Location, Location, Location

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Described as “a sustained and artistically crafted statement of literary finesse,” the Joseph cycle begins in Genesis 37. This “artful composition” that is also classified as a novella, portrays Joseph as the dreamer of dreams who is the delight of his father Jacob. Joseph’s dreams and the obvious favoritism of his father create tension among his brothers to the point where they conspire to kill him. The angry mob of siblings is kept from fratricide by the intervention of two of the brothers. 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, haker nā? 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 and Joseph 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.

The interruption of one story by another, abrupt endings without explanations, and disregard for narrative continuity are the unfortunate characteristics of biblical narrative. The text in its final form is a composite. It originally existed in oral form and was edited over time. The inclination of contemporary readers is to sift through the
various strands in an attempt to separate them out. It is our hope that in isolating the individual voices of the narrative we can find respite from the cacophony of voices that contribute to the text. This is why commentaries of the book of Genesis refer to the 38th chapter as an interpolation. It comes in the midst of what would otherwise be a unified 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.iii

This narrative is a completely individual unit. It has no connection with the drama of Joseph.iv

This peculiar chapter stands alone, without connection to its context. It is isolated in every way and is most enigmatic.v

Genesis 38 is treated as an interpolation because it interrupts the “continuous” narrative of the Joseph story. The Joseph cycle is closer to our modern definition of narrative than anything else in Genesis. For this reason, we approach the narrative with the expectation that the story of Rachel and Jacob’s son will come to us in an ordered and linear form. To us the narrative should start at the beginning and end at the end.

The expectations 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 of the 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.

Literary readings offer an alternative by demonstrating ways in which chapter 38 is related to the surrounding narrative. Chapter 38 is related by theme and motif to the
text in which it is embedded and cannot be set aside if we are to have a fuller understanding of the Joseph story.\textsuperscript{vi}

The dialogic approach goes further in asserting that Genesis 38 is not simply related to the surrounding narrative, but that meaning results from the dialogue between chapter 38 and chapters 37, 39-50. This approach would contend among other things that a discussion of Genesis 38 is impossible without a discussion about the relationship, i.e., dialogue between this chapter and the surrounding narrative. Moreover, the dialogic approach would argue that the meaning of the surrounding material would be impaired 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. Finally, dialogic criticism includes the concept of chronotope, or “time-space,” that offers insights into how meaning is built into the temporal structure of the narrative.

For the purposes of this study, I want to focus first on the dialogue within the chapter itself. What are the disruptive and unifying forces at work in the narrative that are conveyed through the language of dialogue? What meaning can be found in the “ordinariness”\textsuperscript{vii} of the exchange between Tamar and Judah? How will the meanings derived from this chapter influence our understanding of the surrounding narrative? Second, I will examine the significance of the timeline of the story. In the absence of a coherent timeline, how does the passage of time function to produce meaning in a narrative? How does Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope inform our understanding of a story that appears to be temporally disrupted? My approach is based upon the following definitions of dialogic truth and chronotope.
Dialogic truth stands in contrast to monologic truth, which favors unity, coherence, and systems. Monologic truth is an individual truth. Dialogic truth demands more than one perspective. Monologic truth is true regardless of who says it. Dialogic truth results from the interaction of individual truths.

In different ways, historical criticism and many literary approaches all begin with “an unchallenged assumption of a monologic sense of truth.” In contrast to this definition of truth, dialogic truth “requires a plurality of consciousness…[which] in principle cannot be fitted within the bounds of a single consciousness.” It has an “embodied, almost personal quality” to it that is in contrast to the abstract notion of monologic truth. Moreover, there is no drift towards the systematic in dialogic truth. Event rather the system is what gives dialogic truth its unity. It is a dynamic unity. Dialogic truth is always open. Bakhtin’s term for this has been translated as “unfinalizability.”

A Bakhtinian approach is concerned with what resists both synthesis and disentanglement, that is, the quarrel itself. Or put another way, dialogism foregrounds the empty space that makes possible the dialogue, the unresolved and irresolvable questions about the nature of human being.

The term chronotope literally means “time-space.” The concept of chronotope is borrowed from relativity theory. For our purposes, chronotope in a narrative is the “moment” that exists among all the moments in a narrative. It is the organizing center 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.

Every genre and every culture has a different understanding of space and time. With each genre of literature there is a field or chronotope that sets the parameters of events and
possible actions. This is why we come to expect certain elements in an adventure and other elements in history. In biblical narrative, which is heterogeneous, we should not be surprised by the possibility of more than one chronotope at work in any given story. Moreover, the unique chronotopes of the cultures that gave rise to biblical narrative may very likely defy our sense of chronology.

If the fundamental events of biblical narrative are structured around chronotope, then identifying these “moments” is a means by which the reader discovers the issues that are of concern in the narrative. The failure to properly identify and understand various biblical chronotopes may be the underlying reason that some methods of biblical interpretation have met with frustration.

These definitions of dialogic truth and chronotope have tremendous implications for Genesis 38. In my examination of this passage I will begin by focusing on the dialogue within the chapter itself. Who speaks and to whom? How is meaning created by the dialogue within the chapter? I will also examine the dialogue that is created between Genesis 38 and the larger Joseph narrative into which it is inserted. Then I will explore the extent to which the narrative is temporally structured and how an understanding of chronotope assists our navigation of this passage.
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, wayēhi baʿēt hahī’ “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 “had relations with” 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, ʿāmar, 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.” What was done in secret was not hidden from God’s eyes. Onan’s action was displeasing in the eyes of YHWH and he too was killed. In verse 11 Judah speaks, ʿāmar, 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. We have no idea how long Tamar was married to Er before God killed him or how long Onan pretended to serve as levir before God took his life. The first 11 verses of the text seem to be rushing towards some unknown destination when, in verse 12, we encounter these words, wayyirbu hayyāmim “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 begins and completes 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” nāgad, 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, bēpetah ēnayim, 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, rāʿah, she saw “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, wattēkas bassāʿip, herself with a veil to cover herself, wattīṭʿallāp. 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, favor, 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 favor, 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 offense 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 zōnāh, a prostitute. Upon seeing her 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, šā’îp, comes in the story of Isaac and Rebekah. Rebekah dons a šā’îp 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, yāda‘ that she was his “daughter-in-law.” Here the term for daughter-in-law, kallāh, also
means bride. Tamar is a daughter-in-law about to become a bride, and although Judah
does not yāda‘, recognize 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, to the 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, ’āmar, 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, wayyābō‘ ᵁ’ēlēhā wattahar lō, 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, wayyābō‘ ᵁ’ēlēhā wattahar lō, 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 qēdēšāh. This term is in contrast to, zōnāh, 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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, nāgad, 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, nākar, 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 recognizes that Tamar is “more in the right than I.” 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 symbolizes 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….” This 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 fulfillment 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 who makes himself first, “what a breach –pērēṣ– 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 now to real time and 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 fulfillment 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 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:

- 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.
- Words in both narratives function like the garments. They too have the power to conceal/deceive and reveal.
- The heroine/hero in the two narratives is the individual who is able to perceive, nākar, rather than simply see, rā’āh.
- The ones who perceive, Tamar and Joseph, are the outcasts or the other in their respective contexts. They are also the ones who take the necessary steps to preserve the line. They function as the links between the promise of God and the fulfillment of God’s promise.
- Through dialogue and chronotope, the location of Genesis 38 moves from interruption to interpretative lens for the whole story.

This story within a story functions less as a detour and more like a map. The Tamar/Judah story alerts the reader to the fact that those things that appear to stand between the promises of God and the fulfillment of those promises are illusions, and that the one who can “recognize” or “perceive” will be able to find God’s hand working out God’s plan in the most curious of ways.

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5 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 307.
"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."


Bakhtin’s prosaics celebrates and focuses on the “ordinariness” of everyday speech, and in a broader sense, ordinary events as the foundation of history. This underlying philosophical understanding of the role of the quotidian in history is at least in part indebted to Tolstoy, who develops the notion that the major decisions in one’s life are made in the “everyday moments we rarely if ever notice.”


Newsom, “Bakhtin,” 293.


Newsom, “Bakhtin,” 293.

*ibid. p.104.*