



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 11 | Number 1

Article 7

4-1-2010

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Spackman, Ben. "The Story of Judah and Tamar." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 11, no. 1 (2010). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol11/iss1/7>

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Gospel teachers often choose to pass over the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, but it is filled with internal and external contrast, irony, and wordplay, and it has important things to teach us.

The Story of Judah and Tamar

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In my experience, gospel teachers often choose to pass over the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, and understandably so. By itself, the story has no obvious moral to teach¹ and, due to cultural differences, is difficult to understand without what some scholars call “literary competence.”² Moreover, some teachers and students may be uncomfortable with the sexual elements central to the plot. Readers may also wonder why it is inserted, seemingly at random, between Joseph being sold into Egypt and his rise to prominence in Egypt.³

Beyond those, other factors such as time limitations in the classroom may influence teachers to leave out Genesis 38. One important reason may be the paucity of Latter-day Saint treatments.⁴ The Prophet Joseph Smith neither commented on it nor made any changes in the Joseph Smith Translation.⁵ According to the Brigham Young University general conference scripture index, Genesis 38 has been cited only once in general conference.⁶ A bibliographic search through various databases of Latter-day Saint literature turns up very little.⁷ Most references only mention Thamar (the King James Version

New Testament spelling of Tamar⁸) because of her inclusion in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:3).⁹

The institute manual for Religion 301 devotes roughly half of one page to chapter 38, providing a brief explanation of the pre-Mosaic levirate custom. It suggests several possible reasons for the narrative's inclusion in the Bible. First, it "illustrate[s] the effects of the covenant people forgetting the importance of marrying in the covenant."¹⁰ Second, it "shows the lineage of Judah from which the Messiah would eventually come." Third, it further provides an example that "ancestry is not the determiner of one's righteousness." Lastly, "the truth that failure to honor one's commitments often leads to greater trouble is clearly shown."¹¹

I view the passing over of Genesis 38 as something regrettable because the chapter has some important things to teach us. My goal in this article is to provide teachers with enough background and understanding to answer student questions on the chapter, largely by "mak[ing] use of the means which the Lord has provided for us" (Alma 60:21)—in this case scholarly means.¹² To that end, I will first recount the Judah-Tamar story with some cultural background and literary commentary. Second, I will outline some of the skillfully interwoven threads demonstrating a literary unity between Genesis 37 and 39 (and the more extended Joseph story). Finally, I will offer ideas on using parts of the Judah-Tamar story in teaching.

Exposition

Genesis 38 is filled with internal and external contrast, irony, and wordplay, but translation obscures much of it. The intent of my exposition is accurately captured by President Brigham Young when he said it is important to read and understand the scriptures as though we were in the place of those writing them.¹³ What language nuances and cultural nods would an Israelite understand that a modern reader of the English Bible would not? Due to space limitations, I offer a summary with brief commentary instead of a full translation.

Judah leaves his brothers, settles near an Adullamite,¹⁴ and marries an unnamed Canaanite woman, who bears him three sons in quick literary succession—Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah finds a wife for Er whose name is Tamar. Er is killed by the Lord because he is wicked, leaving Tamar a childless widow.

The timing of these events vis-à-vis Joseph being sold into Egypt is uncertain, but the account is compressed, moving through the events of many

years with the barest of detail.¹⁵ Judah moves, marries, and engenders three sons, two of them growing to marriageable age, all in the space of six terse verses. The text describes the firstborn, Er, simply as “wicked.” The author/editor apparently considered the nature of his wickedness unimportant to relate; rather, what matters for the purpose of the story is that Er, as Tamar’s first husband, died before engendering children. Here also we have our first wordplay. In Hebrew, Er’s name *‘er* is the consonantal inverse of “wicked,” *ra’*. In Hebrew terms, *‘er was ra’*.

Judah instructs his second son, Onan, to raise up children in Er’s name with Tamar. Onan takes advantage of this by engaging repeatedly in sexual relations with Tamar but acting in such a way that she cannot conceive, thus displeasing God, who kills him. Judah instructs Tamar to remain as a widow in her father’s house until his third son, Shelah, is old enough to marry her and fulfill the levirate obligation.

One could interject at this point that Judah lived prior to the law of Moses, so how does the levirate obligation (from Latin *levir*, “husband’s brother”)¹⁶ apply? First, one could suggest that the author/editor of the Torah often viewed the past through the perspective of the present, and may be re-projecting his own views.¹⁷ More likely is that the law of Moses often codified preexisting cultural norms,¹⁸ sometimes modifying them in the process. The Mosaic version of the levirate law is found in Deuteronomy 25:5–10.¹⁹

Deuteronomy specifies that this duty belongs to a brother-in-law who may refuse (in contrast to Genesis 38, where no right-of-refusal appears to exist). In pre-Mosaic times, the ultimate responsibility in assuring offspring fell to the father-in-law. Judah, therefore, as father-in-law, bore responsibility for carrying out this obligation, and he dutifully instructs Onan to marry Tamar and raise up children in his brother’s name.²⁰ This difference in where the ultimate responsibility fell explains why Tamar later chose to deceive Judah instead of Shelah (the last living brother-in-law) and fulfill her religious duty to her husband.

Onan’s actions toward Tamar were particularly heinous in Israelite eyes: “By frustrating the purpose of the levirate institution, Onan has placed his sexual relationship with his sister-in-law in the category of incest—a capital offense.”²¹ Thus the death of Onan at the hand of the Lord.

At Judah’s instruction, Tamar returns to her father’s household as a widow, bereft of both husband and offspring. Moreover, as long as Tamar remained

childless, her husband's property did belong not to her but reverted to Judah and his other sons.²² This may have been part of Onan's motivation.²³

Time passes. Judah's wife dies, and Judah's mourning comes to an end.²⁴ Shelah has grown enough to be given to Tamar, yet Judah withholds him from her. Judah travels to the sheepshearing at Timnah. Tamar, informed of his trip, conceals her identity with a veil and strategically places herself in Judah's path at "an open place" (Genesis 38:14).

Though the King James translators understood the Hebrew *petach 'enayim* as "an open place," modern interpreters have understood the phrase differently. First, most read *'enayim* as a proper noun on the basis of verse 21 and Joshua 15:34, and then *petach* as either the crossroads leading to, or the opening/entrance to the city Enaim. Regardless of the specific meaning, *petach 'enayim* can also be read quite literally as "opening of the eyes." Here again is important irony. Judah will see and "know" (have intercourse with) Tamar, but he will not see and know (recognize) her.²⁵ At "opening of the eyes," Judah's eyes are closed to Tamar's identity. Indeed, from verse 13 to verse 24, Tamar's name is never used in the text, allowing the reader to "see" her as Judah does, or more precisely, as Judah does not. For Judah, like a spate of recent films, this episode will end with a plot twist and revealed identity; in this case, however, the reader is aware of the twist from the beginning.

As Judah passes by, he takes Tamar for a prostitute and promptly propositions her. She agrees to a future offer of a kid from Judah's flock but demands his seal, cord, and staff as surety. Judah later sends the kid, as promised, via his friend the Adullamite, who cannot find her. The locals inform him that there has never been a prostitute there. Some time later, rumor reaches Judah that Tamar is pregnant by harlotry. He angrily condemns her to be burned. When brought out, she shows to Judah his staff, seal, and cord, saying, "By the man, whose these are, am I with child" (Genesis 38:25). Judah, recognizing them as his own, suddenly understands what has taken place and declares that Tamar is in the right and he in the wrong.

Tamar veils herself not because veils were traditionally worn by harlots, but to conceal her identity from Judah. Judah likely assumed she was a harlot because she was at a crossroads or city entrance, where harlots traditionally stationed themselves.²⁶ Perhaps a harlot is what Judah wanted or hoped to see, manifested by his abruptness in what Robert Alter terms "a wonderfully businesslike exchange. . . . Wasting no time with preliminaries, Judah immediately tells her, 'Let me lie with you.'" His "sexual appetite will not tolerate

postponement, although he has been content to let Tamar languish as a childless widow.”²⁷

Nevertheless, Judah should not be castigated as the Israelite equivalent of a businessman planning to cheat on his wife while ostensibly on a business trip. The text attempts to minimize his sexual guilt through the inclusion of several details. Judah’s wife has died, and the mourning period has passed. The act was clearly not premeditated, as Judah encountered her by chance (from his perspective) on the normal route to sheep shearing and did not bring anything for payment. There is no indication that such actions were habitual on Judah’s part, nor does it happen again with Tamar. “The text is careful to emphasize that had Judah known the identity of the woman, he would never have had relations with her: ‘she had covered her face’; ‘he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law’; ‘he was not intimate with her again.’”²⁸

Judah promises Tamar a calf from his flock for payment. Tamar, showing great presence of mind, demands his staff, seal, and cord²⁹ until then. The significance of this is often lost on modern readers. Judah is handing over the Near Eastern equivalent of a wallet with driver’s license and credit cards—identification that will later enable Tamar to establish her innocence. In Mesopotamia, loss of one’s seal resulted in the annulment of all legal agreements.³⁰ That Judah agrees to turn these items over, in spite of the potential problems, attests further to a serious (but apparently temporary) lapse of control over his physical appetite.

Three months later, when Tamar’s pregnancy becomes known, Judah promptly orders that she be brought out and burned.³¹ Judah clearly applies a double standard by having visited a *zonah* (harlot) but condemning his daughter-in-law for having acted as one.³² While being brought out, Tamar produces the staff, cord, and seal of the man responsible and asks Judah to identify their owner. Judah, upon recognizing his own objects, realizes what has happened, and acknowledges his guilt in withholding his son from Tamar. Twins are born to her, and the narrative returns to Joseph in Egypt.

My impression is that many Latter-day Saints are uncomfortable with the sexuality inherent in this story. However, this discomfort stems largely from reading the chapter *as though it took place today*. Though speaking in a different context, Elder Oaks’s statement applies to this and other Old Testament stories: “We should judge the actions of our predecessors on the basis of the laws and commandments and circumstances of *their day, not ours*.”³³ By Israelite standards, Tamar had justifiably manipulated Judah into carrying out

the responsibility he had shirked for many years, depriving her in the process of children, of inheritance, and of the opportunity to remarry. In retrospect, she had even prevented him from visiting a harlot. Judah acknowledges all this in verse 26 once her identity becomes known to him (King James Version “she hath been more righteous than I,” or my translation, “she has acted more rightly than I have”). Genesis records neither taint of illicitness in their offspring nor criticism of Tamar. Her actions were unusual but, once clearly understood, not immoral by “the laws and commandments and circumstances of [her] day.” Helping Latter-day Saints understand these laws, commandments, circumstances, and culture mitigates much of the discomfort with this chapter.

Placement

Though its insertion into the Joseph story seems random, the presence of several literary themes common to Genesis 37 and 39 (extending further into the Joseph story in some cases) demonstrates the deliberate and skillful placement of this episode. These include repeated wording and themes of deception, recognition, and reversal. Some themes link all three chapters together, some link 37 to 38, and others link 38 to what follows. Since these themes have been explored in depth elsewhere, I will summarize only two.³⁴

First is the theme of deception involving a piece of clothing. In Genesis 37, Judah proposes a plan, which he and his brothers carry out. They sell Joseph instead of killing him, then kill a goat, dip Joseph’s special coat³⁵ in the blood, and bring it to their father, Israel. They present the coat to him and say *hakkō-na*, “please recognize this, whether it is Joseph’s coat or not.” Thus is Israel deceived by means of Joseph’s coat.³⁶ In Genesis 38, Judah, the deceiver, is in turn deceived as to Tamar’s identity by means of her veil.³⁷ When Tamar is brought out to be burned, she presents the tokens of Judah’s identity (his staff, seal, and cord), ironically using the phrase from Judah’s plan against him: *hakkō-na*, “please recognize to whom these belong.” Following Joseph’s final rebuff in Genesis 39, Potiphar’s wife deceives her husband by means of Joseph’s torn garment, resulting in his incarceration.³⁸

A second theme involves Judah’s personal development. In Genesis 38, he promises a calf to Tamar in payment but leaves tokens of his identity as a pledge of that payment. Later in the Joseph story, after years have passed, he will offer himself as a pledge that his brothers will return with Benjamin. Thus, Judah progresses from selfishness (offering tokens of himself as a pledge

to pay a prostitute) to selflessness and redemption in the Joseph story (offering himself as a pledge for the good of his family, redeeming Benjamin and sparing Israel pain). In portraying this episode in Genesis 38, we also come to understand how Judah loses the birthright, which passes to Joseph.³⁹

Teaching Suggestions

Since the circumstances and culture have changed significantly, students today may not see immediately how to reapply this to themselves, as Nephi teaches us to do in 1 Nephi 19:23. How can this information be made to serve a practical teaching purpose? Joseph is frequently used as an example of how to flee temptation and maintain sexual purity; Judah's actions in the prior chapter can profitably serve as a foil to Joseph's actions, as well as teach some lessons on their own. Under no pressure but personal appetite, Judah is immoral. Judah is juxtaposed and contrasted with Joseph, who is moral even when it would be to his advantage not to be. The following contrasts may prove useful.

1. In Genesis 38:1, Judah deliberately chooses to leave his brothers, and actively “went down” to dwell with the Canaanites, but Joseph was removed from his family by force and trickery and “was brought down to Egypt” (39:1). How do Judah's choices of associates and surroundings influence him negatively in this story?

2. Judah, acting purely on the impulse of a moment and with no apparent second thoughts, takes the sexual offensive. Joseph, by contrast, defends himself repeatedly over many days from the propositions of his superior. Judah demonstrates what can happen when one consistently chooses less-than-ideal influences. Joseph, however, shows us that we have the ability to remain righteous and make good decisions when we find ourselves in negative circumstances through no fault of our own. We must avoid seeking temptation and sin when it is not pressed upon us as well as be able to resist temptation under circumstances we do not choose.

3. Joseph conceivably has something temporal to gain and everything to lose by not giving in to Potiphar's wife, yet he does not. Judah has nothing to gain but temporary fulfillment of his sexual appetite, and much to lose. Joseph chooses to focus on the potential sin and does not rationalize his circumstances.

4. Judah takes Tamar as a prostitute, thus reducing a child of God to a nameless object and a means of temporary gratification. By contrast, Joseph

sees and treats his persistently would-be seductress as a person in her own right and his master's wife, placing her completely off-limits. Prophets have been clear about this aspect of selfishness and dehumanization: "One possessed of selfishness sees others as mere functions or objects to be used—or to be ignored—and not as humans to be helped, to be loved, or to be listened to."⁴⁰ "We must be different than other men. . . . Men of the world may disregard women or see them only as objects of desire or as someone to be used for selfish purposes. Let us, however, be different in our conduct and in our relationships with women."⁴¹

Judah and Tamar have puzzled many commentators over the years, but once the cultural setting and the literary connections are understood, the foreignness of the story is lessened, and it becomes an asset and moral inspiration for both personal devotional study and in deriving lessons from Genesis. By juxtaposing Joseph's actions and attitudes with those of Judah, Joseph shines all the brighter. Students will find more strength in Joseph once they see him in contrast to Judah in the previous chapter. **RE**

Notes

1. "The stories of Genesis are often challenging and stimulating, but they seldom if ever propose simple models to be imitated" (John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004], 90). Indeed, the Old Testament rarely, if ever, refers to the patriarchs as models to be emulated as Helaman did with his sons Lehi and Nephi in Helaman 5:6. Isaiah 51:2 says to "look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you," but the emphasis is on God's power in blessing them.

2. This term, in essence, describes the ability to read and understand the story as an Israelite would have. See John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 8–29; Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 13–17.

3. "From Rabbinic times, the odd placement of Gen 38 has caused problems for biblical exegetes and commentators. At the beginning of the stories about Joseph, just when the plot begins to thicken, this chapter on Judah and his adventures seems a disturbing interruption of the narrative flow" (Johanna W. H. Bos, "Out of the Shadows—Genesis 38; Judges 4:17–22; Ruth 3," *Semeia* 42 [1988]: 40).

4. I am not certain that Latter-day Saint commentators would have anything unique to say. Perhaps, from another perspective, some Latter-day Saint teachers could be encouraged to explore non-Latter-day Saint publications for help in understanding the Bible.

5. *Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible* has no entry for Genesis 38. See Kent P. Jackson, comp. and ed., *Joseph Smith's Commentary on the Bible* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006).

6. See <http://scriptures.byu.edu>. Elder Maxwell cites Genesis 38:12, but only as secondary reference. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 1990, 34.

7. From the *LDS Infobase Collector's Library*, the file GENAUTH.NFO. Tamar/Thamar does not appear at all in the *Journal of Discourses*. Ellis Rasmussen's *Latter-day Saint*

Commentary on the Old Testament (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993) has a brief reference on page 70.

8. Although the King James translators of the Bible were instructed that “the names of the prophets, and the holy writers, with the other names in the text [were] to be retained, as near as may be, accordingly as they are vulgarly [ie. commonly] used,” they did not consistently spell names the same way, nor “attempt to establish uniformity either of sound or spelling” (David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 7, 9). Thus we find the spellings Enoch, Henoch, and Hanoah all for the same Hebrew name.

9. I find it interesting that Matthew includes Tamar and Ruth, two women whose offspring came primarily through application of the levirate institution. These two women and their stories “contribute in a direct way to the birth of the Messiah. Such an explicit connection with the birth of Jesus affirms that this royal lineage does not float above the maelstrom of life. This fact presents divine irony: God works in and through what appears weak and despised according to worldly standards in order to accomplish God’s purposes” (*New Interpreter’s Bible*, 606–7).

10. However, it is only fair to point out that Joseph also marries a non-Israelite (Genesis 41:45).

11. Church Educational System, *Old Testament: Genesis–2 Samuel (Religion 301) Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 94.

12. See John Welch, “Toward Becoming a Gospel Scholar,” *This People* magazine, summer 1998, 42–56. Again, since Latter-day Saint sources are nonexistent, one must consult non-Latter-day Saint sources for insight.

13. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 128.

14. Adullam was apparently a city located between Bethlehem and Gath. David hides in the “cave Adullam” in 1 Samuel 22:1.

15. For a discussion of the timing, see Nahum Sarna, *Genesis, JPS Torah Commentary* (Jewish Publication Society, 1989): 264–65.

16. The Hebrew term for the levirate institution is *yibbum*, related to *yābām*, “husband’s brother,” and *yibbān*, “to carry out the duty of a brother-in-law.”

17. Different parts of the Old Testament have clearly undergone later stages of editing, when these later perspectives could be introduced. Even if the traditional position of Mosaic authorship of the Torah is correct, Moses was not contemporary with all the events and stories recounted in Genesis and Exodus. Any account written or edited later can interject anachronistic perspectives.

18. Though today clearly demarcated nation/states with clear laws and a functional legal/justice system are taken for granted, such was not the case at this time, with the result that cultural norms, for all practical purposes, had the force of law.

19. Middle Assyrian and Hittite laws also included levirate legislation. A levirate marriage is also apparently attested at Nuzi (See Sarna, *Genesis*, 266).

20. Debate exists over whether permanent marriage was actually required at this time, or whether the male was responsible only to provide offspring. “If one assumes that the levirate custom demands not only conception of a child but marriage of the widow, then the story [of Judah and Tamar] has an unsatisfactory ending” (George Wesley Coats, “Widow’s Rights: A Crucial in the Structure of Genesis 38,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 [1972]: 465–66).

21. Sarna, *Genesis*, 267. Sarna continues by saying, “The unusual emphasis given to the particular socio-legal background of the story shows that point at issue is the levirate obligation and not the general topic of birth control.”

22. Eryl W. Davies, “Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage,” *Vetus Testamentum* 31, no. 2 (1981).

23. Coats, “Widow’s Rights: A Crucial in the Structure of Genesis 38,” 462.

24. The Hebrew literally reads “when he was comforted,” but we do not know how much time has actually passed. Robert Alter contrasts the clipped portrayal of Judah’s grief over his wife’s death with Israel’s lengthy mourning for Joseph (Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981], 4–5, 7).

25. Melissa Jackson, “Lot’s Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98 (2002): 31.

26. “Prostitution,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:506; see also John R. Huddleston, “Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion: The Garment Motif in Genesis 37–39,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 98 (2002): 57–58.

27. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 8.

28. Sarna, *Genesis*, 8.

29. One scholar has proposed that the staff was not a walking staff, but the pin which secured the seal, allowing it to role freely over clay. See William W. Hallo, “As the Seal Upon Your Heart’ Glyptic Roles in the Biblical World,” *Bible Review* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 20–27.

30. Hallo, “As the Seal Upon Your Heart,” 20–27. No biblical data exists on whether similar strictures obtained in Israel, but the assumption is not an unreasonable one.

31. Scholars speculate on whether being burned was out of the ordinary at this time. The Torah later specifies stoning, unless the woman is a daughter of a priest (see Leviticus 21:9; Deuteronomy 22:21).

32. *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 606.

33. Dallin H. Oaks, in Conference Report, April 1996, 72; emphasis added.

34. Sarna’s *JPS Torah* (263–70), Alter’s *Art of Biblical Narrative* (5–12), and Huddleston’s “Divestiture, Deception, and Demotion” all provide more depth as well as further themes to be explored.

35. The Hebrew term is uncertain. The “many-colored” aspect of the coat derives from the Greek translation of the term (see John A. Tvedtnes, “Priestly Clothing in Biblical Times,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, ed. Donald W. Parry [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994], 658).

36. This pattern extends earlier into Genesis. Jacob deceives Isaac in Genesis 27:11–23.

37. Note also the presence of the goat in the Judah/Tamar story, another connection to the deception of Jacob.

38. Potiphar has no dialogue during his wife’s accusations, leading some to wonder if he saw through his wife’s deception.

39. See 1 Chronicles 5:2.

40. Neal A. Maxwell, *That My Family Should Partake* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 34.

41. Spencer W. Kimball, “Fundamental Principles to Ponder and Live,” *Ensign*, November 1978, 43.