

## **GENESIS 38: ITS CONTEXT(S) AND FUNCTION**

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Often analysis of the biblical text by critical scholars is based on perceived textual anomalies so subtle and obscure as to escape detection by all but those well trained in critical methodology. The discontinuity between Genesis 38 and its surrounding context, however, is readily apparent to even a casual reader.<sup>1</sup> Genesis 37 begins the Joseph story and continues to the point of Joseph's being sold to Potiphar in Egypt. Genesis 38 then shifts the focus back to Canaan and describes a rather peculiar incident in the life of Judah. Gen 39:1 returns to the Joseph story and essentially repeats the information in 37:36 before continuing to recount Joseph's experience in Potiphar's household.

Most modern scholars have supposed that chapter 38 and the Joseph story come from different sources,<sup>2</sup> but this does not account for why the material was inserted into the Joseph story at this point. Some have argued that there was simply no other place to put the Judah-Tamar story because Judah is still at home with his brothers in chapter 37 and moves to Egypt with his family before the Joseph

<sup>1</sup> I recently asked a class to read the Book of Genesis, and one student asked why Genesis 38 was placed where it is. The student described his feeling about the way the chapter interrupts the Joseph story as "like hitting a speed bump,"

<sup>2</sup> The general opinion among critical scholars is that material about Joseph comes from both the J and E sources; J combined the traditional material into something like the present Joseph story. According to this view, Genesis 38 represents an independent tradition which was incorporated into the present narrative by J. For discussion of these matters and references see, e.g., C. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) 15-23; 46-50; J. A. Emerton, "Some Problems in Genesis 38," *VT* 25 (1975) 346-60; G. W. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt*, *CBQ* MS 4 (1976) 60-80, *Criswell Theological Review* 5.2 (1991) 247-257

story is concluded. The chronological indicators suggest that this is the perspective of the narrative. The statement in Gen 38:1, **ויהי בעת ההוא** ("it happened at that time"), while not a precise indicator of time, suggests that the incidents in 38 took place subsequent to the events in 37, while the circumstantial clause with which 39 begins, **ויוסף הורד מצר ימה** ("now Joseph had been taken to Egypt"), implies that the events of that chapter were simultaneous with those reported in 38.<sup>3</sup> Despite the way the Judah-Tamar material interrupts the Joseph story, certain literary indicators have long been recognized as in some way tying the two stories together.<sup>4</sup> The most striking of the parallels between the stories is the repetition of the words **וישלח/שלחה . . . ויאמר . . . ויכר . . . ויאמר** ("they/she sent... they/she said, 'Please recognize it'. . . he recognized . . . he said") at climactic points in chapters 37 and 38.<sup>5</sup> Other suggested verbal parallels include the descent in 37:8:1 (**י"ד' "ו", "Judah went down"**) and the descent in 39:1 (**וירד**, Joseph had been taken down). Other thematic parallels, will be pointed out below.

As Goldin points out, these literary and thematic indicators suggest that

whoever put the story as we have it in its present position, must have been guided by what seemed to him a sound literary principle: either a thematic or idiomatic connection must be present between the story of the sale of Joseph into bondage and the account of Judah's encounter with Tamar.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Even as these general chronological indicators give some sense of sequence and chronology to the narrative, it must also be noted that the chronology appears to be presented from a Semitic perspective rather than a modern Western one. In particular, the chronology given in the Joseph story indicates that 22 years lapsed between the sale of Joseph by his brothers and the family's move to Egypt during the second year of the famine (37:2; 41:46, 47; 45:6, 11). The list of those entering Egypt includes the grandchildren of Judah (46:12). It is hard to imagine how Judah could have gotten married, had children, married them to Tamar, sent her away to let Shelah grow fathered Perez by Tamar (after it is obvious to Tamar that Judah does not intend to give her to Shelah despite the "many days" that have passed and the fact that Shelah is now old enough for marriage), and have Perez grow up and father two children in the space of 22 years. For a discussion of this question see U. Cassuto, "The Story of Tamar and Judah," *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973), 1.32-40.

<sup>4</sup> These connectors were recognized by many of the rabbis. For a summary of these comments see Cassuto, 30-31; J. Goldin, "The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong," *JBL* 96 (1977) 28-29; M. Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1962) 5.57-87.

<sup>5</sup> 37:32-33 and 38:25-26.

<sup>6</sup> Goldin, 29.

Despite these indications of an intended connection between Genesis 38 and the Joseph story in the final form of the biblical text, most scholars have focused on the meaning of the text at some point in a hypothetical prehistory of the text.<sup>7</sup> Theories about the prehistory of the text, however, tend to be speculative and uncertain since they are generally based on reconstructions of history and culture for which there is minimal evidence. It seems more appropriate to consider the meaning of the passage in its present canonical context since it is there that the tradition is fixed in its final and authoritative form. In the context of the canon, though, there are sometimes a number of smaller contexts that influence and even determine the meaning of an individual pericope. A major task of exegesis involves the identification of the relevant contexts in order to determine how they affect the meaning of the passage. There are several different contexts that are appropriate for understanding the Judah-Tamar story.

Genesis 38 reports interesting facts about Judah, Tamar, the descendants of Judah, and about social institutions like levirate marriage. Placing this, perhaps once independent, unit into the Joseph story gives it a meaning and significance beyond those individual details. Its setting in the larger context of the Jacob story further expands the significance, but it is only when the unit is seen in the context of the patriarchal narrative and God's promise to Abraham that the full significance of the story can be appreciated. The various contexts are not contradictory, but complement one another, and each contributes uniquely to the full impact of the story intended by the biblical author.

First of all, Genesis 38 functions in its own right as a somewhat independent and self-contained story about Judah and his family.<sup>8</sup> The story relates how Judah left the other members of his family, settled among the Canaanites and married a Canaanite woman. If one truly limits the context to Genesis 38, it is impossible to tell whether this was thought to be good or bad.<sup>9</sup> In reality, of course, if the story circulated independently either before or after it was placed in its

<sup>7</sup> Emerton ("Judah and Tamar," VT 29 [1979] 403) for example, has argued that "it cannot be taken for granted that a story in Genesis had a single meaning and purpose and retained them unchanged throughout its history first, probably, as an independent unit of oral tradition and then a part of a written document."

<sup>8</sup> As O'Callaghan (Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association, "The Structure and Meaning of Genesis 38: Judah and Tamar" 5 [1981] 73-74) points out, both the significant vocabulary (numerous family/kinship terms) and the content (Judah's descendants and their offspring) make it clear that the subject of the chapter is Judah's family.

<sup>9</sup> Emerton (VT 29, 410-13) argues that the story may have originated among the Canaanites, since there is no negative evaluation of the Canaanites and since Tamar, who was probably a Canaanite, is presented in a more favorable light than Judah or his sons.

present literary context in Genesis, the culture would have provided sufficient clues for evaluating Judah's conduct without the necessity of explicitly providing them in the story. What is clear from the narrative is that Judah's first two sons, Er and Onan, were wicked and the LORD took their lives. No details are given of Er's wickedness, but Onan's sin lay in his refusal to father a child with Tamar, his deceased brother's wife, as the responsibilities of levirate marriage required. Judah apparently concluded that since each son to whom Tamar was married had died, she was a threat to the family, and he devised an excuse for delaying her marriage to his remaining son Shelah--a delay that he intended to make permanent by simply ignoring her. Judah's attempt to thwart the intent of levirate marriage and thus deprive Tamar of her right to bear an heir for the family, and perhaps of her rightful place in society as well,<sup>10</sup> reflects badly on Judah and provides certain details about both the values of the society and the institution of levirate marriage.

The story is also important in terms of the history of the tribe of Judah since Judah's behavior clearly jeopardized the future of the family (and in the broader biblical context the line of Messiah). Tamar's "virtue" in circumventing the problem of Judah's refusal not only protected her own rights but played a significant role in preserving what was to become one of the most prominent tribes in Israel. Earlier critical scholars supposed that the references to individuals actually refer to the various clans in the tribe of Judah and describe their settlement and movement in Canaan.<sup>11</sup> This idea, of course, presupposes a late date for the material, but as Emerton points out, it is possible that while the story is about individuals, it also reflects in a general way the later history and movement of the tribes.<sup>12</sup> Thus a story about individuals may have continued to be used beyond its relevance for family history because it generally reflected the situation of the various clans in the tribe of Judah. The subsequent popularity of the story is evident from the blessing given by the people of Bethlehem to Ruth when her engagement to Boaz (apparently through a form of levirate marriage) was announced.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> S. Niditch ("The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," HTR 72 [1979] 143-49) has suggested that in ancient Israelite society "the young woman is allowed only two proper roles. She is either an unmarried virgin in her father's home or she is a faithful, child producing wife in her husband's or husband's family's home" (145). By denying Tamar the right to produce children -in the family, Judah made her a misfit in the social structure. By bearing Judah's children as the result of her deception, "Her position in society is regularized. She now becomes a true member of the patriarchal clan" (148).

<sup>11</sup> See Emerton, *VT* 29, 404-5 for references.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Ruth 4:19-20.

Genesis 38 also occurs in the context of the Joseph story, though as Westermann has noted, the chapter is not really an addition to the Joseph story, but rather "belong(s) to the conclusion of the Jacob story."<sup>14</sup> Even so, the Judah-Tamar story does interrupt the Joseph story, and it must be interpreted in the context of that material. A literary function of Genesis 38 is immediately apparent; it increases tension in the Joseph story in much the same way that cliff-hanger endings in serials and soap operas increase suspense and generate interest. As Baldwin notes, "While the reader is in suspense to know how Joseph fared in Egypt, he is forced to attend to this review of Judah's private life."<sup>15</sup> Von Rad says, "It is really effective for Joseph to disappear from the reader completely for a time just as he disappeared from the father and the brothers."<sup>16</sup>

Commentators have long recognized that the doctrine of retribution is set in clear relief by the juxtaposition of Genesis 37 and 38. In Gen 37:26-27 Judah suggests selling Joseph to the Ishmaelite/Midianite traders,<sup>17</sup> and while it is not explicitly stated, it seems likely that he was significantly involved<sup>18</sup> in the plan to slay a male goat in 37:31, dip Joseph's tunic in the blood and present that "evidence" to Jacob for him to recognize in 37:32, and draw his own conclusions about what happened to Joseph. Judah is thus instrumental in depriving Jacob of a child and deceiving him with evidence. In chapter 38 Judah loses two sons and, as Alter<sup>19</sup> notes, the deceiver himself is deceived by the evidence he gave in pledge for the kid in 38:17. According to the Midrash, "God said to Judah, 'You deceived your father with a kid. By your life, Tamar will deceive you with a kid.'... God said to Judah, 'You said to your father, "Please recognize." By your life Tamar will say to you, "Please recognize."' "<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> J. G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986) 162-63.

<sup>16</sup> G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 357.

<sup>17</sup> As a result of Judah's suggestion Joseph's life is spared (v 27), but the text does not present Judah in a totally positive light in this. His comment in v 26, "What profit is it for us to kill our brother?" uses a word for profit (בצע) that has quite negative connotations, "illicit gain."

<sup>18</sup> At the very least, Judah joined with the others as they slaughtered the goat. Given Judah's leadership role in suggesting that they sell him, it seems likely that he was significantly involved in this part of the scheme as well.

<sup>19</sup> R Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 11. While the terms male goat (שער עזים) in 37:31 and kid (גדי עזים) in 38:17, 20 are not identical, both the wording and meaning are sufficiently similar to establish the literary connection.

<sup>20</sup> Gen. Rab. 84:11-12 as cited by Alter, *ibid*. As was indicated in the previous note, the Hebrew terms for "male goat" in 37:31 and "kid" in 38:17, 20 are similar but not identical. The Hebrew expression (הכר נא) translated "please recognize" in the citation from the midrash is identical in Gen 37:31 and 38:25.

By setting the Judah-Tamar story in the context of the Joseph story, a deliberate contrast seems to have been made between Judah's conduct toward Tamar, who may have been a Canaanite,<sup>21</sup> and the conduct of Joseph with another foreign woman, Potiphar's wife. There is no real basis for evaluating Judah's marriage to a Canaanite woman and his subsequent behavior toward Tamar in either the Judah-Tamar story or the Joseph story, and the implications of this contrast between the two brothers are not clear apart from the broader context of the patriarchal narrative.

It has also been suggested that the incident reported in Genesis 38 represents a turning point in the life of Judah.<sup>22</sup> He appears in a very negative light when he suggests the sale of Joseph,<sup>23</sup> as he does in chapter 38 in his dealings with Tamar, in his relationship to the Canaanites (see below), and perhaps to the rest of his family as well. Judah's guilt in refusing to give Tamar to his youngest son is clear from his confession in 38:26 ("She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah"). Throughout the rest of the Joseph story, Judah appears as the leader of the brothers,<sup>24</sup> and while Baldwin's description of him as "sensitive and self-forgetful"<sup>25</sup> is perhaps overly positive, he does appear to have changed. In 44:18-34 he intercedes for Benjamin before Joseph when he could easily have justified abandoning Benjamin in an Egyptian jail<sup>26</sup> since he assumed

<sup>21</sup> Certainly the daughter of Shua, whom Judah married, was a Canaanite woman. While the text does not indicate the national origin of Tamar, as Emerton points out (VT 26 [1976] 90), "most commentators believe that Tamar was thought by J to be a Canaanite. . . . The obvious implication is that Tamar was a Canaanite." J. Sailhamer (*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers* [The Expositor's Bible Commentary; 12 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990], 2.232) argues that if Tamar had been a Canaanite it would likely have been mentioned. He suggests that "through Tamar's clever plan, then, the seed of Abraham was preserved by not being allowed to continue through the sons of the Canaanite. . . . The line was continued through Judah and Tamar." The force of this suggestion is reduced by the fact that at other points in the Davidic Messianic line there are foreign women such as Rahab and Ruth.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., A Berlin (*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* [Sheffield: Almond, 1983] 40) says that Judah "seems to undergo a transformation in Gen. 38 and from that point on is different from the way he appeared in Gen. 37." See also Baldwin, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Goldin (JBL 96, 40-43) suggests that Judah may well have deliberately thwarted Reuben's plan to rescue Joseph (which was perhaps Reuben's attempt to get back in his father's good graces) in order to protect the position of family leadership that had come to him essentially by default as the result of his three older brothers' misdeeds (see, e.g., Gen 49:3-7).

<sup>24</sup> Goldin (JBL 96, 43) argues that Genesis 38 is part of the theme of leadership in Jacob's family, and it may well be that a change in Judah's character contributes to that theme. Goldin maintains that chapter 38 is an important part of the vita of the one chosen to lead the family.

<sup>25</sup> Baldwin, 163.

that the boy had actually stolen the prime minister's cup and thus deserved the punishment he got. This suggests that Judah is a different person than the one who 20 years earlier sold his little brother as a slave because of jealousy and irritation over Joseph's dreams and his favored status with Jacob and over the negative reports that Joseph brought Jacob about the brothers.

Genesis 38 also occurs in the context of the Jacob story,<sup>27</sup> and is similar to other narratives about Jacob's children (e.g., Genesis 34; 35:22-23). As was noted above, the material may have been placed here because of the general chronology of the events. Judah was with his brothers in the Hebron Valley in chapter 37, and he and his wife and children went into Egypt with the rest of Jacob's family before the end of the Joseph story. As Goldin has made clear, however, a major theme of both the Jacob and Joseph stories is the question of who will be the leader of Jacob's family, and the narrative contains several examples that illustrate that the usual principle of primogeniture was not the exclusive prerogative for leadership. At times this was determined by the sovereign choice of God (e.g., the choice of Jacob before the twins were born [Gen 25:23]); in other instances the normal right was forfeited because of grossly improper behavior (e.g., Reuben,<sup>28</sup> Simeon, and Levi).<sup>29</sup> Judah's leadership is affirmed despite the fact that he was not the first born-or the second or even the third born-and despite Jacob's preference for Joseph. God's providence is evident in this even though human factors such as the brothers' irresponsible behavior play a role as well. The possibility that chapter 38 recounts an event that began a transformation in Judah's character may contribute to this theme also.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the Judah-Tamar story is set in the context of the entire patriarchal narrative, and this context also provides significant clues to its meaning. It is well known that the promise made by God to

that he had made with his father is an important consideration in evaluating Judah's action as well.

<sup>27</sup> See above, n. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Goldin, 37-38, makes the interesting suggestion that Reuben's sexual intercourse with his father's concubine was not the cause of his losing the birthright but the result of his perception that he would be unjustly passed over in favor of Jacob's favorite, Joseph. Since possession of the father's concubines apparently signified mastery and authority over him, Reuben tried to take matters into his own hands.

<sup>29</sup> See Gen 49:3-7. Actually in the case of Jacob and Esau elements of both sovereign choice and irresponsible human behavior can be seen. Alongside the pre-birth oracle declaring Jacob's rule over his brother, Esau's disregard for the promise and its spiritual dimensions seems to have contributed significantly to his loss of the rights of the firstborn.

<sup>30</sup> See above and nn. 21-25.

Abraham in Gen 12:1-3<sup>31</sup> dominates the entire patriarchal narrative. The provisions of that promise included an heir for Abraham (and for his descendants as well), the land, and the assurance that the descendants of Abraham would become a great nation that would bless all the families of the earth. The stories of the patriarchs revolve around that promise and the various obstacles to its fulfillment encountered by the patriarchs. Abraham responded to God's call and went to Canaan where he was immediately confronted with a major obstacle to possessing the land--"Now the Canaanite was then in the land" (Gen 12:6). Then came a famine in the land that threatened his family's survival in Canaan. This obstacle drove them out of the land and into Egypt where Abraham's deceit landed Sarah in Pharaoh's harem--a rather significant threat to the fulfillment of the promise--and she had to be extricated by God. The promise was threatened by Sarah's barrenness, by the command to sacrifice Isaac, by Isaac's not being married at age 40, and then by Rebekah's barrenness. Jacob's forced exile from the promised land<sup>32</sup> threatened the fulfillment, and the obstacles did not end with Jacob's return from Aram.

For Abraham and Isaac the threats to the promise seem to focus primarily on the heir; in the case of Jacob they shift primarily to that part of the promise involving the land. As the promise theme continues to unfold in the Jacob story, a theme introduced earlier is developed in a way that is relevant for understanding Genesis 38. As was noted above, it is difficult to evaluate Judah's marriage to a Canaanite woman on the basis of either Genesis 38 or the Joseph story. The Jacob story taken together with the broader patriarchal narrative does provide a basis for such a judgment. As Abraham was about to send his servant to Aram to find a wife for Isaac, he made the servant formally swear that he would not take a wife for Isaac from among the Canaanites (Gen 24:4). This same anti-Canaanite perspective is evident in 26:34-35 where Isaac and Rebekah's displeasure over Esau's marriage to two Canaanite women (see also 28:8-9) is emphasized. Genesis 34 from the Jacob story suggests one reason for this perspective.

Genesis 34 relates an incident in which a Canaanite named Shechem had sexual relations with Jacob's daughter Dinah and

<sup>31</sup> E.g., in response to the question of where the impetus for the thematic development throughout the Pentateuch comes, D. J. A. Clines (*The Theme of the Pentateuch* [Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1978] 26) says, "There can be little doubt that the answer must be: the promise to the patriarchs, with its various elements, and in its various formulations." For a detailed study of this subject see C. Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980; see also W. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978) 84-99.

<sup>32</sup> On this see E. Curtis, "Structure, Style and Context as a Key to Interpreting Jacob's Encounter at Peniel," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987) of 129-37, esp.135-37.

approached her family requesting permission to marry her. In his negotiations with Jacob, Hamor, Shechem's father and the Canaanite leader, described the advantage that such an arrangement would have for the family of Jacob: "Intermarry with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. Thus you shall live with us, and the land shall be open before you; live and trade in it, and acquire property in it" (Gen 34:9-10). When the sons of Jacob imposed circumcision as the condition for the marriage, Shechem explained to his fellow citizens why they should submit to this and afterward said, "Only on this condition will the men consent to live with us, to become one people" (34:22). What was viewed by the Canaanites as a significant advantage (becoming one people), was viewed by the biblical authors as a significant threat to Israel's existence, and this perspective provides a basis for judging Judah's behavior in Genesis 38. The story of Dinah in Genesis 34 shows that the Canaanites living in the land constituted a major threat to the promise in that assimilation with the Canaanites would make it impossible for Abraham's descendants ever to become a great nation as Gen 12:3 predicts.

Judah's departure from his brothers and his settling among the Canaanites represented a threat to the family in that it would be more difficult to maintain the family's distinctive Yahwistic values in isolation from the other family members. Settling among the Canaanites and intermarrying with them posed the significant risk of being assimilated with them (ie., becoming one people).<sup>33</sup> It is likely that Judah's evil sons reflect the values they learned from their father and constitute evidence for Judah's departure from the values deemed proper by the biblical author. It is possible that the repetition of the verb **וָשָׁב**, "he turned aside" in 38:1, "he turned aside to a man, an Adulterate, whose name was Hirah"; and 38:16, "he turned aside to her [ie., the prostitute] by the road" is meant to suggest that Judah was committing fornication in both instances (first spiritually and then physically), an even closer parallel if Tamar was a Canaanite. Hirah,

<sup>33</sup> This theme continues into the Book of Judges. As Block ("The Period of the Judges: Religious Disintegration Under Tribal Rule," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K Harrison* ed. A Gileadi; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988] 48) has suggested, literary indicators make it clear that the editor of the Book of Judges is making the point that --the spiritual condition of the people inhabiting the land of Canaan at the end of the settlement period is the same as it had been at the beginning. It has made no difference that the identity of the people has changed. ...He has exposed the total Canaanization of Israelite society." Thus the threat anticipated in Genesis proves to be fully legitimate. The close parallels between the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 and the story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19 makes it clear that interaction with the Canaanites has resulted in assimilation of their values to the point where the Benjaminites are little different from the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Judah's Canaanite friend, uses the term  $\text{הַשְׂדֵּימָה}$ , "cult prostitute" (vv 21-22) for the woman with whom Judah had sexual relations while the narrator (v 15) uses the word  $\text{הַזֹּנֵה}$ , "harlot, prostitute." Perhaps the Canaanite's use of a term replete with connotations of Canaanite fertility worship would remind the reader that cult prostitution constituted an important part of Canaanite worship.

Even as the story of Dinah and Shechem in chapter 34 implies the threat the Canaanites posed to the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the Judah-Tamar story shows that Judah willingly contributed to the problem by his behavior.<sup>34</sup> As Ross points out, chapter 38 "present[s] a picture of a corrupt family. Judah continued his irresponsible course: he had earlier moved the sale of Joseph, then separated from his brothers and married a Canaanite, and now had seen the fruit of that marriage thoroughly evil."<sup>35</sup> He further notes, "If it had been left up to Judah, the family would have assimilated with Canaanites."<sup>36</sup> Aalders says that the events of chapter 38 "especially bring to light the critical danger that threatened the 'chosen seed' if they remained in Canaan. Mixed marriages with the Canaanites could only lead to the people of Israel losing their identity among the Canaanites and eventually being absorbed by them."<sup>37</sup>

This suggests another important connection with the Joseph story although the verbal and literary connectors are not explicit ones. Genesis 38 shows that living in Canaan among its inhabitants jeopardized the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham because the sons of Jacob were unable and/or unwilling to resist assimilation with the Canaanites. The family of Judah, the leading spokesman for the brothers, and the one destined to become the leading tribe and father of the royal and messianic line, was threatened with extinction as a result of Judah's actions.

34 In strong contrast to Judah's behavior, Joseph is presented in chap. 39 as resisting the advances of a married foreign woman. It is true that Joseph does marry an Egyptian, and the daughter of a priestess at that. There are no indications in the text that this was viewed negatively and that this constituted a threat to the promise or the future of Abraham's descendants or to proper Yahwistic values. It is unclear whether it was the context (ie., Joseph was living in Egypt where he perhaps had few choices for a wife other than Egyptians. In addition, Pharaoh apparently arranged for the marriage) or if it was Joseph's character that caused the biblical author to view that marriage to a foreign woman as appropriate. Generally Egyptians were not viewed in the same overwhelmingly negative terms as Canaanites though at a later time Solomon's marriage to an Egyptian princess was viewed negatively and was seen as a major step that set Solomon on the course that led him to apostasy. ;

<sup>35</sup> A P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988) 616.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 619.

<sup>37</sup> G. C. Aalders, *Genesis* (Bible Student's Commentary; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981) 2.191.

Joseph's time in Egypt and his elevation to a high position there did much to insure the survival of Jacob's family during the famine that affected the entire Near East, but there appears to be a significance that goes beyond the short term. Gen 43:26-34 describes a meal that Joseph ate with his brothers in Egypt before he revealed himself to them. Verse 32 explains that Joseph, the brothers, and the Egyptians ate separately. This was done, according to v 32, because "the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians." Likewise, Joseph's family was allowed to live in the area of Goshen, apparently apart from the areas where the Egyptians lived, because "every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians" (46:34). The situation in Egypt was very different from that in Canaan. In Egypt the problem posed by intermarriage and assimilation was far less significant, not because of the Israelites but rather because the Egyptians would not have anything to do with them. In Egypt the descendants of Abraham were protected from themselves because the Egyptians considered them to be an abomination. Thus Jacob's family was placed in a cultural environment where God's promise that they would become a great nation could be fulfilled.

As Aalders suggests, "Jacob's descendants had to leave Canaan if they were to develop as a separate and distinctive people. It was imperative that they be moved into a situation where they could not possibly mix with their countrymen. This, of course, happened in Egypt."<sup>38</sup> The necessity for the Egyptian sojourn in Israel's becoming a גוי גדול "a great nation," as predicted in Gen 12:2 is suggested by Joseph in 50:20, "You meant evil against me, but Cod meant it for good in order... to preserve many people alive [להחית עם רב]." While the same kind of direct verbal correspondence that often links passages and ideas is not found here, it seems likely that עם, "people," and גוי "nation," are essentially synonymous here and that Joseph's statement is related to the situation found in Exodus 1. Exod 1:20 says, וירב העם, "the people have become very numerous and strong," and this prompts the Pharaoh to do something about a situation he considers quite dangerous (e.g., Exod 1:7, 9, 12, 20). It seems likely that the statement in Exodus is meant to emphasize the fulfillment of the promise to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation.

Recognizing the various contexts in which the Judah-Tamar story is set is essential in understanding the significance of the events described in Genesis 38. The contexts complement one another, and each provides unique information that illuminates the purpose(s) of the story intended by the biblical author.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

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