

# The Story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38

## Its Compositional Structure and Numerical Features

### Genesis 38 in its literary context

Though Genesis 38 is not a piece of embedded poetry, please consult the Introduction to the [Embedded Poetry](#).

At first sight, the story of Judah and Tamar may appear to be an erratic block within the Joseph story, but a closer examination shows that its positioning is most appropriate. If an author wanted to tell this story, or if a redactor wished to incorporate it, there was no better place to do so than within the Joseph story. After all, next to Joseph, Judah is Jacob's most important son, therefore this episode in Judah's history is perfectly in place in the Joseph story, which is really the 'History of Jacob' (Genesis 37-50), in the same way as the story of Jacob and Esau is in fact the 'History of Isaac' (Genesis 25:19-35:29).<sup>1</sup>

The story of Judah and Tamar, no doubt, originally belonged to orally transmitted traditions of the clan of Judah, and was adapted to suit its present context. The present episode in the life of Judah is squarely integrated into the Joseph story by means of certain compositional devices making it absolutely clear that it is part and parcel of the Joseph story:

**First**, in Genesis 37 it is Judah, who advises his brothers not to shed Joseph's blood and *cover up all vestiges*, but to sell him to the Ishmaelites. In Genesis 38 Judah tries to *cover up all vestiges* of his encounter with the 'harlot'.

**Second**, when Reuben does not find Joseph in the pit, the brothers contrive the *garment* trick to *disguise* the 'body' of Joseph in order to *cheat* Jacob (37:31-34). In Genesis 38 Judah himself falls victim to a *garment* trick, when Tamar *disguises* herself in order to *cheat* him. Note also the *garment* trick performed by Rebecca in order to *cheat* Isaac in Gen. 27:15!

**Third**, the young *goat* Judah promises to give to the 'harlot' for her services is anything but fortuitous, because it has a predecessor in Rebecca's *goat*.

**Fourth**, the key-word '*recognize/identify/acknowledge*' occurs in both stories: in 37:32 the brothers ask Jacob whether he *recognizes* Joseph's robe, and in 37:33 Jacob does *recognize* it, while in 38:26 Judah *recognizes* and *acknowledges* his belongings.

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<sup>1</sup> As I have demonstrated in my book *Numerical Secrets of the Bible* (2000), pp. 64-67, the *toledoth*-formulae ('This is the history of...') in Genesis have been used as a compositional device to give structure, not only to the genealogies, but also to the book as a whole, in the pattern  $7 + 4 = 11$ :

1.	This is the history of Heaven and Earth	Gen. 2:4
2.	This is the history of Adam	Gen. 5:1
3.	This is the history of Noah	Gen. 6:9
4.	This is the history of Noah's sons	Gen. 10:1
5.	This is the history of Shem	Gen. 11:10
6.	This is the history of Terah ( <b>Abraham!</b> )	Gen. 11:27
7.	This is the history of Ishmael	Gen. 25:12
8.	This is the history of Isaac ( <b>Jacob and Esau!</b> )	Gen. 25:19
9.	This is the history of Esau	Gen. 36:1
10.	This is the history of Esau, father of Edom	Gen. 36:9
11.	This is the history of Jacob ( <b>Joseph and Judah!</b> )	Gen. 37:2.

**Fifth**, the story of Judah's marriage to a Canaanite woman, the 'Daughter of Shua' (Bathshua), in which he is seduced by his daughter-in-law Tamar, whom he thought to be a harlot, preludes the episode in the story of Joseph, in which Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him (Genesis 39). Moreover, both brothers married non-Israelite women, and both clans partly survived in Canaan by incorporating into themselves various Canaanite elements. And so did David, who incorporated, e.g., the Jebusites. More importantly, Judah's Canaanite wife, as well as his Canaanite (?) daughter-in-law Tamar, were part of David's pedigree, just as Ruth, the Moabitess, at a later stage. The story of Judah and Tamar ultimately deals with the pedigree of David, for Tamar's son, Perez, is a direct ancestor of David.

Compare the pedigree of David from Tamar onwards in Ruth 4:12-22 (*eleven* verses), which is like the genealogies and *toledoth* in Genesis in the pattern  $7 + 4 = 11$ . This also holds true for David's pedigree along the ancestry of Judah in Matthew 1:3-6!<sup>2</sup>

**Sixth**, in Genesis 38 Tamar is presented as a woman of noble conduct, being conscientiously faithful and dedicated to her deceased husband and resolved to give him offspring. By contrast, Potiphar's wife is depicted in Genesis 39 as the unfaithful woman ready to commit adultery. Compare the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite.

In this respect, it is important to assert that, within the cultural context of the time, and especially in regards the brother-in-law custom, Tamar's ingenious snaring of Judah, in order to force him to perform the required brother-in-law duty, is a perfectly lawful and noble deed.

**Seventh**, the purpose of the story is obviously to contrast Judah's conduct in his encounter with Tamar to that of Joseph in his encounter with Potiphar's wife. Joseph does not sin against God (39:9), for God is with him (39:2, 21, 23), but Judah - whose conduct is described in utterly secular terms - does sin against God, on no less than five counts:

- 1) By refusing to let his son Shelah perform the duty of a brother-in-law to Tamar.
- 2) By sending away the innocent Tamar to live as a widow in her father's house, falsely suggesting that the youngster Shelah will later on perform his duty (38:11).
- 3) By his indecent escapade with Tamar, whom he thought to be a harlot (15-19).
- 4) By covering up his vestiges with the help of his friend Hirah (38:23).
- 5) By condemning the innocent Tamar to be burned.

The only positive deed Judah pulls off in the whole story is that he admits that, in contrast to him, Tamar is in her right (38:26). In fact, she is the only one that acts righteously throughout the story. And it is only thanks to her righteousness – that he performs the brother-in-law duty. This results in a happy ending: the birth of Er-and-Tamar's offspring, Perez and Zerah. The remarkable birth of these twins parallels the miraculous birth of the offspring of Isaac and Rebecca: the *twins* Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:21-23).

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<sup>2</sup> **Pedigree from Tamar – David (Ruth 4:12-22):**      **Pedigree from Judah – David (Matthew 1:3-6)**

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. Tamar</b></li> <li>2. Perez</li> <li>3. Hezron</li> <li>4. Ram</li> <li>5. Amminadab</li> <li>6. Nahshon</li> <li>7. Salmon</li> <li><b>8. Boaz</b></li> <li><b>9. Obed</b></li> <li><b>10. Jesse</b></li> <li><b>11. David</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Judah</b></li> <li>Perez and Zerah by <b>Tamar</b></li> <li>Hezron</li> <li>Ram</li> <li>Amminadab</li> <li>Nahshon</li> <li>Salmon</li> <li><b>Boaz</b></li> <li><b>Obed by Ruth</b></li> <li><b>Jesse</b></li> <li><b>David.</b></li> </ol>
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## The Compositional Structure of Genesis 38

The logotechnical analysis revealed that the text of Genesis 38 has been composed in a beautiful symmetric menorah pattern, which is reinforced by the use of the divine name numbers and their multiples. Tamar's conception constitutes the meaningful centre:

<b>vs. 1-5</b>	<b>The birth of Judah's sons</b>	<b>51 (3 x 17) words</b>
vs. 6-11	Tamar remains childless	79 (52a + 27b)
vs. 12-14	Tamar gets ready to play her role as harlot	<b>51 (3 x 17) words</b>
<b>vs. 15-19</b>	<b>Tamar conceives by Judah</b>	<b>68 (4 x 17) words</b>
vs. 20-23	Tamar 'the harlot' cannot be found	<b>58 (23 + 32) words</b>
vs. 24-26	Tamar is with child	54 (17 + 37) words
<b>vs. 27-30</b>	<b>The birth of Tamar's sons</b>	44 (34 + 10) words.

The divine name numbers symbolically signify Yahweh's presence, through his name, in the entire drama. The **58** words used in vs. 20-23 may have been deliberately chosen to express his presence in still another way, through his glory, for **58** is the double *kabod* number: the alphabetic value of *kbwd* is  $11 + 2 + 6 + 4 = 23$  and its decimal value is  $20 + 2 + 6 + 4 = 32$ . For particulars, consult the [General Introduction](#).

### Additional Numerical Features of Genesis 38

In addition to the above mentioned instances of the divine name numbers, more of them have been woven into the text to make it a showpiece of numerical composition:

vs. 1-11	<b>130 (5 x 26) words</b> altogether: the story up to Tamar's dismissal
vs. 18-19	<b>26 words</b> , with <b>17</b> before <i>atnach</i> : Tamar and Judah agree to have sex
vs. 24	<b>17 words</b> in total: Tamar's pregnancy announced to Judah
vs. 27-29	<b>34 (2 x 17) words</b> in total: the birth of Perez
vs. 20-30	<b>156 (6 x 26) words</b> in total: the part played by Tamar in the story.

The name Judah occurs **15x** in the story, and Tamar **5x**. Other members of the family are mentioned **14x** (Judah's wife Bathshua 2x, Er 3x, Onan 3x, Shelah 4x, Perez 1x, Zerah 1x), giving altogether exactly **34 (2 x 17)** occurrences.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>: I found many examples of divine name numbers determining the occurrences of an important name or names in a given text. E.g., in the framework to the book of Job, the name Job occurs **26** times; so does the name YHWH. In the book of Psalms, the name Jacob occurs **34 (2 x 17)** times. To mention only a few instances from Genesis:

**26** women are mentioned by name in Genesis.

**26** generations from Adam–Moses (Gen. 5:1-32 and 11:10-27): up to Abram (**20**), followed by Isaac–Moses (**6**).

**26** sons of Sem (Gen. 10:21-29): **13** sons from Elam – Joktan, and **13** from Almodad – Jobab.

The readers can check my tally for themselves, which I found corroborated by Oskar Goldberg, *Die fünf Bücher Mosis ein Zahlengebäude*, Berlin, 1908, p. 5-7, and Hans Hutmacher, *Symbolik der biblischen Zahlen und Zeiten*, Ferdinand Schöningh: Paderborn – München – Wien – Zürich, 1993, pp. 31-32. Both authors devote much of their time and energy to gematric computations, which, in my opinion, lead away from the biblical text into the misty field of speculative (kabbalistic) calculations. In fact, I do not consider such computations a concern for biblical scholars.

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