The Literary Function of the Judah-Tamar Story (Gen. 38) in the Joseph Story

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I. Introduction

One of the most fierce debates in the study of Genesis is obviously concerning the present position of Gen. 38, the so-called Judah-Tamar incident, in the Joseph story. Most biblical critics have insisted that the story of Judah and Tamar in Gen. 38 is a completely independent unit which has nothing to do with both what precedes and follows it. At best, in their contention, the presence of the material is intended to build a sense of suspense about the fate of Joseph and an indication of the elapse of time. Even G. W. Coats, who contends the unity of the Joseph story in Gen. 37-50, states that “the Judah-Tamar story stands out of the unity in the Joseph story as an independent element with an independent plot.” Contrary to the biblical critics, some literary critics like R. Alter and J. P. Fokkelman have tried to demonstrate the interconnectedness of the Judah-Tamar story and the Joseph story.

The parallels observed by them are related to key-words and phrases

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as well as a common theme. In Gen. 37, after selling Joseph according to the proposition of Judah (Gen. 37.26-27), the brothers take Joseph’s tunic and dip it in the blood of a “goat” (שָׁעָרָה) and send (ביל) it to their father Jacob. They say (אחֵרִים) to Jacob, “Please, recognize (רָאֵיתוֹ) whether it is your son’s tunic or not. And he recognized it and said (יְדֵי אָבִי) (Gen. 37.32-33). This deception echoes in Tamar’s scheme in Gen. 38 exactly in the same order. Here Judah, the leader of the brothers in selling Joseph and probably also in deceiving his father, is the main character with his daughter-in-law Tamar. But in Gen. 38, the tables are turned. Now it is Judah’s turn. Tamar pretends to be a prostitute to entice her father-in-law Judah, and exacts the pledge of his seal, cord, and staff which are to be redeemed by a young “goat” (שֵׁן שְׁרוֹד). After succeeding in enticing Judah, she disappears with Judah’s seal, cord, and staff. A few months later, when Tamar is found pregnant and about to be burned as a punishment, she sends (ביל) a message with the pledge to her father-in-law Judah, saying (אחֵרִים), “Please, recognize (רָאֵיתוֹ), to whom these seal, cord and staff belong” (38.25). And Judah “recognizes and said” (אחֵרִים) (38:26). These two episodes of “Judah versus Tamar” and “Judah/his brothers versus Jacob” are exemplary narrative instances of the “deceiver deceived.”

These parallels duly indicate the close interconnectedness and unity of the passages as they now stand in the Joseph story. This means that Gen. 38 is not heterogeneous material but an integral part of the Joseph story. Therefore, this article focuses on the intended function of the Judah and Tamar story in Gen. 38 and contends that without Gen. 38 the main storyline and theme of the Joseph story would falter. This contention will be further justified when the boundary of the Joseph story is rightly set and the literary structure of the Joseph story within the new boundary is properly reconstructed. To prove this contention, the present form of the text should be cherished. Thus, the canonical and structural approaches

5) Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 10-11. The meaning of the connection between the story of Joseph sold by his brothers and the Judah-Tamar story was noted in the Midrash: “The Holy One Praised be He said to Judah, ‘You deceived your father with a kid. By your life, Tamar will deceive you with a kid’The Holy One Praised be He said to Judah, ‘You said to your father, haker-na. By your life, Tamar will say to you, haker-na’” (Bereshit Rabba 84.11, 12).