


Article

# Dialogue or Narrative? Exploring Tensions between Interpretations of Genesis 38

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**Abstract:** We examine dialectical tensions between “dialogue” and “narrative” as these discourses supplant one another as the fundamental discourse of intelligibility, through juxtaposing two interpretations of Genesis 38 rooted in changing interpretative paradigms. Is dialogue properly understood as a narrative genre, or is narrative the content about which people are in dialogue? Is the divine–human relationship a narrative drama or is it a dialogue between a god and human beings? We work within parameters laid out by the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer (primarily representing dialogue) and Ricoeur (primarily representing narrative). On the one hand, a feminist approach can develop Tamar as a courageous hero in impossible circumstances, strategizing to overturn Judah’s patriarchal naïveté. On the other hand, Judah seems to be able to be read as a tragic hero, seeking to save Tamar. These readings challenge one another, where either Tamar’s or Judah’s autonomy is undermined. By putting these interpretations into dialogue, our aim is to show that neither dialogue nor narrative succeeds the other with finality, and that we can achieve a fragile integration of the two (dialogue and narrative) despite their propensity toward polarization.



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## 1. Fundamental Discourses at a Crossroads

Narrative and dialogue are two modes of discourse that seem to compete to be the fundamental discourse of intelligibility. This competition can be observed in scholarship where a researcher puts two disparate theorists “in dialogue” with one another about a subject matter to develop it more completely, or where a researcher attempts to provide “a compelling narrative account” for a more complete explication of a phenomenon. Ideally, narrative and dialogue would harmonize in an essential unity; however, under conditions of existence, these pressurize and polarize into forces that seek to supplant one another (see [Tillich 1955](#), p. 21). Is dialogue properly understood as a narrative genre, or is narrative the content about which people are in dialogue? Is the divine–human relationship a narrative full of dramatic change, or is it an ever-changing dialogue between a god and human beings? It seems we must place our loyalty with one or the other, where their tension leads to destructive rather than productive changes.

Consider how interfaith dialogue is a crucial strategy promoted to address potential conflicts in religiously diverse societies. There is a fundamental difference between empathy and understanding. We can empathize with others, feeling what they feel, without understanding what they say or what they are experiencing that elicits those feelings. For example, seeing someone yawn might draw out a yawn from us. Alternatively, we can understand what others say, grasping the meaning of their statements and narrations, without empathizing with them ([Dickman 2021](#)). We can use dialogue, however, to solicit narratives from religious others when we have difficulty empathizing with them. In this way, we rotate dialogue and narrative in a dialectic where narratives are created, expanded, and even revised. The challenge is for religious communities to reread their own texts in

new and evolving ways, because how we read affects how we live out our religious convictions in communities where we must live with religious others. We can make dialogue and narrative work together despite their propensity toward polarization.

The status and interpretation of Genesis 38 is especially ripe for illustrating a way to make the distance between narrative and dialogue productive. Just as we often experience narrative and dialogue at a crossroads, the crux of their story involves Tamar, in disguise, meeting Judah at a crossroads. The Judah and Tamar story—packed with drama ensuing from their meeting at a crossroads—has troubled interpreters and scholars from its earliest reception history (Hayes 1995a, 1995b; Wassen 1994). Some of these interpretations exonerate Tamar and present Judah as foolish, if not downright lecherous. Other interpretations downplay Tamar's role and emphasize Judah's worthiness as a patriarch and David's ancestor. The story has also proven to be empowering for women in relatively recent feminist interpretations (Adelman 2012; Claassens 2012; Niditch 1979). Who is the main character: Tamar or Judah? Is Judah morally corrupt toward Tamar, and does she do what she must to survive? Why does Genesis 38 appear to interrupt the narrative arc concerning Joseph's enslavement and liberation in Egypt?

In what follows, we first explain the distance between narrative and dialogue to bring out how they in turn supplant one another. We do this primarily through the framework of philosophical hermeneutics roughly aligned with Ricoeur and Gadamer. Second, we turn to develop two interpretations of Genesis 38 that stand in radical opposition to one another. In one, Tamar is the hero, piercingly strategic in making a crucial contribution to carrying on the Davidic lineage. In the other, Judah is the hero, covertly protecting loved ones from the disapproval and dangers of the explosive crowd. Third, through critique of both interpretations, we seek to open up the possibility of holding both avenues open where both Tamar's and Judah's dignity can be respected. In conclusion, we reiterate ways this project performs a dialectical rotation of narrative and dialogue that can make their propensities toward polarization productive.

## 2. The Propensity of Narrative and Dialogue toward Polarization

Christian theology is just one among many research specializations that turned toward narrative in the last 40 years (Stiver 1996, pp. 134–62). Consider the controversies over the effect of narrative on historians' representations of their findings (see Mink 1970; White 1984). Even the so-called "hard" sciences demonstrate the need to be reflexive about narrative in the development of explanatory models (see Yeo and Gilbert 2014; Norris et al. 2005). Leslie Marmon Silko, of the Laguna Pueblo (Kawaika) people, writes of narratives, "They aren't just entertainments . . . They're all we have, you see. All we have to fight off illness and death. You don't have anything if you don't have the stories . . . They try to destroy the stories, but the stories cannot be confused or forgotten" (Silko 1986, p. 2). Narrative theology, predominantly in postliberal Christian theology, places narrative or story at the basis of systematic religious reflection, challenging earlier theological foundationalism rooted in either rational autonomy or divine revelation (see Navone 1986).

Dialogue also emerged as definitive for theological engagement in the middle of the 20th century under the wide influence of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber (see Tillich 1964; Vogel 1996). Jewish sacred writings—unlike sacred texts or oral narratives in other religious traditions—are for Buber "full of a dialogue between heaven and earth" (Buber 1967, p. 214). As he writes, "The basic teaching that fills the Hebrew Bible is that our life is a dialogue between the above and the below" (Buber 1967, p. 215). Indeed, Jewish commentarial traditions in and beyond the Talmud show ways in which dialogue is intrinsic to the Torah or the god's word as it reveals itself to human beings over time (Kolbrener 2004; Dickman 2022). The primacy of dialogue has ancient roots, such as in Plato's formulation of thinking itself as an inner dialogue one has with oneself (see Plato 1997, §189e). Evangelists for interfaith efforts describe our age as "the Age of Dialogue," compared to previous eras of monologue—whether that of divine authoritarian dictates in

medieval Europe or the principles of autonomous reason in Enlightenment Europe (see [Swidler 1990, 2006](#)). It is interesting to note that, while we promote interfaith dialogue, people do not seem to do the same for interfaith narrativizing.

Peters captures this polarization in two symbols: Jesus disseminating his message to broad audiences through short stories or parables, and Socrates engaging single interlocutors through questions and sustained dialogue ([Peters 1999](#); see also [Levine 2014](#)). For Peters, dialogue requires special initiation and privileged intimacy. Narrative dissemination, however, democratizes understanding and knowledge. Calls for dialogue as “the” answer can be naïve and can undermine the value of other modes of communication. In philosophical hermeneutics, the propensity of narrative and dialogue toward polarization is represented by the contrasting points of focus between Ricoeur and Gadamer (see [Dickman 2014](#)).

### 2.1. Religious Narrative within Philosophical Hermeneutics

Ricoeur’s approach to narrative is nuanced and layered, from the structural analysis of emplotment to the existential transformation of readers in light of the text (see [Ricoeur 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988](#)). For Ricoeur, plot is not a static structure but an integrative process. He uses “emplotment” to name the synthesizing of disparate elements such as discrete events and actions into more than merely a serial succession of sentences ([Ricoeur 1986](#), p. 122). Plots bring parts of a story together into a broader whole, unifying widely divergent elements into stories, from agents and patients of actions to accidental and expected confrontations, from characters in conflict and cooperation to strategies for achieving goals and repercussions from using those strategies. Genres are sedimented inherited models for plots whereby we can distinguish, say, comedies from dramas. Yet this sedimentation cannot be exhaustive. The models generate possibilities for innovation, where they guide further experimentation (see [Ricoeur 1986](#); see also [Alter 1981](#), p. 57). Afrofuturism, for example, brings together elements of science fiction and African diasporic genres.

In addition to plot is the narration or authorial discourse, the story and the storyteller. These two dimensions of story and discourse form a hinge between the internal configuration of a literary work (story) and the external refiguration of a reader’s life where a text “speaks” to them (discourse) (see [Ricoeur 1986](#), p. 127). Ricoeur takes inspiration for this from narrative structuralists such as Barthes, Chatman, and Todorov (see [Todorov 1969](#); [Barthes and Duisit 1975](#); [Chatman 1978](#)). On the one hand, the story configures parts into a whole. On the other hand, the discourse engages a reader’s self-understanding and—if successful—transforms the reader. Interpreting narratives involves readers taking hold of that hinge between a work’s configuration as a story and the potential re-figuration of their life on the level of discourse, where readers’ horizons are broadened through understanding themselves in light of the story. Characters themselves often mediate stories as much as they are parts of stories ([Ricoeur 1985](#), p. 37). A character can provide a point of view within the story through their own direct discourse. Since characters have a point of view, they can be asked for it. Whereas an omniscient narrator sees the entire labyrinth of detail, Alter explains, characters grasp broken threads of the plot as they seek their own way ([Alter 1981](#), p. 197). Through the narrator(s), the story is *a discourse given by a voice to readers to receive it and thereby change their acting* ([Ricoeur 1984](#), p. 53). Both the authorial voice and reader’s presence are detectable in the story. Obvious traces are when a narrator says “I” in self-reference or “you” in a direct address to the reading audience. Anytime a narrator rehearses facts in the story that the narrator already knows, there occurs, writes Barthes, “a sign of the reading act, for there would not be much sense in the narrator’s giving himself information . . . ” ([Barthes and Duisit 1975](#), p. 260).

For Ricoeur, religious narratives contribute to the constitution of the identity of a community in ways nonreligious narratives do not. Communities see in religious literature an all-encompassing metastory, one that is open-ended and ongoing ([Ricoeur 1995](#)). Individuals within such communities are empowered to see their own actions as part of this ongoing story. Religious literature provides communities with an orientation, one

that projects a total world horizon that informs and orients the intentions of community members. Moreover, religious literature is traditional, authoritative, and liturgical (Ricoeur 1995). What makes it traditional is that its content is handed down and told in a certain way, and this grounds its repetition in that way. What makes it authoritative is that the content is characterized as canonical and distinguished from the so-called “heretical”. What makes it liturgical is that religious narrative is recited and performed in devotional contexts. Through these features, religious narrative undermines the distinction between the imaginary and the real world. It gives adherents’ lives ultimate orientation and intelligibility. Adherents understand themselves in light of religious literature, such as the characters developed in religious narratives. What would Tamar do? What would Judah do?

Our efforts to understand religious narratives should precede asking whether it is factually true or false (see Dickman 2022). As Alter puts this, “Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take [a religious narrative] seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy [religious] stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history” (Alter 1981, p. 235). We need to keep in mind, however, that such narratives are always nested in other modes of discourse (see Ricoeur 1995). Genealogies, laws, and poetry accompany Genesis narratives. Ricoeur emphasizes that a range of material is distributed between “the two poles of storytelling and praise” (Ricoeur 1995, p. 245). Nonnarrative discourse accompanying religious narratives prompts communities toward explicit philosophical or theological explication. Nonnarrative discourse inaugurates the process of transferring adherents from recitation of stories to a full grasp of the significance and meaning of the stories. Ricoeur refers to religious narratives as “embryonic theological thinking” (Ricoeur 1995, p. 248). For Ricoeur, religious narratives allow a reader to undergo, as Vanhoozer explains, “a change in consciousness, thanks to a fictive experience of time that reorients human time toward eternity” (Vanhoozer 1990, p. 219).

## 2.2. *The Hermeneutic Priority of Questioning and Dialogue*

Gadamer emphasizes dialogue as the model for the process of interpretation through his isolation of the hermeneutic priority of questioning. As Gadamer writes, “We understand the sense of a text only by acquiring the horizon of the question [of the text]—a horizon that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers” (Gadamer 2013, p. 378). To interpret and understand a text involves asking the questions to which it responds, even if those questions are not written explicitly in the text (see Ricoeur 1988, p. 174). Some questions, as Booth explains, are “insisted upon by a text . . . ” and some questions “the text declares ‘inappropriate’ or ‘improper’” (Booth 1979, p. 238). A tale starting out with “Once upon a time . . . ” prompts a reader to ask, “And then?” The story provides further details in answer to such questions. Readers might instead ask “improper” questions, refusing to play along with the apparent direction of the text. As Booth writes, “To refuse might be the very best thing in the world for us to do; there is no guarantee that a text, taken in terms of its own demands, will be either interesting or harmless” (Booth 1979, p. 239). Texts presuppose questions, and often those questions are explicit in the text itself. Yet there are also questions asked by the texts to readers themselves. That a text is interpreted means, according to Gadamer, “that it puts a question to the interpreter . . . Interpretation always involves a relation to the question that is asked of the interpreter” (Gadamer 2013, p. 378).

Because writing and reading explode the immediacy of face-to-face dialogue, however, readers must make the text speak (Gadamer 2013, p. 382). That is, only through the reader are written marks transformed into complete thoughts that readers can understand, and this happens when readers ask the questions to which sentences of the text answer. Readers have to resuscitate textual agency to bring what a text says to speech. To force another to speak in face-to-face dialogue can be just as dehumanizing as robbing another of their voice. Yet this is required, where reading comes to the aid of a silent book. This voice of the text only emerges in actual readings. Through interpretation in reading, the text becomes

like speech. Of course, a book does not literally speak; it does not utter conventional noises. Instead, the same general features of reading aloud apply to silent reading to oneself (see [Gadamer 1989](#), p. 47). When we read aloud, just as with recitation, we do so for an audience. That is, we read to and for someone else. Thus, we need to bring the resonance of the words and sentences into harmony with the sense of what is said ([Gadamer 1989](#), p. 47). This is just what guardians do when they sound out the voices of characters in children's bedtime stories, such as voices for the wolf and the three little pigs in different registers. When students are called on in class to read a passage of an assigned text, a teacher can tell by their sound and rhythm of reading whether students understand what is said. Sounding out the text, giving it voice, inaugurates the dialogue between the reader and text necessary for interpretation ([Dickman 2014](#)).

In actual readings of a text, the living reader transforms the role of an implied reader ([Ricoeur 1988](#), p. 171). A text, then, is not an abstract structure in itself like a book, where reading is extrinsic to it. Artifacts that can be put on a shelf are mere books, not texts. A text is a semantic field opened by an actual reader's dialogue with it. Without an actual reader, there is no text but merely a book ([Dickman 2014](#)). The reader enters into dialogue with the authorial voice or narrator, as this voice is resuscitated by the reader themselves. Someone—not merely something—asks questions of the reader. This voice, Ricoeur writes, "... is an instance of the text ..." ([Ricoeur 1995](#), p. 191). Texts that continue to speak to further generations of readers—such as religious texts—exceed the imaginative capacities of writers, where their texts spread beyond just their original audience. That is, no writer can anticipate or intend in any controlled way just what their texts might come to mean for people. As Gadamer writes, "If by the meaning of a text we understand the [writer's intention], that is, the 'actual' horizon of understanding of the original Christian writers, then we do the New Testament authors a false honor. Their honor should lie precisely in the fact that they proclaim something that surpasses their own horizon of understanding—even if they are named John or Paul" ([Gadamer 1977](#), p. 210).

Questions, while not operative between writer and reader, are operative in (sometimes silent) reading between the reader (giving voice to the text itself) and the one read to (the reader oneself). If we do not find and ask the questions to which the written work responds, then what is said will be lost on us, such as when we "read" a page in a book but have no idea what is going on. Yet dialogue is not only operative in the interpretive process of reading. As Alter explains, biblical narration always directs reader attention to character dialogue ([Alter 1981](#), p. 82). That is, within biblical narratives, our attention really is drawn to interactions between characters where they ask questions of one another. That is, narrative seems subordinate to dialogue both on the level of interpretation and on the level of story content.

### 3. Genesis 38: A Competition of Interpretations

Given our development of narrative and dialogue in hermeneutics, we can use these tools to navigate conflicting interpretations of Genesis 38, as well as attempt to place these interpretations into dialogue. What questions are asked of readers, and what questions do readers ask of the text? How do disparate elements get integrated by the plot? Some narrative and historical background first will provide common reference points before turning to each interpretation.

The story of Genesis 38 focuses exclusively on Judah, the fourth son of Jacob's first wife Leah, and Judah's eldest son's wife Tamar. Their interaction leads to the birth of Perez (38:29), whose only other role in the Hebrew Bible is within Ruth's genealogy of David (Ruth 4:18). What strikes many readers as unusual about the passage is that it seems to interrupt the narrative flow of Joseph's story, where Joseph is favored by his father (Gen. 30:24), is attacked and sold off by his brothers (37:28), is enslaved in Egypt (39:1), rises to the Pharaoh's court (41:45), and eventually reconciles with and cares for his family (47:11). Yet Genesis 38 does not mention Joseph at all. In overview, the story starts with Judah's separation from his brothers and he starts a family, having three sons. Once his oldest

son Er comes of age, he selects Tamar for his wife, but Er dies. Judah appoints Onan to impregnate Tamar on Er's behalf, but Onan refuses and prevents her getting pregnant by ejaculating outside her—presumably to prevent reducing his share of inheritance from Judah now that Er is out of the picture. Onan also dies. Instead of giving his youngest son Shelah to Tamar, Judah sends Tamar back to her father's home. When later on she hears about Judah's attending a festival after he has mourned the death of his wife, she disguises herself as a prostitute and seduces him. She requires his staff as a promise for payment. Later when he finds out she is pregnant, Judah condemns her, but she brings forward his staff and he confesses that, "She is more in the right than I . . ." (Gen. 38:26). Tamar then gives birth to twins, one of whom is Perez.

There is some scholarly consensus that the Judah and Tamar story belongs to the J source (Goldin 1977, p. 39; Clifford 2004, p. 520). This is primarily due to the use of the god's personal name, YHWH, instead of the generic Elohim. However, as Ho underscores, this is more likely the result of later Deuteronomistic intervention (Ho 1999, pp. 524–25). Identifying the source matters to the degree that it might provide explanation for an apparent interruption in the Joseph story. As Goldin explains, however, interpretation—not explanation—should attempt to understand the meaning of it as the redactor presents it, that they must have been guided by a sound literary principle for its placement (Goldin 1977, p. 29). One crucial factor to note is that the story's timeframe spans roughly 22 years, although Genesis 46:12 states that Judah went to Egypt with his sons Shelah and Perez, as well as Perez's sons, suggesting that it is probably 40 years (see Clifford 2004, pp. 526–27). This means that Judah and Tamar's narrative spans nearly the same length as the Joseph narrative, but receives only this one condensed interjection.

Goldin suggests that one theme is the repeated argument against consecrating the first-born as the obvious inheritor of leadership, just as with Jacob's assumption over Esau (Goldin 1977, pp. 32–37). Moses is the youngest. David is the youngest. Judah is, after all, the youngest son of Jacob and Leah's first set of sons. For both Adelman and Claassens, the story involves a lesson about levirate law. According to levirate law, a suspension of the prohibition about incest, a brother is responsible to a widowed sister-in-law to provide children (especially a son) to maintain them within the communal-family fold (Adelman 2012, p. 92; Claassens 2012, p. 663). Emerton elaborates on ways that the story is an eponymous fiction that illustrates inherited tribal politics and the question of Canaanite inclusion (Emerton 1979). Leuchter discusses textual allusions to both the Jacob and Rebekah story, as well as the David and Bathsheba episode, where the story functions as a criticism of David through the criticism of Judah (Leuchter 2013).

All these approaches illustrate a multitude of avenues for interpreting and examining Genesis 38. In Hayes's comprehensive study of *midrashim* about Genesis 38, he shows that there are two predominant veins of interpretation reflecting the narrative's intrinsic ambiguity—one where Judah's character is exonerated and one where Tamar demonstrates moral superiority to Judah's character (Hayes 1995a, 1995b). We seek to develop these two seemingly contrasting interpretations. On the one hand, a feminist approach can develop Tamar as a courageous hero in impossible circumstances, strategizing to overturn Judah's patriarchal naïveté. On the other hand, Judah seems to be able to be read as a tragic hero, seeking to save Tamar. These readings challenge one another, where either Tamar's or Judah's autonomy is undermined.

### 3.1. A Feminist Informed Reading Centering Tamar

Tamar is vulnerable and is not treated as an equal subject whose needs matter. As Claassens underscores, Tamar is widowed twice over in a society where male providers determine a woman's worth (Claassens 2012, p. 662). While other wives of patriarchs such as Sarah and Rebekah experience barrenness as a result of their bodies, Judah puts Tamar in a situation of enforced barrenness. This could have been the end of her story, but instead Tamar takes control. When she learns Judah will be in Timnah, she devises a plan. Donning

a disguise, she plants herself in a place she is sure to attract her father-in-law's attention as he is en route to Timnah.

Tamar subverts patriarchal norms of her society through, as Adelman describes, an audacious act "of seduction for the sake of continuity" (Adelman 2012, p. 88). Judah takes the bait. The death of Judah's wife gives him, as Ho writes, "an opportunity for sexual laxity—which also becomes an opportunity for Tamar's retaliatory action—'You refuse me the semen of your Shelah, I'll get yours!'" (Ho 1999, p. 528). Convinced she is a local temple prostitute, Judah engages in intercourse with Tamar. It is possible that this is a tremendous risk because, being promised to Shelah, her having intercourse with another person would be equal to adultery. However, she cleverly requests two items as collateral that she knows will make Judah's role in the paternity of her future offspring indisputable. Her possession of Judah's signet and cord insulate her from the consequences of these charges.

While the narrator does not pass explicit judgment on Judah's visiting a prostitute, the judgment seems to be that he acts foolish by giving her his staff, cord, and seal—the symbols of his legal and social standing (see Clifford 2004, p. 526). The staff, cord, and seal serve as collateral in the absence of immediate payment. The narrator seems to judge Judah for leaving these behind. Judah honors the contract he has made because he sends the baby goat, the agreed upon payment. Judah is assisted in his corrupt acts at Tamar's expense by Hirah the Adullamite (see Brown 2017). In many cases of sexual misconduct, both perpetrators and complicit partners promote forgetting. If that fails, as Brown points out, they then attack the credibility of victims (Brown 2017, p. 78). When Judah wants his staff back, he merely sends Hirah, who seems to put his own reputation in question by asking around for a prostitute. Both of them appear shameless, casually going about their affairs.

When word reaches Judah that Tamar is pregnant, he denies Tamar basic human dignity by threatening to execute her (Claassens 2012, p. 664). Tamar has prepared for this. It is at this moment when Tamar reveals her possession of his signet and cord, and the depth of Tamar's planning becomes clear to the reader. Judah recognizes his hypocrisy and guilt, which overwhelms him. As Claassens writes, "Tamar uses cunning, deception, and a change of clothes to gain what is rightfully hers, thereby transforming her situation of death into a situation of life" (Claassens 2012, p. 666). Judah's offensiveness seems clear given the god's apparent approval of Tamar's extreme strategies (see Clifford 2004, p. 526).

By the end, however, Judah responds to Tamar's challenge and is transformed by it (see Adelman 2012, p. 95). She does this without shaming him. Where he once betrayed Joseph and Jacob's trust by selling Joseph into slavery, he later acts as a guarantor for Benjamin (Gen. 43:9; 44:32). Judah is transformed from putting others on the line to putting his own life on the line for the sake of others (see Adelman 2012, p. 94). As Hayes writes, "there is no doubt in the reader's mind who of the pair has indeed acted more righteously, and it is gratifying to read of Judah's eventual recognition of Tamar's righteousness and his own wrongdoing" (Hayes 1995a, p. 65). Only through admitting his own guilt for how he has treated Tamar, only at the end does he, as Leuchter writes, "end his victimization of Tamar" (Leuchter 2013, p. 225).

Yet it is left ambiguous how far Judah goes after this. Does he make any effort at restitution? Does he give Shelah to be her husband (see Claassens 2012, p. 668)? For the majority of the story, Judah is corrupt, as can be seen by his choosing to marry a Canaanite woman, where Abraham's descendants hold a rule against exogamy. The narrator seems to go out of their way to identify the daughter of Shua as a Canaanite. Thus, to many interpreters, the deaths of his sons imply that the god curses Judah's marriage (see Clifford 2004, p. 525). He visits a prostitute. He impulsively orders that his daughter-in-law be burned (Clifford 2004, p. 524). Moreover, as Adelman writes, "he treats his widowed daughter-in-law, Tamar, unconscionably" (Adelman 2012, p. 92). Judah acts impulsively, perhaps from grief, seeking comfort and gratification at the annual sheep-shearing festival—an event notorious in Near East materials as a time of irreverent debauchery (see Adelman 2012, p. 93; Hayes 1995a, p. 69; Leuchter 2013, p. 220).

Chapter 38 seems to only make sense in light of this dramatic irony. Judah must be transformed before he meets Joseph again so that he knows that the god can “transform the brothers and their sin” (Clifford 2004, p. 527). Tamar is the primary agent causing Judah’s change. Without readers recognizing this dramatic reversal of character, the chapter will seem out of place.

### 3.2. A Reading Centering Judah as Worthy in Impossible Circumstances

In early *midrashim* about Genesis 38, Judah is interpreted as blameless from beginning to end, and the chapter’s function is to establish Judah’s anointment as Jacob’s true inheritor despite Judah not being Jacob’s eldest son (see Goldin 1977; Hayes 1995a, 1995b). As Clifford explains, there are many scholars who see Genesis 38 as belonging to a source tradition where none of Judah’s actions are blameworthy; the narrator expresses no embarrassment about Judah joining with a Canaanite or marrying the daughter of one (Clifford 2004, p. 523). This story must have emerged at a time when no one perceived it as scandalous. Later interpreters develop a tradition of translating “Canaanite” as “merchant” to avoid any hint of the patriarch’s possible wrongdoing (see Clifford 2004, p. 525). Moreover, the narrator shows no condemnation of judgment toward Judah for sleeping with a prostitute during the sheep-shearing festival. Springtime festivals were well-known times of “drunkenness and sexual activity, and the release of debts and settling of scores . . . ” (Leuchter 2013, p. 220). This in part explains how Tamar could predict that Judah would engage in sex.

While the presence of Genesis 38 may appear odd on a surface skim, it is necessary, as Goldin explains, for establishing Judah as the fitting heir to Jacob (Goldin 1977). It cannot be Reuben (the oldest) because, in his seeing Jacob show preferential love to Joseph, he takes a premature attitude of “now or never” and sleeps with Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaiden (Gen. 35:22). In this act, Reuben attempts to take charge of the community, like Absalom taking David’s concubines in his attempt to dethrone David (2 Sam 16:21). It cannot fall to Simeon and Levi (the next oldest sons) because of their murderous rampage of revenge on an entire city of men, in an attempt to meet out justice for Shechem’s rape of their sister, Dinah (Gen. 35). And Joseph—as a result of Judah’s intervention to prevent his brothers from murdering Joseph—is out of the picture enslaved in Egypt (Gen. 37: 26). Judah, then, is the next in line—the youngest of Leah’s first set of four sons.

Genesis 38, then, is like a *vitae* promoting Judah to the status of patriarch. It checks off many major motifs associated with the previous three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—with new ironic twists (see Clifford 2004, p. 528). These include the prohibition of exogamy, the barren wife who experiences difficulty in having children, mothers naming the sons, younger sons strategizing or fighting for birthright status, the divine demand for a father to give up or lose his son(s), the meeting of one’s future wife at a spring, and the disguising of the wife as a sister to sleep with a pharaoh or tribal lord. There are also allusions to David, such as David’s encounters with Bathsheba alluding to Judah’s wife Bath Shua and paralleling Judah’s sexual liaison with Tamar (see Ho 1999, p. 515; Clifford 2004, p. 529). Perhaps more significant in this regard is Judah’s friend, Hirah the Adullamite. Adullam, a city in Judea, provided refuge for David when he was under attack (1 Sam. 22:1; 2 Sam. 23:13; Brown 2017, p. 81). These are the sorts of people willing to put their lives on the line for you!

Judah’s separation from his brothers, then, is not a descent into sinfulness, but a turn from the brutal likes of Simeon and Levi to the noble Adullamite. A number of traditions emphasize this, such as *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Wayyeseb* 17, and *Bereshit Rabbati*, *Genesis* 49:9, both of which view as heroic and noble Judah’s effort in Genesis 37:26 to sell Joseph, thus saving him from his murderous brothers (see Hayes 1995b, p. 179). Reuben, the oldest, expressed desperation to save Joseph, in all likelihood to win back the favor of Jacob for his impulsive indiscretion with Bilhah (Goldin 1977, p. 40). Of course Simeon and Levi would ignore Reuben, and perhaps would be fine to kill other brothers along with Joseph. Judah, on the other hand, shrewdly suggests not killing but selling Joseph—perhaps the only way to save Joseph (and other brothers) from certain death. As Goldin puts words in



Judah's mouth, "We are not Cains!" (Goldin 1977, p. 42). These traditions attribute Jacob's speech honoring Judah (Gen. 49:8–12) in part to this act.

If Judah is already honorable and shrewd like Jacob, why does he seem to fall into this situation with Tamar? In this interpretation, it is not as punishment for selling out Joseph. Moreover, as already noted, it is not for marrying a Canaanite or merchant. The question falls on why he resists giving Shelah, his youngest son, to Tamar. There are two crucial factors necessary for explaining this. First, given the levirate code, a man who dies without a son needs a son provided to him by a relative, usually a brother (see Adelman 2012, p. 92). A son, an heir to tend the land on which one is buried, is necessary to rest in peace in Sheol. Hence, Onan not only wrongs Tamar by not preserving her status in the family, Onan also wrongs Er who needs an heir. Note that both Er and Onan are said to die not because Judah is being punished for selling Joseph, but simply that they themselves were displeasing to the god (see Friedman 1990, pp. 29–30). Second, once two sons die after having sex with Tamar, the natural explanation is that she is causing it in some way. This appears to be Judah's assumption, and—in the Talmud—Rava explains that their deaths result from sexual contact with her (Friedman 1990, p. 45). She must have a sexually transmitted infection. If Judah gives Shelah to Tamar, then not only will Shelah also die, but also none of Judah's sons will be able to rest in peace. Moreover, *he* will not be able to rest in peace. This perspective is sometimes attributed to Bath Shua, instead, such as in the Book of Jubilees or in the Testament of Judah (Hayes 1995a, pp. 68–69). In fact, she is construed as too controlling and the one who really puts Judah in this impossible situation.

Given this, what should Judah do in such an impossible situation? Is it really possible that Judah had no idea with whom he had sex or settled the contract? As Kim writes, "It is highly inconceivable to me that Judah did not recognize Tamar, the daughter-in-law he had married to both his dead sons, if not in the disguise, at least when they spoke to make the contract. Judah may have known he had slept with his daughter-in-law and that is why he sent Hirah to find her and did not go himself" (Kim 2012, p. 556). Maybe Judah did not recognize her at first, but surely in discussion of the contract and especially in the act itself Judah would have to be someone extremely clueless to not know who it is. In this case, the issue is not why did Tamar disguise herself from Judah, but why did Judah go along with this ruse? Who is the ruse really for? Bath Shua's family? His brothers full of rage looking to knock him out of leadership? Note that, if he believes she has an STD, he is willing to risk his own life. Note, too, that he does not sleep with her again. As many traditions spin his confession, it is not that he is saying he is more morally wrong than Tamar due to some sexual indiscretion, but merely that he is indeed the father (see Hayes 1995a, p. 72).

Chapter 38 seems to only make sense in light of this promotion of Judah. Judah must be shrewd like Jacob to inherit leadership. Tamar is reduced to a vehicle for Judah carrying on the family line. Without readers recognizing this establishment of noble character, the chapter will seem out of place.

### 3.3. *Toward a Critical Hermeneutic Rereading of Genesis 38*

These two interpretative narrations of Genesis 38 stand in tension with one another. On the one hand, Tamar is the hero and Judah is the "mediocre" idiot who, by the end, seems willing to take responsibility for his misdeeds. On the other hand, Judah is the hero, and Tamar is reduced to a vehicle for carrying on his line. Is there a way to bridge these conflicting interpretations, developing one where neither Tamar nor Judah is dehumanized? Recall, as Claassens explains, "to be human means, first, to resist those forces that seek to violate or obscure one's dignity, and, second, to be able to see or recognize the plight of another" (Claassens 2012, p. 660). How might the Judah and Tamar narrative be reread to preserve both of their dignity? The goal is not merely to "join" the two interpretations together. They cannot be combined. They create an exclusive dichotomy, when focused on the narrative alone. However, we propose turning away from the narrative content alone and toward the reader, away from story to discourse. This story is about the kind of readers we are, readers with identities and biases constituted by intersecting social conditions. As

Smith explains, “all biblical interpretation . . . is political, seeking to expose oppressive ideologies in texts, contexts, and in ancient and contemporary readers and readings. This political agenda includes the debunking of respectability politics, which claims that people of color and poor people will always be treated with dignity, justice, and respect in a racialized, patriarchal, and class-conscious society [only] when they exhibit acceptable behaviors” (Smith 2017, p. 65; emphasis added). How are Tamar and Judah disrupting respectable or appropriate norms? How are these norms established and defined in contemporary society? Respectability politics demand people submit to norms of white patriarchal capitalism. Deviations from these norms will be punished brutally or even eliminated. As Smith writes, “Unacceptable behaviors, according to a politics of respectability, like responding to injustice or resisting and protesting systemic racism, sexism, and violence from authority figures, should result in negative, harmful outcomes, particularly when the actors are persons of color” (Smith 2017, p. 65). Intersecting privileges and marginalizations shape all readers’ identities and views. These shape readers’ orientations for dialogue with the text. This ongoing dialogue must be inclusive of a multiplicity of perspectives, with particular attention paid to the voices of the oppressed.

A helpful way to reframe this narrative to move toward readers is to start with the question: from whom is Tamar really disguising herself, and who is Judah really deceiving? Consider how packed the puns are in the very words of the narrative. As Leuchter writes, “The author of Genesis 38 packs the narrative with metaphorical implications, relying on the devices of double entendre and homonymy with several personal and geographic names in the story” (Leuchter 2013, p. 220). Shelah literally means “hers” (Leuchter 2013, p. 221). Therefore, the traditions emphasizing Bath Shua as preventing Shelah from being married to Tamar are not without textual support. Moreover, Shua connotes promising or pledge (Leuchter 2013, p. 220). What promise or pledge does Judah make to Shua and his community? Tamar’s name connotes the palm tree, known for yielding an abundance of fruit (Leuchter 2013, p. 222). Thus, Tamar is fitting for Judah’s progeny. Chezib, the city where Judah is for the birth of Shelah, connotes “deceit”, “lying”, or even “illusion” (see Elitzur 2004). That is, as with Jacob and Rebekah to Isaac (and Esau), someone is having the wool pulled over their eyes. Perhaps it is the wild brothers Simeon and Levi who, like Esau, cannot be trusted to control their tempers and appetites.

Rather than staying on the level of story content and characters, it is worthwhile to move to the level of discourse, where the narrator is communicating with a reading audience (Barthes and Duisit 1975). Recall the rabbinic imperative: build a fence around the Torah (*Pirke Avot* 1:1). The Torah is an explosive book and, thus, its truths and laws should be protected from casual use and superficial interpretation. Just as Joseph needs protection from his brothers, so does the Torah need protection from some readers—readers who are on the ready as Simeon and Levi to condemn, to vent their frustrations on others, readers who are on the ready to dehumanize biblical characters. Jonah, for example, is made into a cartoon, when the book’s themes of suicide and justice and genocide are among the most challenging and horrifying experiences people face. In the case of many readers, they vent on characters, seduced by the possibility of condemning characters, placating their own egos in the feeling of superiority. These are the types of readers who might say to themselves: “What a fool Judah is! What a slut Tamar is! What an idiot Isaac is! What a liar Jacob is!” Alternatively, these readers might find the actions of the characters disappointing relative to the readers’ standards or expectations of what Patriarchs or Biblical women should do in these circumstances. This implies that a reader is not really engaged with an understanding the text. Recall that the story configures parts into a whole, but the discourse engages a reader’s self-understanding and—if successful—transforms the reader. An engaged reader takes hold of that hinge between the story and the refiguration of their life, where readers’ horizons are transformed.

Is the narrator reliable or deliberately ambiguous to deceive some readers, to build a fence around the truth of the Torah (see Sternberg 1992)? The narrators’ radically abbreviated method requires more of readers than just collecting information. It demands

that readers themselves resist dehumanization and fill in the blanks. For example, rather than seeing Genesis 38 as an interruption of Joseph's story-arc, readers should instead see the fanciful and flashy ("technicolor dream coat") story-arc as a red herring to throw readers off the scent of the main story: Tamar and Judah and their line to David. Moreover, the narrator names the crossroads *Enaim*, a word that connotes an opening of the eyes (Adelman 2012, p. 93; Leuchter 2013, p. 221). Whose eyes need to be opened? The readers'?

One way that readers can respect the dignity of both Tamar and Judah is to see both of them as in on the actions. They are equals, rooting their actions in mutual respect under conditions of persecution not only by Judah's brothers but also some readers. Some people cannot handle the truth. How does Tamar know to be at the exact spot where Judah will pass during the festival—a gathering of hundreds of people? We are not told who tells Tamar that Judah will be there. Perhaps it is Hirah, someone on whom Judah can rely. Perhaps Judah is not so dumb as to not even know with whom he is having sex, let alone not so foolish as to leave his staff with a prostitute. Research has shown that the next in line after Onan dies is not necessarily Shelah. There are some Near Eastern sources suggesting that the father-in-law could perform the role of the levir (see Adelman 2012, p. 92). Yet both Judah and Tamar need to prevent the collective disapproval of both the community of brothers and the community of judgmental readers from pouncing on them. What would you do in such an impossible situation?

In this light, Chapter 38 seems to be a radical statement of irony, exposing readers for the type of person they are. Such explosive irony has repercussions in different directions in the broader narrative. Consider Jacob and Rebekah "fooling" Isaac with wool; perhaps Isaac is in on it, especially since he lives 30 more years after this. Alternatively, consider David and Bathsheba's encounter; perhaps Bathsheba is in on it. How might other passages be reread in such a way to recognize the dignity of characters rather than readers seeking to placate themselves in superiority? In this approach, neither Tamar nor Judah is subordinated to the other. Their story makes different sense.

#### 4. Narrative and Dialogue in Dialectical Succession without Finality

What this exchange of differing interpretations of Genesis 38 reveals about narrative and dialogue is that, as dialogue progresses, so does narrative. On the other hand, as narrative progresses, so does dialogue. An important need people have is to be recognized, to be seen for who we really are. This means being seen by the right people and keeping up appearances ("deceit"?) for other people, readers who are committed to misunderstanding or even condemning you. Can readers imagine what it is like to be in Tamar's place? In Judah's place? As Claassens writes, "The success of an ethically significant response depends on the extent to which the reader is capable of empathizing with the characters in the story. The reader is invited to bring their emotional responses into conversation with their reasoning abilities in reflecting ethically about these stories" (Claassens 2012, p. 673).

Fernandez and Zahavi approach empathy as a kind of affective relationship between two individuals or two subjectivities (Fernandez and Zahavi 2020). It is the experiential source for the "comprehension" of a foreign subject's experience. There is an essential difference, however, between what "I" am aware of in empathy and that which the other subject is experiencing. That is, empathy is not about having the same feeling, but, they write, "about me being acquainted with an experience that is not my own" (Fernandez and Zahavi 2020). The emphasis here is on understanding or comprehending another's experience, not simultaneously undergoing their experience. As Ricoeur writes,

My experience cannot directly become your experience. An event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred as such into another . . . Yet, nevertheless, something passes from me to you . . . This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle: The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. Communication in this way is the overcoming of the radical noncommunicability of the lived experience as lived. (Ricoeur 1976, p. 16)

Empathetic dialogue is distinct from mere empathy as imaginative perspective taking or some projective imposition on others. Such imposition happens when people condescendingly claim, “I know exactly how you feel” or, perhaps even more insidiously, “I already know exactly who you are”.

In an attitude of open attentiveness, people can solicit narratives from others when they have a difficult time having empathy for them. That is, dialogue and narrative can rotate in a dialectical spiral where questions are asked and answered, and where narratives are filled in, expanded, and even revised. Members of religious communities face the challenge to reread their own texts in new and evolving ways. How we read shapes how we live within our religious communities and tell our own stories while simultaneously holding space for dialogue with religious others. In this way, we make dialogue and narrative work together.

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