when he reverts to levirate practices in the death of his firstborn son. These are matters that the earliest readers or hearers of the text would readily have understood without explanations of Judah's obligations to the larger family of Jacob.

At this point a few words are helpful concerning the social familial backdrop of Judah's deception. Judah has three sons. The firstborn, and husband of Tamar, is named Er, an appellation that means "evil." He is described by the narrator as one who "was wicked before the Lord," and the "Lord put him to death" (38.7 NRSV). The middle son, Onan (sounds like "sorrow, trouble, wickedness"), following levirate practices in Israel that apparently were shared at least in principle throughout the Near East (Deut 25.5–10),⁶ is commanded by his father to "raise up seed" to Er.

This would insure that Er's name would "not be blotted out" (v. 6). In so doing, it would preserve Er's patrimony (21.15–17; also Num 27.4; Ruth 4.5, 10; 2 Sam 14.7) that includes Tamar's future security as his widow and Judah's daughter-in-law. Israelite legislation affirmed that a woman in Tamar's precarious situation had the right to go to the community of elders to tell them that her dead husband's brother refused to accept his levirate responsibility (which happens in the case of Onan). If the brother persists in not accepting his duty, the wife of the deceased in the presence of the elders would pull a sandal off his foot and spit in his face, publicly shaming him. She then would declare, "This is what is done to the man who does not build up his brother's house" (Deut 25.7–9). He would be marked for life.

The narrator tells us that Onan spilled his seed on the ground "so that he would not give offspring to his brother" (Gen 38.9). Thus, Onan refuses to accept his familial obligation, motivated most probably by his part in family economics. By avoiding his duty to preserve his brother's patrimony, he would increase his share of the family pie. For this injustice the Lord kills Onan, also (v. 10).

This sets the stage for the deception. Judah has a third son named Shelah (v. 5) who is the final hope to fulfill the responsibility of "raising up seed" to his brother. Stung by two deaths, Judah fears that Shelah will also die—perhaps he believes that Tamar is to blame for the deaths of Er and Onan. (See Tobit 3.7–9; 8.9–10. Too often, fear of the female prevails in societies like ancient Israel.)⁷ At any rate Judah tells Tamar to remain a widow in her father's house until Shelah grows up, a promise he apparently never intends to keep. This she does, her hope now bound up in Judah's untrustworthy promise.

After Judah completes his mourning after the death of his wife (Gen 38.12), he goes up to Timnah to the sheep shearing, a time of "significant celebration characterized by feasting, heavy drinking, and the settling of old scores."⁸ Along the way Judah is enticed and has a sexual encounter with Tamar who is disguised as a prostitute (v. 15). As Hendel aptly puts it, "Her change of clothes, from widow's garb to prostitute's, reverses her situation from a dependent figure to an active agent, a woman empowered to negotiate with men about sex. This is her ruse to enforce the duty of a brother-in-law, which now falls to the next closest male kin, not Shelah but Judah himself."⁹

6. See Millar Burrows, "The Ancient Oriental Background of Hebrew Levirate Marriage," *BASOR* 77 (1940) 12–15; *idem*, "Levirate Marriage in Israel," *JBL* 59 (1940) 23–33.

7. For a feminist interpretation of the story see Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presuppositions in Three Old Testament Texts," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Woman and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 197–218.

8. Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, "Israelite Sheepshearing and David's Rise to Power," *Biblica* (1:2006), 63. Geoghegan traces out the social/political circumstances surrounding the four times it is used in biblical record: (1) Jacob takes his wages for tending Laban's flocks, Genesis 31; (2) Tamar entices Judah into a sexual encounter to secure her rightful property, Genesis 38; (3) David seeks payment for protecting Nabal's flocks, 1 Samuel 25; and (4) Absalom kills Amnon for raping his sister Tamar, 2 Samuel 13.

As security for Judah's promised future payment of a kid from the flock, Tamar demands Judah's seal, cord, and staff (vv. 17–18), and, as Geoghegan states, these are “all symbols of clan authority and, in the case of Judah, royal authority.”¹⁰ Putting it another way, I believe the scene and the symbols are proleptic, that is, they anticipate what is to come in the birth of Perez, one of David's progenitors. Assuming this the case, we can look ahead at two other sheep-shearing scenes that involve the resolution of conflicts regarding a critical aspect of the Davidic dynasty. In the case of Nabal, a name that means “fool” (1 Sam 25), David establishes a firm foothold in the region around Hebron, and in the case of Absalom (2 Sam 13), a salvo is fired regarding Davidic succession. The ironies are too many to cite in this brief account but careful examination of the three stories tied to David indicate that sheep-shearing celebrations were times of trickery, licentiousness, and revenge.¹¹ Certainly, all three terms fit the story of Judah and Tamar: for Tamar, the tables are turned when the sheep are sheared.

As the story unfolds, Judah sends the kid with his Adullamite friend to recover the pledge from the woman (Gen 38.20). He doesn't find her and the townspeople deny that any “holy woman,” that is, temple prostitute (v. 21) has been there.¹² When Tamar turns up pregnant, Judah is inflamed and demands that she be burned to death (v. 24). Following the law, what had transpired is a form of adultery that demands the death penalty for both parties (Deut 22.22). However, in her defense, Tamar has the insignia of her father-in-law, Judah. Note the language she uses: “Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff” (Gen 38.25).

Judah, faced with the truth, now sees rightly. He openly recognizes Tamar's just actions. Verse 26, accordingly, marks a turning point in Judah's life. The way Judah's statement is generally translated, “she is more righteous than I” (KJV, RSV, NIV) or “[she is] more right than I” (NRSV, NAB, NJPSV), possibly does not give an exact rendering. Clifford maintains that a better translation would be simply and directly to the point, “she is righteous, not I.” To defend his translation, Clifford cites Waltke and O'Connor who affirm that the Hebrew quoted by Clifford introduces “a comparison of exclusion,” in which “the subject alone possesses the quality connoted by the adjective or stative verb, to the exclusion of the thing compared.”¹³ If so, the simple acknowledgement, “she is righteous, not I,” places justice squarely on Tamar's side. She has exercised faithfully her familial right and responsibility; Judah has not. By his statement he now recognizes and owns his lack of fidelity to household expectations.

This marks a change in Judah. Clifford states, “After his courageous acknowledgment, he rises to a level of moral behavior from which he will never deviate.”¹⁴ However, based on an email exchange I had with John Willis, the Hebrew term *min* which is used in verse 26 connotes a comparison (see 1 Sam 24.17 for the same construction), not *lo*'. Therefore, Willis maintains that the traditional translation is the correct one. In either case, both translations underscore a significant change in Judah but Clifford's interpretation makes that shift more emphatic.

The account ends (Gen 38.27–30) with the birth of twin boys, Perez and Zerah, to Judah and Tamar, an event that echoes the birth scene of Jacob and Esau (25.21–26). In their birth struggle (which child will be born first) Perez prevails.¹⁵ He is King David's ancestor (Ruth 4.18–22) and he is included in Matthew's messianic genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1.3).

9. Ronald Hendel, “Genesis,” in *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, gen. ed. Harold W. Attridge, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 62.

10. Geoghegan, “Israelite Sheepshearing and David's Rise to Power,” 57.

11. *Ibid.*, 61.

12. Prostitute vocabulary in the story is actually confusing. The common term for “prostitute” (*zonah*) is used in verses 15 and 24. The term translated “temple prostitute” or “holy woman” (*qedeshah*) is used in verses 21–22.

13. Clifford, “Genesis 38,” 530. See Bruce K. Walke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 265–66.

14. Clifford, “Genesis 38,” 531.

15. For the clan status of both Perez and Zerah, see Numbers 26.19–22.

Judah Leads His Brothers In Bringing Benjamin to Egypt (Gen 43.3–10)

In the second trip to Egypt the brothers take Benjamin with them but not without difficulty. Jacob is opposed to letting Benjamin make the journey and first refuses Reuben, the eldest son, who promises, “You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you” (42.37). Then Judah, assuming leadership as spokesperson, addresses Jacob in behalf of his brothers and eloquently with bold and firm resolve persuades the patriarch to let Benjamin go, “Send the boy with me, and let us be on our way, so that we may live and not die—you and we and also our little ones. I myself will be surety for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever” (43.8–9 NRSV). Von Rad, again, summarizes the matter:

Judah’s solemn decision to be surety for the younger brother marks the turning point in the struggle. His offer is nothing less than a secularly formulated curse upon himself in the event that Benjamin did not return. Every reader will consider Judah’s unconditional tie of his life to that of his brother as something magnanimous and uplifting.¹⁶

Judah, Joseph and Benjamin (44.18–34)

Judah’s speech to Joseph on behalf of Benjamin is a rhetorical classic. After addressing Joseph with the greatest respect, Judah reviews in some detail what has transpired and then makes a proposal: Judah, not Benjamin, should bear the punishment of slavery because he can’t return home without Benjamin (vv. 32–34). God knows of the brothers’ guilt (v. 16), a declaration that seems to recall the desertion of Joseph. The emotions and language of his plea powerfully convey how Judah cannot bear the thought of how his father would suffer, were Benjamin to not return. This would destroy the old man (vv. 20, 28). In the end, Judah’s speech moves Joseph to effect reconciliation and unity once more among his brothers. Von Rad states, “After the steward has done his work, only Joseph, in terrifying power, and Judah, in purified devotion which compels him to speak, stand over against each other.”¹⁷

Judah’s Blessing in Jacob’s Prophetic Foresight (49.8–12)

Finally, in Jacob’s prophetic pronouncements, the first three sons (Reuben, Simeon and Levi) are not blessed. Reuben is cursed for having slept with Bilhah (35.22). Simeon and Levi are cursed because in their anger, they killed men and “weapons of violence are their swords” (49.5)—language that probably refers to the story of the butchery of the men of Shechem over their sister, Dinah (34.25–31). Thus, Judah is elevated. He is the first to be blessed, a matter that reflects his rise to prominence in Israel’s history. David is a king from the loins of Judah. Reference to the scepter (49.10) symbolizes royalty (Ps 45.6). Reference to the vine and “the blood of grapes” signifies that Judah’s heritage will be characterized by strength and prosperity.

Conclusion

Judah’s role in the Joseph story is moral in nature. Prior to his statement in Genesis 38.26, “She is righteous, not I,” Jacob’s fourth-born son, as Clifford notes “conspired against his brother, scorned endogamy, neglected a widow, associated with a prostitute, and recklessly condemned a family member.”¹⁸ But after his acknowledgement of the truth concerning Tamar, he is an ethically altered person. The guiding hand of God is seen in all that transpired, notably stated by Joseph at the end of the story: “So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (45.8). Ultimately, God’s purpose is to preserve life. And Judah’s critical change is vital to fulfilling that divine intention. The profound mystery of God’s agency in history and the exercise of human choice can never be taken lightly; both are enigmatically interlocked.

Finally, we must not view Judah’s declaration “She is righteous, not I” simply as his response to the infraction of specific rules such as sexual promiscuity or prostitution. Instead, it is his acknowledgement of

16. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 382.

17. *Ibid.*, 390.

18. Clifford, “Genesis,” 531.

his injustice, his failure to secure the welfare of his family and his father's heritage. Similarly, in light of this profound truth, Tamar's behavior is righteous. She forces Judah to keep covenant—to fulfill the commitments owed to the patriarchs. This historical thread of covenantal communal loyalty leads us to King David and Messiah Jesus. Breaking it is a serious matter for the sake of the community both in ancient Israel and today.

So what about Judah? Through both his tragic and heroic behavior, he teaches us the importance of upright living in an age of secular relativity. Just as God's divine purpose for Judah worked through all the events in his life, bad and good, so God's divine purpose for us is at work, perhaps ever so slowly, but ever so decisively in our lives.

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