My Brother’s Keeper:
Judah, Tamar, and the Lineage of Israel

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Scholars of the Bible have long labored to make sense of the location of the account of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, near the beginning of the broader “Joseph story” in which it is embedded. Many conventional biblical critics have confidently asserted that there is no connection whatsoever between the story of Judah and Tamar and the surrounding material, and that the narrative function of the episode’s placement is merely to heighten the suspense surrounding Joseph’s fate after being sold into slavery.¹ But such scholars, as I hope to demonstrate in my discussion, miss the intricate nexus of language, motif, and theme that weaves the Judah and Tamar story into the wider chronicle of Jacob’s family. A close, literary reading reveals that Genesis 38 cannot be understood outside its context within that larger story and in fact plays a decisive role in its ultimate outcome. Indeed, Judah’s transformative encounter with Tamar is the principal turning point in the story of Israel’s children.

Only by appreciating the relationship between the stories of Judah and Joseph, furthermore, can we in turn ascertain the full purpose of the account of the sons of Jacob within the overall framework of the Torah, and indeed the broad sweep of the entire Bible, for the last quarter of the book of Genesis is as much about Judah as it is about Joseph, the two brothers’ narrative strands entwining to form a single coherent whole. Genesis 37-50 is ultimately the story of the

¹ Gerhard von Rad, for example, self-assuredly declares that “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. This compact narrative requires for its interpretation none of the other Patriarchal narratives.” Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 351-352. E. A. Speiser proclaims, in slightly less complacent terms, that “the narrative is a completely independent unit. It has no connection with the drama of Joseph, which it interrupts at the conclusion of Act I.” E. A. Speiser, Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes, vol. 1 of The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 299.
forefathers of Israel’s two most politically powerful tribes, Judah and Ephraim (Joseph’s son standing in for himself, as the grandfather’s blessing reveals and as the course of the biblical narrative will confirm). Each undergoes severe testing, each emerges deeply transformed, and each in the end is revealed to be the worthy progenitor of a ruling house of Israel. My purpose in this essay is to illustrate how the dramatic evolution of Judah’s character—brought about by his encounter in Genesis 38 with the formidable and courageous Tamar—ultimately befits the royal destiny of his tribe.

Let us first of all look closely at the intimate linguistic and thematic connections between Genesis 38 and the surrounding material. To begin with, the opening verses of chapters 38 and 39 both feature the Hebrew root י-ר-ד, a verb root that, depending on the construction, can mean “to go down,” “to bring down,” or “to be brought down.” In 38:1, Judah “went down [וירד] from his brothers”; in 39:1, Joseph “was brought down [הורד] to Egypt.” These parallel verses are the first time we see, respectively, Judah and Joseph separated from their father’s family. It should not surprise us that, to become a leader of his people, Joseph, like his ancestors Abraham, Rebecca, and Jacob, must first leave the house of his father and be tested. But as 38:1 teaches us, the same is true for Judah.

Thus, in juxtaposing 38:1 and 39:1, we learn early on in the “Joseph story” that Joseph is not its only leading character; Judah, too, is to be a central figure in the unfolding drama.

The clearest and most important connection between the episode of Judah and Tamar and the broader narrative in which it is embedded, however, consists in the omnipresence of the verb root נ-כ-ר, which has to do with recognition, and its thematic implications. In 38:25, upon being taken out for execution, Tamar sends Judah the articles of identification he had with her in exchange for sex, along with a message imploring him to “recognize, please”—הכר-נא—to whom they belong. Indeed Judah “recognized” (ויכר) the items as his own. The reader’s mind should immediately flash back one chapter to 37:32, when the brothers bring Joseph’s torn and bloodied coat to Jacob and ask him to “recognize, please”—הכר-נא—to whom it belongs; Jacob “recognized it” (וייכרה). As Richard Clifford points out, 37:32 and 38:25 represent the only instances of the phrase הכר-נא in the entire Bible. The thematic implication is unmistakable: Judah is being repaid in kind for having deceived his father regarding the identity of a person or identifying object—just as Jacob was repaid in kind for

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deceiving his father back in chapter 27 (in 27:23, Isaac failed to “recognize him”—
—because the skins Jacob was wearing made his hands hairy like Esau’s). To make this
linguistic-thematic interconnection even more ironclad, all three cases of deception involve
an article of clothing and a goat from the flock.5

Joseph, for his part, will keep his brothers in the dark about his identity when they first
encounter the Egyptian viceroy in chapter 42. In verse 7 we are told that Joseph “recognized
them”—יִכְרָם—and in the following verse the narrator again informs us that he “recognized”—
יזר—his brothers. Joseph, though, “played the stranger” (יִתְנָכֵר) to them, and so they “did
not recognize him” (לֹא תִכְרָם). 6 And if the reiteration of Joseph’s recognition of his brothers in
verses 7 and 8 of chapter 42 signifies the interweaving of two documents, as source-critical
biblical scholarship has traditionally attested, the choice to stress this recognition twice only
underscores the insistence with which the final redactor wished to emphasize the interrelated
themes of identity, recognition, and deception that pervade the Joseph story and the wider
narrative of Jacob and his family as a whole—of which the episode of Judah and Tamar is
clearly an integral component.

II

Having shown that Genesis 38, far from being an unconnected interruption, is in fact
thoroughly integrated within the framework of the overall narrative, we now turn to the
impact of the chapter’s events on Judah, and in turn Judah’s decisive role in the outcome of
the broader Joseph story. Our first step is to examine Judah’s characterization prior to his
pivotal moment of “recognition” in 38:26. As we learn from 37:26-27, Judah played a leading
part in the brothers’ betrayal of Joseph and deception of Jacob. When we encounter him on
his own in chapter 38, he has hardly improved. Clifford incisively documents the
thoughtlessness, unresponsiveness, and reckless disregard for others Judah displays even in
the sparse, synoptic narrative of verses 1-11:

The breathless pace and absence of dialogue in the verses are narratively significant.
Judah is a one-man show, making all the decisions and showing little regard for others or
for family customs. Even the divine slaying of his children does not slow him down. The
rapid pace and terse tone of the narrative suggest Judah’s brusque and imperious style.7

5 The kid Judah pledges to Tamar in 38:17 is not in itself an instrument of deception, but it is an important
narrative symbol nonetheless.
6 As Robert Alter notes, the brothers’ ignorance of Joseph’s identity “is an ironic complement to their earlier
163.
7 Clifford, “Genesis 38,” p. 523.
In comparison to Jacob’s perhaps overwrought histrionics following the apparent death of his favored son, Judah’s almost total non-reaction to the deaths of two of his sons in rapid succession calls his emotional compass into serious question. Similarly, Judah’s rather boorish, unseemly solicitation of Tamar in which he foolishly pledges the symbols of his social status to an apparent whore (so reminiscent of Esau’s coarse, impulsive demand to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew in exchange for his birthright) causes the reader to doubt his judgment.

Judah might be oblivious, but unlike Esau, a clumsy yet mostly benign figure, he is far from harmless. Concerning his selfishness, Alter notes ironically that Judah’s “sexual appetite will not tolerate postponement though he has been content to let Tamar languish as a childless widow indefinitely.” The most damning indictment of Judah’s character, however, is furnished by the breathtaking recklessness and ruthlessness with which he condemns his own daughter-in-law to death by fire in 38:24 upon learning of her pregnancy, without the slightest contemplation or demand for evidence: “Take her out to be burned!” As Alter points out, “the naked unreflective brutality of Judah’s response to the seemingly incriminating news is even stronger in the original, where the synthetic character of biblical Hebrew reduces his deadly instructions to two words”—ותשרף הוציאוה.

Tamar, however, has planned for this moment all along. Had we read the story carefully to this point, we might have perceived that she is destined for greater things than the immolation to which her father-in-law sentences her. The swift and decisive series of actions she launches into upon realizing that Judah does not plan to give his third son, Shelah, to her as a husband calls to mind Rebecca at the well. Indeed, the etymology of the place-name where Judah and Tamar’s sexual encounter takes place, עיניך פתח, likely carries a meaning akin to “Twin Wells”—a clear if perhaps wry allusion to the biblical type-scene of finding a wife at a well or spring. In fact, the allusion serves to tell the reader that Tamar, no less than Rebecca or Rachel, is to be a mother of the nation, and an ancestress of the royal line at that. The parallels between the figures of Tamar and Ruth as female forebears of the House of David are indeed striking, and we shall return below to the question of the significance of Genesis 38, and the figure of Judah more broadly, as a prefiguration of the ascendency of the tribe of Judah later in the Bible.

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10 Burning, incidentally, was the most severe form of capital punishment; the punishment prescribed for Tamar’s purported crime was stoning.
So, just as she is being brought out to be burned in 38:25, and not a moment sooner, Tamar springs her trap: “Recognize, please, whose are this seal, and these cords, and this staff?” We can only imagine the stupefied horror, not to mention the profound shame, with which Judah identifies his own effects and realizes not only that he himself is the father of Tamar’s unborn children (as we are about to find out, Tamar is pregnant with twin boys), or that his withholding Shelah had driven her to such extreme measures, but also that he had without a moment’s thought ordered his own daughter-in-law to be unjustly executed. Anthony Lambe contends that Tamar’s precise verbal formulation in that moment even causes Judah to “recognize” the suffering he had caused his father in asking him to “recognize” Joseph’s mangled coat.14 This series of revelations, one more appalling than the last, hits Judah like a ton of bricks. “He had seen his sons die,” Tikva Frymer-Kensky poignantly observes, “and had not recognized God’s justice; he had seen Tamar and had not perceived her right to have a life; he had seen the veiled Tamar and had not known her. But now he recognizes the staff and seal, and understands all that he had failed to see before.”15 Given his previous history, and most notably his penchant for deception, we might expect Judah to deny Tamar’s implied accusation and to cover up his shame even by seeing through her execution. But now Judah nobly faces up to his past wrongdoing and takes responsibility for his actions: “She is more righteous than I, insofar as I did not give her to Shelah, my son” (38:26). Tamar has shaken Judah from the moral and emotional stupor in which he has gone through life till now.

Judah’s moment of recognition is the turning point of his life and by extension, as we are about to see, the hinge on which the entire narrative of Jacob’s sons pivots. The next time we see Judah, in chapter 43, he who once sold Rachel’s older son into slavery now takes upon himself the responsibility both for the safety of her younger son, Benjamin, and for the survival of Jacob’s whole family in the midst of famine:

"And Judah said to Israel his father, “Send the youth with me, and let us rise and go, that we may live and not die, neither we, nor you, nor our little ones. I will pledge myself for him—from my hand you may request him: If I do not bring him to you and present him before you, I will be guilty to you forever.”"

14 Anthony J. Lambe, “Judah’s Development: The Pattern of Departure-Transition-Return,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 83 (1999): pp. 59-60. Lambe suggests that, through the interconnections of parallel language, “the allusion to the recognition scene in ch. 37… has the effect of signaling to the reader that Judah’s ‘realization’ also entails a flickering memory of his prior deception of his father and injustice to Joseph.”

Jacob, who had stubbornly refused Reuben’s initial plea to allow the brothers to take Benjamin with them on their second journey to Egypt per Joseph’s demand, now capitulates in the face of Judah’s forceful assurance.

Judah’s finest hour, though, is still to come. When Joseph implements the final test he has contrived for his brothers by planting his prized silver goblet in Benjamin’s sack and thence condemning him to slavery, Judah steps forward to plead with Joseph to take him as a slave in Benjamin’s stead. Judah’s impassioned appeal in Genesis 44:18-34 is too long to quote at length here. I would like merely to point out that Judah’s urgent entreaty to Joseph is indeed “a point-for-point undoing, morally and psychologically, of the brothers’ earlier violation of fraternal and filial bonds,” as Alter eloquently comments:

Twenty-two years earlier, Judah engineered the selling of Joseph into slavery; now he is prepared to offer himself as a slave so that the other son of Rachel can be set free. Twenty-two years earlier, he stood with his brothers and silently watched when the bloodied tunic they had brought to Jacob sent their father into a fit of anguish; now he is willing to do anything in order not to have to see his father suffer that way again.16

Moreover, Alter notes, Judah “can even bring himself to quote sympathetically (verse 27) Jacob’s typically extravagant statement that his wife bore him two sons—as though Leah were not also his wife and the other ten were not also his sons.”17

Let us pause to take stock of the deep moral and narrative significance of Judah’s appeal to Joseph. Parental (and spousal) favoritism and the sibling jealousy that it breeds constitute the prime source of family strife—and arguably conflict in general—throughout the book of Genesis, stretching all the way back to Cain and Abel. They are a common thread running through the stories of every generation of Abraham’s descendents: Isaac and Yishmael, Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, and their children—the children of Israel. Until the moment Judah steps forward to plead with Joseph on behalf of Benjamin, this twin scourge that has plagued the family of the Israelites—and indeed humanity—from their very first generation has yet to be faced and overcome. Cain’s pregnant question—Am I my brother’s keeper?—still hangs in the air, unanswered, a pall stretching over the whole narrative arc of Genesis. It is Judah, in Genesis 44:18-34, who, in taking unconditional responsibility for his brother, finally and emphatically answers Cain’s question, who names his family’s heartbreaking legacy of favoritism and jealousy, and who makes peace with that legacy, with his father, and with his

16 Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, pp. 174-175.
own past. It is Judah who, in so doing, finally brings healing and peace to the family of Israel—indeed, to the lineage of Abraham.

But the question still remains to be answered: Who or what heals Judah? In keeping with the Bible’s studied reticence in portraying character and motive, the narrative does not explicitly tell us why Judah, whose toxic jealousy toward his brother and bitterness toward his father once impelled him to betray Joseph and to deceive Jacob, in this moment accepts his father for who he is, loving him despite the egregious favoritism toward his sons by his preferred wife that he still exhibits more than twenty years after it had been the cause of such disaster for his family. Does Judah’s own experience of grief over the loss of two sons animate the remarkable compassion he suddenly displays toward his deeply flawed father? Perhaps, but the only thing we know for sure is that Judah has been a changed man since his encounter with Tamar. Following his moment of literal and existential “recognition” and honorable acknowledgment of his unrighteousness in 38:26, Judah becomes the upstanding spokesman for the brothers, rising to a level of courageous and conscientious action from which he will never backslide. It is worth here quoting Clifford’s analysis at length:

Gone forever is the Judah who conspired against his brother, scorned endogamy, neglected a widow, associated with a prostitute, and recklessly condemned a family member… He becomes the unselfish and loving family speaker in the great oration in 44:18-34. The man who coldly used the bloody tunic to trick Jacob into thinking that Joseph was dead now says, “How could I go back to my father if the boy were not with me? I could not bear to see the anguish that would overcome my father” (44:34). In short, in 38:26 Judah recognizes a divine power enlarging and healing the family, nullifying stupid and cowardly acts and transforming selfish men into heroes; and he embraces it.19

Through the thematic keywords and motifs discussed above, we realize that Tamar, the extraordinary matriarch of the Davidic dynasty that will one day issue from the tribe of Judah, has indeed transformed the man Judah himself.20 Judah’s heroism, in turn, decisively shapes the course of the larger story of Joseph and his brothers, for it is Judah’s incomparable act of moral courage in pledging himself as a slave to Joseph in place of Benjamin—unrivaled, to my mind, by any of the actions of his more celebrated forefathers—that finally impels Joseph to

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18 See Alter’s chapter entitled “Characterization and the Art of Reticence” in Art of Biblical Narrative, pp. 114-130.
reveal himself to and reconcile with his brothers.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, Tamar’s transformation of Judah in Genesis 38 constitutes the fulcrum of the entire narrative of Jacob’s sons.

### III

The question remains as to the thematic significance of Judah’s redemption within the broader context of the Torah, indeed the entire Bible, as a whole. The rather explicit comparison that the narrative draws between Judah and Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn son, provides an important clue here. We may recall that Reuben, not Judah, is the first to plead with the other brothers not to kill Joseph. The text, however, registers no reply on the part of the brothers to Reuben’s desperate appeal. Only when Judah comes along and suggests that they sell Joseph rather than murder him do the brothers take heed. It should be clear from this episode that Judah, and not Reuben, is the natural leader among the brothers. Similarly, Reuben is the first of the brothers to attempt to convince Jacob to let them bring Benjamin back to Egypt with them. Alter perceptively observes the almost comic irony of the blundering Reuben’s rash offer, in contrast to the more judicious proposal that Judah will put forth subsequently (the transformative encounter with Tamar has also had a favorable impact on his judgment), that Jacob be allowed to kill his own grandsons should anything befall Benjamin while in his care:

> His father has just bemoaned being twice bereaved, and now Reuben compounds matters by proposing that Jacob do away with two of his grandsons if Benjamin should be lost!… Again one understands why Reuben the firstborn will be passed over, and why the line of kings will spring from Judah, Joseph’s second advocate, who in the next chapter (Genesis 43:8-9) will make a more reasonable statement of readiness to stand bond for Benjamin.\textsuperscript{22}

Alter also notes the larger import of the juxtaposition of the two proposals, which we will treat in short order. Indeed, just as the brothers do not explicitly reply to Reuben’s plea not to kill Joseph, here Jacob does not even dignify Reuben’s invitation with a response. The narrator of these two closely related episodes clearly means to establish Judah, and not Reuben, as the

\textsuperscript{21} Taking issue with the standard reading of Joseph’s manipulation of his brothers as a series of calculated trials, Clifford argues that Joseph, like Judah, is transformed by the recognition of God’s ultimate purpose in the story: “Scholarly emphasis on Joseph as a wise man testing his brothers to see if they have changed has obscured Joseph’s need to change. In family affairs, no one is a cool sage. Judith’s speech in chap. 44, the longest in the Book of Genesis, demonstrates only one brother’s change of heart. The reader knows only that Joseph loves his father and his only full brother; the reader is not told about Joseph’s attitude toward the other ten. One must assume that he is truly undecided… Can he forgive the brothers who tried to kill him and then sold him into slavery? Joseph wavers until he hears Judah offer to take Benjamin’s place lest his father be destroyed. Joseph then recognizes that God has indeed brought good out of evil; his envious and murderous brothers have truly changed and become sons of Israel, willing to give up their own lives that the family might survive.” “Genesis 38,” pp. 531-532. See also Lambe, “Judah’s Development,” pp. 66-67.

\textsuperscript{22} Alter, Art of Biblical Narrative, p. 170.
leader (alongside Joseph) among the sons of Jacob—and by implication among the tribes of Israel.²³

In the end, Jacob himself comes to recognize Judah’s character and leadership—Jacob, who in a real sense had scarcely before even acknowledged those of his sons not born to Rachel. It is fitting that, having learned Joseph is still alive, Jacob now appoints Judah to lead the way to Egypt for the rest of the family in 46:27—Judah, who had done more than any of the other brothers both to divide the family and separate Jacob from his most beloved son, and later to reunite them. And of course, the glowing blessing that Jacob bestows upon Judah, in sharp contrast to the curses he heaps upon the three eldest sons of Leah, is perhaps rivaled only by that which he grants Joseph himself.

These blessings—and indeed the entire story—manifestly prefigure the royal destinies of the tribes of which Judah and Joseph are to be the progenitors. As Nahum Sarna observes, the ascendancy of the tribe of Judah continues to be an important trope within the Five Books of Moses beyond Jacob’s blessing at the conclusion of Genesis. As various censuses reveal, Judah is by far the largest of the tribes in the wilderness; it encamps in front of the Tent of Meeting and heads up the order of march; and its chieftain is recorded in Numbers 7 as being the first to bring gifts for the Tabernacle.²⁴ Furthermore, of the twelve scouts dispatched to reconnoiter the Promised Land in Numbers 13, the only two who do not bring back a damaging report, Caleb and Joshua, are from the tribes of Ephraim and Judah, respectively. Ultimately, the founder of the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam, will issue from Ephraim, the preeminent northern tribe (1 Kings 11:26); David, as we know well, heralds from the predominant tribe of the southern part of the land, Judah—through Tamar’s son, Perez, that is, born to Judah the man from his coupling with her in Genesis 38. Judah is to be the patriarch—and Tamar the matriarch—of the Davidic dynasty.

Thus, in conclusion, I offer Sarna’s trenchant summation of the ultimate significance of Judah’s salience among Jacob’s sons in the narrative bloc of Genesis 37-50:

These narratives, while they recount the rise of Joseph, subtly register as well the ascendancy of Judah… Two kingdoms resulted from divine promises to the patriarchs:

²³ Traditional biblical scholars like Gerhard von Rad and E. A. Speiser attribute the presence of distinct appeals first by Reuben and then by Judah, both to the brothers not to kill Joseph and later to Jacob to release Benjamin, to a duplication of sources, thereby completely missing the rather obvious point, which I hope to have demonstrated, of the contrast between the brothers’ respective attempts to exercise leadership. See von Rad, Genesis, p. 348; Speiser, Genesis, pp. 293-294 and pp. 329-330. Speiser does, however, at least affirm the general importance of Judah’s story within the broad context of the Bible. See Genesis, pp. 299-300.
²⁴ See Sarna, Genesis, p. 335.
Judah became the name of the southern kingdom, while the northern kingdom of Israel was known as Joseph (cf. Zechariah 10:6).  

The prominence of the figure of Judah alongside that of Joseph therefore “hints, ever so obliquely, at the future Joseph-Judah polarity in the history of the people of Israel.”  

And it is his fateful encounter with his intrepid daughter-in-law, wherein Tamar singlehandedly sets in motion the chain of events that will bring healing to Israel’s family, that transforms Judah into the leader of that family—and the fitting sire of the royal house of Israel.

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25 Sarna, Genesis, p. 264.
26 Sarna, Genesis, p. 264.