

“What a breach you have made for yourself!”

The History of Jewish Interpretations of Genesis 38

Maayan Lustigman
Department of Jewish Studies
McGill University, Montreal
June 2007

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Arts.

© Maayan Lustigman, 2007



Library and
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-38458-9

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-38458-9

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

**

Canada

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
Introduction.....	6
<i>Genesis 38</i>	6
<i>Literary Context</i>	9
<i>Themes and Difficulties in Genesis 38</i>	10
Chapter 1: The Early Interpreters.....	14
<i>Introduction</i>	14
<i>Inner-biblical interpretations</i>	14
<i>Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal Texts</i>	19
<i>Other Greco-Roman Texts</i>	23
<i>Translations and Versions of the Bible</i>	26
<i>Conclusion</i>	34
Chapter 2: The Early Rabbinic Corpus.....	36
<i>Introduction</i>	36
<i>Talmudic Texts</i>	36
<i>Midrashic Texts</i>	42
<i>Conclusion</i>	46
Chapter 3: Medieval and Pre-Modern Interpretations.....	48
<i>Introduction</i>	48
<i>Shelomo Yitzhaqi</i>	48
<i>Shmuel ben Meir</i>	52
<i>Avraham Ibn Ezra</i>	55
<i>David Kimhi</i>	57
<i>Joseph Bekhor Shor</i>	59
<i>Moshe ben Nahman</i>	60
<i>Bahya ben Asher</i>	63
<i>Yaakov ben Asher</i>	65
<i>Levi ben Gershon</i>	67
<i>The Zohar</i>	70
<i>Yitzhak Abravanel</i>	72
<i>Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno</i>	74
<i>The Karaites</i>	74
<i>The Sixteenth- to Eighteenth Centuries</i>	75

<i>Yehudah ben Bezalel Loew</i>	75
<i>Yaakov Culi</i>	77
<i>Conclusion</i>	78
Chapter 4: The Modern Commentaries	80
<i>Introduction</i>	80
<i>Yaakov Tzevi Mecklenburg</i>	81
<i>Samuel David Luzzatto</i>	83
<i>Baruch Halevi Epstein</i>	85
<i>Joseph Herman Hertz</i>	86
<i>Menahem Kasher</i>	88
<i>The Soncino Chumash</i>	90
<i>Ephraim Avigdor Speiser</i>	91
<i>Gunther Plaut</i>	93
<i>Nahum Sarna</i>	95
<i>The Stone Chumash</i>	97
<i>Robert Alter</i>	99
<i>Conclusion</i>	101
Conclusion	103
<i>Historical Developments</i>	105
Bibliography	110
<i>Bible Interpretations</i>	110
<i>General Works</i>	114

Abstract

This thesis traces the history of Jewish Bible interpretations of Genesis 38, a story that is significant for the history of the early Israelites and today's Jews, as it purports to describe the origins of the Davidic line. I have exposed the possible implications of this account throughout history by exploring interpretations from biblical to modern times and have attempted to define the various difficulties that are addressed. This history is presented as a dialogue and, in this way, I have explored the intricate connections between interpreters and their proposed understandings of the narrative.

Ce mémoire retrace l'histoire de l'interprétation biblique juive du chapitre 38 de la Genèse, un passage important dans l'histoire de la civilisation hébraïque puisqu'il décrit l'origine de la lignée du roi David. J'explore les conséquences des interprétations de ce passage tout au long de l'Histoire, depuis les temps bibliques jusqu'à l'époque contemporaine, et ce, en cherchant à préciser les enjeux philosophiques abordés. Je présente l'histoire des interprétations successives de ce passage sous la forme d'un dialogue au travers duquel j'explore l'univers complexe des interrelations entre, d'une part, ceux qui interprètent et, d'autre part, les interprétations qu'ils proposent du texte.

Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the help and support of many people. Many thanks to my advisor, Dr. B. Barry Levy, who read my numerous revisions, and who always reminded me to be patient with my work. I would also like to thank Joyce Rappaport for her help and suggestions. Thank you to my friends and family who offered their constant support. Finally, many thanks are due to my parents who endured this long process with me and always offered their guidance and love.

Introduction

Genesis 38

¹About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. ²There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. ³She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. ⁴She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. ⁵Once again she bore a son and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.

⁶Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. ⁷But Er, Judah's first-born was displeasing to the Lord, and the Lord took his life. ⁸Then Judah said to Onan, "Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother." ⁹But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. ¹⁰What he did was displeasing to the Lord, and He Took his life also. ¹¹Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Stay as a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up"—for he thought, "He too might die like his brothers." So Tamar went to live in her father's house.

¹²A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. ¹³And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing." ¹⁴So she took off her widow's garb, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. ¹⁵When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. ¹⁶So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Here, let me sleep with you"—for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" ¹⁷He replied, "I will send a kid from my flock." But she said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it." ¹⁸And he said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry." So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb.

²⁰Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. ²¹He inquired of the people of that town, “where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?” But they said, “There has been no prostitute here.” ²²So he returned to Judah and said, “I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute here.” ²³Judah said, “Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her.”

²⁴About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” ²⁵As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are there?” ²⁶Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again.

²⁷When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! ²⁸While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify; This one came out first. ²⁹But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” So he was named Perez. ³⁰Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah.¹

The purpose of this thesis is to trace the history of Jewish interpretations of Genesis 38. This episode may be significant for the evolution of the early Israelites, because it purports to present circumstances thought to lie behind the creation of the Davidic line; more specifically, it describes the human follies that are thought to lead to redemption. Nonetheless, the account of Judah and Tamar is a controversial one because of its negative portrayals of two central biblical figures. Judah prevents his daughter-in-law from fulfilling her final obligation toward her deceased husband – bearing a child that would be considered his – while Tamar deceives her father-in-law in order to realize her responsibility.

¹ Reprinted from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation to the Traditional Hebrew Text*, © 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society, with the permission of the publisher. [This and all other English citations of the Bible in this study are taken from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translations to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), unless otherwise noted.]

Those who use the Bible as a homiletical tool or view the early Israelites as a unique people and attempt to unify contemporary Jewish communities faced with threats such as exile or assimilation may find such descriptions difficult to justify. Moreover, these portrayals pose a threat to the perception of an ideal genealogy, the line that would lead to the Davidic kingdom and ultimately the messianic figure. If it arose from objectionable circumstances, its authority might be subject to challenge.

Thus, in order to validate the elevated status of the genealogy at hand, a lengthy discourse about the original intent of Genesis 38 has arisen. The narrative and its value have been redefined throughout history, with each Bible commentator conveying the circumstances and concerns of his or her time, and this history underlies our present interest.

While some interpreters offer explanations of an apologetic nature, others solve the difficulties by rewriting the Bible, and thus emphasize particular details and values. Some take an expansive approach to the narrative, while others condense it, omitting details they deem insignificant or problematic. Still, others are concerned with the laws and principles that can be drawn from the biblical episode and applied to one's daily life in an attempt to demonstrate the Bible's relevance for contemporary readers.

This study does not attempt to seek out the “true” meaning of Genesis 38 but rather to reveal the conditions that ultimately generated its innumerable Jewish interpretations. By taking a chronological approach to the vast literature of interpretation, this inquiry attempts to provide insight into the common elements with which the commentators approached the Bible and attempted to resolve the difficulties that arose from it. The interpretations, as reflections of intellectual history, cannot be isolated from the contexts that created them. Since they form part of a larger corpus in which reciprocal influences are evident, their interrelationships cannot be denied, and therefore they are best studied in an integrated manner rather than as independent sources.

This examination consists of a chronological sampling of interpretations beginning with inner-biblical references to our account and post-biblical

translations. It explores early rabbinic interpretations, including examples from the Talmud (both Babylonian and Palestinian) and the midrashim, and it follows with an analysis of commentaries from the Middle Ages and the pre-modern period. It concludes with a discussion of modern commentaries.

The careful reader will note that this thesis does not include a study of feminist writings. Genesis 38 relates the story of Tamar, a noteworthy female figure in biblical narrative, and has consequently drawn the attention of many post-modern writers, particularly in the area of feminist thought. These writers add to the discussion of the Judah and Tamar episode, and they address issues that are minimized or neglected by the traditional interpreters. Nonetheless, they will not be considered here because they expose an area of research that requires a great deal of attention and to include it in the following analysis would expand it to an inappropriate size.²

According to Martin Jan Mulder “the text does not exist without its interpretation.”³ Throughout this study I will illustrate the way in which the understandings of Genesis 38, while they may change and expand in detail, consistently address the same issues and demonstrate mutual concerns over the centuries.

Literary Context

The final fourteen chapters of Genesis revolve around Jacob’s favored son, Joseph. While they have the potential to stand independent of the rest of the

² For those who wish to explore the feminist interpretations of Genesis 38, the following list provides some initial sources to consider: Athalya Brenner, “Female Social Behavior: Two Descriptive Patterns within the ‘Birth of a Hero’ Paradigm,” *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986) 257-273; Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, “Tamar and the limits of patriarchy: between rape and seduction,” *Anti-Covenant: Counter-reading Women’s Lives in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989) 135-156; Melissa Jackson, “Lot’s daughters and Tamar as tricksters and the patriarchal narratives as feminist theology,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26,4 (2002) 29-46; Randy L. Maddox, “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t: Tamar – a feminist foremother,” *Daughters of Sarah* 13 (1987) 14-17; Nobuko Morimura, “The Story of Tamar: A Feminist Interpretation of Genesis 38,” *Japan Christian Review* 59 (1993) 55-67; Susan Niditch, “The wronged woman righted; an analysis of Genesis 38,” *Harvard Theological Review* 72, 1/2 (1979) 143-149; Carol Smith, “The story of Tamar; a power-filled challenge to the structures of power,” *Women in the Biblical Tradition* (1992) 16-28.

³ See Martin Jan Mulder, *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) xxiii.

book and often are referred to as a novella, they form an essential point of transition for the reader to move from the patriarchal narratives to those about the early Israelites in Egypt – the setting of the book of Exodus.

Genesis 37 reintroduces Joseph and his brothers and describes him as the favored son. His brothers resent his honored status and his boastful attitude, and thereupon decide to sell him. They return to their father Jacob with Joseph's cloak, whereupon he concludes that his son has been killed by an animal,⁴ thus causing him to fall into a state of despair. The novella continues in Genesis 39, after some time, describing Joseph as having been given an elevated status in Egypt;⁵ therefore, when his brothers come looking for provisions during a famine, they find themselves confronting the man they once tormented. In due course Joseph reveals himself, following which Jacob discovers that his beloved son, believed to be dead, is alive.

Thus the narrative of Genesis 38 comes at an awkward time and disrupts the narrative flow of the Joseph story. The controversial episode of Judah and Tamar shifts the focus from Joseph to them and therefore begs the question: As a seeming interruption to the Joseph story, what is the significance of Genesis 38?

Themes and Difficulties in Genesis 38

Both textual and conceptual difficulties arise within the narrative.⁶ A few interpretations address both types of questions simultaneously, but most interpreters deal more with the conceptual difficulties than the textual ones. This results primarily from the assumption that the text is correct. Moreover, because the narrative's significance lies in the circumstances that led to the genealogical line that played a central role in early Israelite history, interpreters are interested in justifying the status of the lineage, a conceptual issue in itself. Consequently,

⁴ Gen. 37:33.

⁵ Potiphar gives Joseph jurisdiction over all that is his (except for his מְנִיחָה — sometimes interpreted literally, as the food he ate, and often interpreted as a euphemism referring to his wife); see Gen. 39:4-6.

⁶ Textual difficulties are limited to linguistic, philological and literary issues, while conceptual difficulties refer to problems that arise, for the most part, due to inconsistencies between the apparent implication of the biblical passages and the moral standards and values of the interpreters and their contexts.

the textual difficulties take on a secondary status and are less likely to be discussed.

One of the first textual difficulties concerns the naming of Judah's sons. The interpreters note the textual inconsistency in the use of both the masculine and feminine forms of the verb קָרַא. While Judah names his firstborn, Er, the following two sons are named by his wife. No reason is offered, and the careful reader is stimulated to find an explanation.

Another textual issue, also of conceptual nature, concerns the use of the two terms זָוָנָה and קָדְשָׁה to refer to Tamar; however, it is not clear why two different words are used. Both imply a sexual encounter but the contexts differ. A זָוָנָה is a common prostitute, while a קָדְשָׁה is a woman involved in temple or cult prostitution.⁷ These terms give insight into the context that formed the Judah and Tamar account and illustrate possible non-Israelite influences on the Bible. Most relevant to this analysis, however, is that these words help justify Judah's actions. If Judah has slept with a common harlot, his behavior is inappropriate. But if his relations with Tamar are interpreted as a ritual act, possibly related to the sheep-shearing festival he attends in Timnah,⁸ his behavior may be considered acceptable.

Finally, the placement of Genesis 38 is a textual issue addressed by most, if not all, interpreters. The narrative disrupts the Joseph story, and while verbal and thematic connections do exist between the two episodes, the interruption is unsubstantiated. Hence, interpreters note this interlude and seek to explain its significance.⁹

⁷ For a discussion of these terms see Michael C. Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigial Motifs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966) 185-196. See also Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 269.

⁸ Scholars have proposed a direct relation between sheep-shearing feasts and ritual fornication (as a form of fertility rite). See Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigial Motifs," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966) 185-196; Joan Goodnick Westenholz, "Tamar, Qedesa, Qadistu, and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia," *The Harvard Theological Review* 82, 3 (1989) 245-265.

⁹ In addition to the many early, rabbinic, medieval and modern interpretations that address this issue, there are several additional articles that discuss the structure of the Bible, specifically, the placement of Genesis 38. See George W. Coats, "Redactional Unity in Genesis 37-50," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974) 15-21; Richard J. Clifford, "Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob

Many conceptual difficulties arise in the Genesis 38 account. For example, Judah's wife appears to be of Canaanite origin, a clear dismissal of the biblical prohibition against such marriages (Gen. 24:3 and Ex. 34:15-16). Did this proscription exist during the period in which the story is set? If so, how can Judah's behavior be justified and his descendants be given such an elevated status in the history of the Israelites? What did Er and Onan do to displease God and to deserve being killed? More importantly, how can one justify the fact that God took their lives?

This Genesis chapter pivots around the theme of the levirate law and the fact that its non-fulfillment was a constant challenge faced by Tamar. Meanwhile, its passages do not provide the details of this practice. The widow's rights, as well as the duties of the levir, are left unexplained. An understanding of the levirate law is essential to appreciating the circumstances of Judah and Tamar, and thus, interpreters have looked to the book of Ruth and to Deut. 25:5-10 for the particulars.¹⁰

The substantiation of actions taken by both Judah and Tamar has been the common focus of Jewish interpretations of Genesis 38. Judah seems dishonest and immoral; he approaches a harlot by the road soon after his wife's death, and the scriptural text omits a description of Judah's mournful state.¹¹ How is it

Story," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66,4 (2004) 519-532; J. A. Emerton, "Judah and Tamar," *Vetus Testamentum* 29,4 (1979) 403-415; J. A. Emerton, "An Examination of a Recent Structuralist Interpretation of Genesis XXXVIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976) 79-98; J. A. Emerton, "Some Problems in Genesis XXXVIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975) 338-361; Judah Goldin, "The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977) 27-44.

¹⁰ While interpreters relate Genesis 38 and Tamar's circumstances to the Book of Ruth, Deut. 25:5-10 is the biblical passage more frequently used to explain the levirate law. For more information on and analysis of the levirate law in the ancient Near East and among the Israelites see the following articles: Eryl W. Davies, "Inheritance Right and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," *Vetus Testamentum* 31,2 (1981) 138-144, 257-268; Samuel Belkin, "Levirate and Agnate Marriage in Rabbinic and Cognate Literature," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 60 (1970) 275-329; Millar Burrows, "The Ancient Oriental Background of Hebrew Levirate Marriage," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 77 (1940) 2-15; Millar Burrows, "Levirate Marriage in Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59,1 (1940) 23-33; George W. Coats, "Widow's Rights: A Crux in the Structure of Genesis 38," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972) 461-466.

¹¹ Judah's loss (his wife and two sons) is significantly greater than Jacob's, as described in Genesis 37; however, his state of mourning is trivial as compared to his father's. A careful reader would be impelled to juxtapose the two figures, and in this way would conclude that Judah is portrayed as self-interested, as opposed to the selfless depiction attributed to his father.

appropriate for Judah to approach a harlot, especially considering the circumstances? Along the same lines, Tamar is scheming and deceptive. Why does she not reveal her identity to Judah when he assumes her to be a common prostitute?

Another conceptual issue has to do with Tamar's punishment. As a result of her sexual encounter with Judah, she conceives, and the report of her alleged act of adultery¹² and resulting pregnancy, prompts Judah to sentence her to being burned. How can Judah, who has prevented Tamar from fulfilling her obligation to her deceased husband, and who has played a central role in her pregnancy, mete out punishment?

Genesis 38 concludes with a genealogy and thereby draws attention to the connections between Tamar's son Peretz, David, his kingdom, and ultimately, the Messiah, considered to be one of his offspring. Such difficulties as those outlined above shed a negative light on Judah and Tamar and therefore, interpreters seek ways to validate both figures' aberrant behaviors as depicted in the narrative so that their significant roles in biblical history are justified. Interpreters adapt the episode and attempt to enhance their portrayals by offering apologetics and justifications.

Whether a result of ambiguity, textual inconsistency, or changing moral standards, such issues as these were addressed by numerous interpreters over the centuries. As a story recounting the origins of a central genealogical line in early Israelite history, it is remarkable to see how the interpretations have attempted to resolve the matters at hand. Most noteworthy are the common interests and concerns that can be traced from the very beginnings of biblical interpretation to this day.

¹² In the proceeding chapters, it becomes clear that some interpreters do not consider Tamar's actions to be worthy of criticism. They frequently argue that she was never legally bound to Judah's sons, and therefore she was never married.

Chapter One

The Early Interpreters

Introduction

This chapter will explore early interpretations¹³ of Gen. 38:1-30. It will examine inter-textual references, as well as versions of the text, including post-biblical translations.¹⁴ Apocryphal, pseudepigraphal, and other Greco-Roman texts will be included in the discussion.

These early interpretations use the Bible as a means of explaining the realities of their contemporary worlds and consequently they manipulate the text to reflect contemporary interests and concerns. In contrast to many later interpretations, these do not follow the Bible verse by verse; rather they elucidate selections from Genesis in ways that help explain the realities or patterns of thought to which these interpreters are committed.¹⁵

Inner-biblical interpretations

Some biblical passages relate to Genesis 38 not because they are active explanations of that text, but rather because they provide related information that can help the reader explain it. Regardless, most are concerned with the families

¹³ What I refer to here as “early” interpretations is perhaps not an adequate term, as this chapter examines texts spanning hundreds of years. I choose to refer to them as “early” because they appear to be the foundations of later commentaries. The concerns and themes they introduce are further developed in later rabbinic, medieval, and modern interpretations.

¹⁴ Translation is considered to be a form of interpretation as its process reflects “linguistic and contextual exegesis.” The interpreters illustrate their understandings of the Bible in the lexical choices they make, and these are “influenced by the[ir] immediate context and the[ir] conceptual world.” For a more in depth explanation, see Emanuel Tov, “The Septuagint,” *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996) 168-174.

¹⁵ This is particularly true with regard to sources that arose in the Greco-Roman contexts.

that originated with Judah and Tamar,¹⁶ thus illustrating the central role of Peretz as an ancestor of the Davidic line.¹⁷

Gen. 24:65 describes Rebekah's behavior when she sees Isaac and, based on its linguistic parallel to Gen. 38:14,¹⁸ it may help to reveal the intended meaning of Tamar's actions – she covers herself before sitting at Petah Enaim. The uncertainty rests with Tamar's motivation; interpreters have explained her behavior as a feature of common prostitutes, an illustration of her modest nature, or a desire to conceal her identity. Assuming Rebekah acted out of modesty when meeting her groom for the very first time, Tamar's behavior may be considered an indication of similar nature.¹⁹ While Rebekah's behavior appears to be rooted in modesty,²⁰ the nature of Tamar's action is unclear.²¹

Genesis 46 provides a genealogical list that notes: “Er and Onan had died in the land of Canaan.”²² This passage does not simply list descendants but expands on the circumstances of their deaths. How does this observation contribute to the greater Bible story? In its first verses, Genesis 38 describes Judah as going to Canaan and finding a wife who soon bears him three sons. No substantial reason is given to assume that they ever left the region. But, repetition

¹⁶ Tamar bore twins, Peretz and Shelah, from whom the Peretzite and Shelanite clans descended. These references include Gen. 46:12-13; Num. 26:19-22; Ruth 4:12; 1 Chron. 2:3-5.

¹⁷ This is noted by most interpreters, and is a predominant factor in many rabbinic understandings of the text.

¹⁸ Gen. 24:65 reads as follows: וְתַכֵּס בֶּצְעִיף וְתַהֲלִל; Gen. 38:14 reads as follows: וְתַכֵּס בֶּצְעִיף הַצְעִיף וְתַחֲכָס. The latter passage adds that Tamar “wrapped” herself – this may or may not be a significant modification in terms of the meaning of Tamar's actions. Along the same lines, in Gen. 20:16 the expression כְּסֹת עַזְנִים suggests Sarah's intentional concealment from Abimelech; one may draw on the possible relation to פְּתַח עַזְנִים in Genesis 38 and assert that Tamar's action was simply intended to conceal her identity, and it had nothing to do with modesty.

¹⁹ When rabbinic interpretations explain that Judah thought Tamar was a harlot because she covered herself, two questions arise: When did she cover herself – at Petah Enaim or in Judah's house? Was this to conceal her identity or was it an act of modesty? If she covered herself at Petah Enaim this implies that she did not always dress this way and may indicate a period of hiding or prostitution. If she covered herself in Judah's house this suggests that this was her standard dress – a possible indication of modesty.

²⁰ This statement is based on the circumstances – she is meeting the man she is to wed for the first time and she hopes to give a positive impression. John Skinner claims that “putting on the veil...is part of the wedding ceremony” [John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976) 348].

²¹ While the Genesis 38 passage, taken literally, suggests that Judah thought Tamar was a prostitute because she had covered herself (וַיַּרְא יְהוָה וַיַּחֲשֹׁב לֹוֹנָה כִּי כְסֹתָה פְנִיה) the nature of her action is ambiguous. It is unclear whether it symbolizes modesty, intent to conceal, or harlotry.

²² Gen. 46:12. The same statement appears in the book of Numbers (see Num. 26:19).

becomes a tool for emphasizing the distinction between Judah's first sons – those who acted in a displeasing way and whose lives were taken by God – and the twins born from Tamar. In the history of the Israelites, this accentuates Peretz's status, as well as that of his descendants.

Like the Genesis and Numbers passages, the concern with genealogy is reiterated once again in 1 Chronicles, which says,

The sons of Judah: Er, Onan, and Shelah; these three, Bath-shua the Canaanite woman bore to him. But Er, Judah's first-born, was displeasing to the Lord, and He took his life. His daughter-in-law Tamar also bore him Peretz and Zerah. Judah's sons were five in all.²³

The references to Judah's first wife, and the irony that Er's displeasing behavior is mentioned while Onan's is disregarded,²⁴ are noteworthy here. Similar to Genesis 46, Judah's first sons are distinguished from those of Tamar. Once again, this helps draw attention to the important roles of Tamar and Peretz in the history of the early Israelites.²⁵

The book of Ruth often has been compared to the story of Judah and Tamar because of thematic and linguistic parallels.²⁶ Their close relation is exemplified in Ruth 4:12, which says, “And may your house be like the house of Peretz whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring which the Lord will give you by this young woman.” Rather than emphasize the difficulties that arise from the Genesis 38 account, this passage views the encounter between Judah and Tamar in terms of its positive outcome. Their union is a model and therefore is considered a blessing.

²³ 1 Chron. 2:3-4

²⁴ Why is it that Onan's behavior, clearly delineated in the biblical passage, is omitted, while Er's displeasing behavior, undefined in the Bible, and premature death is noted?

²⁵ This passage also serves as a possible source for those who interpret כנען as Canaanite instead of the common interpretation, “merchant.”

²⁶ Some parallels include the fact that both Ruth's husband and his brother died, thus leaving her without a potential levir (see Ruth 1:6); Ruth, similar to Tamar, took control of the situation in order to produce children; both Tamar and Ruth are ancestresses of the Davidic line (see Ruth 4:18-22). Also see Ellen van Wolde, “Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives,” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*, vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

In addition to the verses already noted, others are used by interpreters to better understand the episode. For example, Lev. 21:9 states: “If the daughter of a priest defiles herself through harlotry, it is her father whom she defiles; she shall be put to the fire.” This passage provides a context that acknowledges the possible punishment for prostitution as burning. It also presents a reason to explain Tamar as a descendent of a priest. However, two assumptions are required: first, that Tamar did commit harlotry, a point of contention, and second, that she was the daughter of a priest.²⁷

Regardless of its central role in the narrative, the levirate law, as described in the passages of Genesis 38, is ambiguous. The text clearly explains that Onan, Judah’s second son, is expected to have sexual relations with Tamar in order to provide a child that will be considered his deceased brother’s, but no further information is provided. Accordingly, interpreters seek further details in Deut. 25:5-10 to explain the circumstances depicted in Genesis 38.²⁸ The text reads as follows:

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir’s duty. The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel. But if the man does not want to marry his brother’s widow, his brother’s widow shall appear before the elders in the gate and declare, “My husband’s brother refuses to establish a name in Israel for his brother; he will not perform the duty of a levir.” The elders of his town shall then summon him and talk to him. If he insists, saying, “I do not want to marry her,” his brother’s widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up

²⁷ Sources that maintain that Tamar was the daughter or descendent of Shem include Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (see Gen. 38:6, 24); Gen. R. 85:10; Tanh. B., *Va-yeshev* 17 (1, 187).

²⁸ Some scholars have noted that the levirate law underwent a process of development and, with it, a series of modifications. They assert that the Genesis text reflects the law in its earliest stage, while the Deuteronomy passages contain a description as it was at a later point. Generally, the evidence used to support such an assertion is that in Genesis 38 the choice of refusing the levirate duty is non-existent (*halitsah*). When Onan behaves improperly, he displeases God and is punished with death. Conversely, the Deuteronomy text gives the brother of the deceased a choice. Deut. 25:7-10.

his brother's house! And he shall go in Israel by the name of "the family of the unsandaled one."

The principle difference between Genesis and Deuteronomy is that the latter gives the levir the opportunity to refuse the practice while the former entails no such option.²⁹

Josh. 15:34 provides a list of towns within the confines of Judea, including עיון, which is drawn in parallel to פתח עיניים and frequently used to support the view that it refers to a formal place designation.³⁰ Some interpreters explain פתח עיניים as a formal place name, but others understand it to be a descriptive label – either of where Tamar sits, her mindset, or her behavior.³¹ Similarly, when in Gen. 38:12-14 Judah sees a harlot by the road he is on his way to Timnah. Jud. 15:5 refers to a town with that same name, and is therefore regularly used in an effort to situate the Timnah of Genesis. Moreover, it is used to explain the meaning of Judah's ascent to Timnah, as opposed to Samson's descent in the book of Judges.³²

The references to names that occur in Genesis 38 ignore the major conceptual difficulties that arise within that narrative. Instead, the focal point lies in the lineage generated through Judah and Tamar, thus

²⁹ While Deuteronomy offers more detail concerning the levirate law, one should be cautious in using it to explain the much earlier Genesis narrative. According to some scholars the two were neither written by the same author, nor compiled in the same period; thus the passages should not be studied as compliments to one another without proper consideration.

³⁰ The slight difference in spelling is an additional ' in Genesis. The understanding that עיניים refers to a geographical location is found mostly in later interpretations. The rabbis do discuss the expression in BT Sotah 10a and generally interpret it metaphorically. Conversely, later interpreters such as Samuel David Luzzatto, Gunther Plaut and Nahum Sarna assert that this term does indeed refer to a place name. See Samuel David Luzzatto, *Perush Shadal 'al Hamisha Humshe Torah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965) 158; Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981) 25; Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 267.

³¹ Some claim that she prayed to God and asked not to leave empty-handed. Others maintain that she opened Judah's eyes by answering several questions he posed to her before engaging in sexual relations.

³² This divergence may be indicative of a larger significance, forewarning Samson's ultimate punishment for deeds done, while Judah's rewards are foreshadowed.

acknowledging the unique nature of the Genesis 38 narrative and its importance as a story of origins.

Apocryphal and Pseudepigraphal Texts³³

Attempts to polish the images of Judah and Tamar are a predominant factor in the Testament of Judah and the Book of Jubilees. Dating back to the second century B.C.E., the Book of Jubilees focuses on the early Israelites up to the time of Moses.³⁴ At the time of its composition, as well as throughout most of biblical history, the tribes of Judah and Levi were prominent,³⁵ thus explaining the author's aspiration to enhance Judah's image and resolve the discrepancy between his elevated status and behavior. The need to justify his prominence is expressed in Jubilees 20 and in chapter 41 where the author recounts the episode.

Jubilees' first reference to Genesis 38 occurs when Abraham instructs his descendants to follow in the ways of God.³⁶ He teaches that any woman who fornicates should be punished by fire. A parallel can be drawn to Lev. 21:9, which states that if a daughter of a priest behaves as a harlot she shall be put to death by fire. The Leviticus passage provides a possible explanation for the punishment Judah was going to mete out to Tamar in Gen. 38:24, and therefore Jubilees accepts this sentence as appropriate for Tamar's behavior.

Jubilees 41 recounts the story of Judah and Tamar and manipulates the text in ways that diminish Judah's guilt and responsibility for her unfortunate circumstances. While Er wanted a wife of Canaanite origin, Judah prohibited such relations, and this suggests that Tamar was an Israelite.³⁷ Jubilees explains that Er wanted a Canaanite wife because of his mother's Canaanite origin. Moreover,

³³ For a brief explanation of these texts see Devorah Dimant, "Use and Interpretation of Mikra in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha" in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) 379-380.

³⁴ See O. S. Wintermute, "Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction," *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Ed. James H. Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913) 35.

³⁵ Wintermute 36.

³⁶ See Jub. 20:4.

³⁷ If Judah frowned upon marriage to Canaanites, the assumption is that he would not have chosen a woman of foreign origin for his son.

Judah's wife forbids Tamar to Shelah³⁸ and prevents the fulfillment of the levirate duty. In this way her foreign origin is confirmed and the blame is shifted to her.³⁹ The Bible suggests that Judah kept Tamar from Shelah because he worried about his son's life. The Book of Jubilees, however, manipulates the text so that Judah is no longer guilty.

In addition to its concern with the portrayals of Judah and Tamar, the Book of Jubilees is also noteworthy for its similarities to other interpretations that follow. For example, when Tamar puts on her veil, she "makes herself beautiful";⁴⁰ a similar motif appears in the targumim where she is described as adorning herself, a focus that gives the impression that she actively sought to seduce Judah.

Regardless of its possible influences on later sources, Jubilees introduces an element that does not reappear in subsequent interpretations. It describes Judah as going to Tamar's father and brothers, where he tells them that she must be brought out and burnt to death because of the defilement she has brought upon Israel.⁴¹ Tamar's family is never once mentioned in the Bible, so why is there a need to integrate them now? Did she not belong to Judah's family now that she was married to his sons? Jub. 41:27-28 says,

And we told Judah that his two sons had not lain with her and therefore his seed stood for a second generation and it would not be uprooted because in the integrity of his eyes he went and sought judgment because by the judgment of Abraham, which he commanded his sons, Judah wanted to burn her with fire.

Tamar's marriages to Er and Onan were never consummated and thus she should never have been considered legally Judah's daughter-in-law. Therefore, according to Jubilees, Judah was not guilty of having sex with his daughter-in-law.

Jubilees recounts that "'Tamar was more righteous than I. And therefore let them not burn her.' And on account of that she was not given to Shelah. And

³⁸ This recurs in the Testament of Judah.

³⁹ This shift in blame is repeated in the Testament of Judah. In later interpretations, there is debate as to whether Judah's wife was a Canaanite or a merchant.

⁴⁰ Jub. 41:9.

⁴¹ Jub. 41:17.

therefore he did not approach her again.”⁴² This statement is an acknowledgement of Judah’s active role in Tamar’s pregnancy; it should not be considered a confession for having gone back on his word to give her to Shelah. This text separates the original clauses and, in this way, suggests that Tamar was kept from Shelah because she engaged in sexual relations with Judah.

Jubilees’ didactic account says that “everyone who lies with his daughter-in-law or with his mother-in-law causes defilement. In the fire they shall burn the man who has lain with her and also the woman. And the wrath and punishment he will cause to cease from Israel.”⁴³ While the biblical narrative depicts the Israelite ancestors in a positive light, it also transmits a broader lesson to its larger community.

Like the Book of Jubilees, the Testament of Judah interprets Genesis 38 in an apologetic manner. Tamar is described as non-Canaanite, which is why Er and Onan do not want her to bear their children.⁴⁴ Similarly, the blame is shifted to Judah’s wife – she prohibits Shelah’s marriage to Tamar and, in this way, prevents Tamar from fulfilling her duty. The Testament expands this idea further by adding that she found Shelah a Canaanite wife during Judah’s absence.⁴⁵ Finally, Judah’s wife is a negative influence and this is highlighted when the Testament claims that her death resulted from her wicked nature.⁴⁶

With regard to Tamar sitting at פֶתַח עִירִים, the Testament states that “it was a law of the Amorites, that she who was about to marry should sit in fornication seven days by the gate.”⁴⁷ This is an attempt to rationalize the behaviors of Tamar and Judah; if it is a custom it becomes more acceptable. However, the relevance of this statement to the Bible text is unclear; how does an Amorite law apply to Tamar, as a daughter of Aram?⁴⁸ The Testament’s author seeks to explain

⁴² Jub. 41:19-20.

⁴³ Jub. 41:26.

⁴⁴ T. Jud. 10:1-6.

⁴⁵ T. Jud. 11:3-4.

⁴⁶ T. Jud. 11:5.

⁴⁷ T. Jud. 12:2-3.

⁴⁸ In the Testament, Tamar is described as a descendent of Aram, originally from Mesopotamia (see T. Jub. 10:1). It is plausible to suggest that the author confused the name Aram with the Amorites, leading to the conclusion that the two were synonymous, thus resulting in the view that Tamar was practicing this custom.

Tamar's actions at פֶתַח עִירִים which he interprets as a city gate. It is also possible that the author is seeking a source of origin for a practice with which he or she is familiar – Tamar's actions fit the description and may be the originator. But if Tamar is engaging in this Amorite practice, whose bride is she? According to the Bible, she is a widow. Finally, Tamar may simply be involved in a non-Jewish practice.⁴⁹ Her origin is not mentioned in the Bible; therefore, this may be an attempt to attribute her with a non-Israelite nationality.

Throughout the Testament of Judah, intoxication is a central concern. This is what prompts Judah to marry a Canaanite woman even though his “father had not counseled it.”⁵⁰ Moreover, this is why Judah does not recognize Tamar. Thus, like the Book of Jubilees, the Testament of Judah is an attempt to educate its readers. It explains that there exist two spirits: the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit. One should aspire to attain the spirit of truth, while avoiding intoxication as they lead to the spirit of deceit.⁵¹ By describing Judah as aware of his unfavorable behavior, the Testament reaffirms his honor and sheds a positive light on his character.⁵²

⁴⁹ Amorite frequently is understood to refer to non-Jews, in general.

⁵⁰ T. Jud. 11:3.

⁵¹ T. Jud. 14:1-8. The Dead Sea Manual of Discipline states:

He created man to rule over the earth, designing two spirits for him in which to walk until the time fixed for His visitation, namely the spirits of truth and of deceit. From a spring of light (emanate) the generations of truth and from a well of darkness (emerge) the generations of deceit. And in the hand of the prince of lights is the rule over all the sons of righteousness, and in the ways of light they walk. In the hand of the angel of darkness is all the rule over the sons of deceit, and in the ways of darkness they walk. By the angel of darkness (comes) the aberration of all the sons of righteousness, and all their sins, their offences, their guilt, and their iniquitous deeds (are caused) by his reign, according to God's mysteries, during the period fixed by Him. All their afflictions and their times of suffering (are caused) by the ascendancy of his hostility. All the spirits which are allotted to him, (strive) to trip up the sons of light, but Israel's God and His true angel help all the sons of light. He created the sprits of light and darkness, and upon them He founded every work, and...every action, and upon their ways...The one God loves for all eternity, taking pleasure in all its doings for ever; the other—its assembly He loathes, and all its ways He hates for ever.

[P. Wernberg-Moller, trans., *The Manual of Discipline: Translated and Annotated with an Introduction* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957) 25-26]. While a direct relation cannot be established, the similarities in motif between the Testament of Judah and this Qumran passage are unmistakable.

⁵² The Testament of Judah also describes Judah as praying and repenting, resulting in ultimate forgiveness from God (See Jub. 41:23). This is yet another example of the apologetic nature of these early sources.

Like Judah's image, Tamar's is of great concern. According to the Testament of Judah, his wife and her wickedness stimulated Tamar's actions. Because his wife advised her sons not to procreate through Tamar, she became desperate and was left with one final alternative – to lie with her father-in-law. While her behavior does not correspond to the moral standards of our time, the Testament of Judah defends her and emphasizes the motivations underlying her behavior – loyalty to her husband.

Both the Book of Jubilees and the Testament of Judah frown upon the sexual encounter between Judah and Tamar, and they attempt to resolve this difficulty through apologetics. While they justify their actions, these early sources lack commentary about the narrative's essence – the creation of the genealogy that will lead to ultimate human redemption.

Other Greco-Roman Texts

Philo takes an allegorical approach to Genesis 38 and compares Tamar to two biblical figures – Leah and Moses. In *The Preliminary Studies*, Philo writes that Leah and Tamar are alike – both wear a veil and sit at the crossroads, thus “presenting the appearance of a harlot to passers-by.”⁵³ He explains that both women await someone who will unveil them and reveal their undefiled, “modest” beauty.⁵⁴ More specifically, both women await someone who will discover their Virtue. While some may argue for the coincidental nature of Judah being the first to approach Tamar, Philo suggests otherwise. In his *On Flight and Finding*, Philo depicts Tamar as Virtue and Judah as a king. Kings are naturally incapable of leaving things unexplored,⁵⁵ so Judah's behavior should be considered a natural trait rather than a sign of immorality. He approaches Tamar because of his deep-rooted curiosity and because of his desire to discover the virtue that hides beneath her veil.

⁵³ *De Congressu Quaerendae Eruditioonis* 124. I cannot find a biblical reference to Leah wearing a veil – Philo may have come up with this to make it fit into his philosophical framework.

⁵⁴ *De Congressu* 124. Later rabbinic interpretations, like Philo, interpret Tamar's behavior as a reflection of her modest nature.

⁵⁵ *De Congressu* 125.

Philo further develops this idea and explains that Tamar represents that which is morally excellent and that which is not easily found or attained. He draws on the Bible and claims that Hirah's unsuccessful search for Tamar symbolizes the fact that in "a life of turmoil" Virtue is almost unattainable.⁵⁶

In *On the Change of Names*, Philo draws a parallel between Tamar and Moses. While she covers herself with a veil, Moses covers his face in Ex. 3:6.⁵⁷ Just as Moses did not see God,⁵⁸ so Tamar did not see the man with whom she lay. The meeting between Moses and God is compared to the encounter between Tamar and Judah – both are intimate and give the impression of mystery. Philo's attempt to justify Tamar's behavior is clear – he maintains that those who interpret her actions as deceitful misunderstand the circumstances under which her encounter with Judah took place. Moreover, by relating Tamar to Leah, a matriarch, and to Moses, a great leader of the Israelites, Philo elevates her status regardless of the image as portrayed in the Genesis text.

Like Philo's works Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* is concerned with Tamar's portrayal. *LAB* 9:5 views the account of Judah and Tamar as analogous to the situation it depicts – Pharaoh's decree and Moses' birth. The two episodes are thematically connected – while Tamar's pregnancy is recognized only after three months by those around her,⁵⁹ the Exodus narrative maintains that Moses is hidden by his parents for three months.⁶⁰ Consequently, Pseudo-Philo views the Tamar episode as a precedent to the Moses narrative. The author's concern lies in God's presence or lack thereof with regard to the slavery in Egypt, and thus he asserts that, just as God played an integral role in the Genesis 38 account by helping Tamar fulfill her obligation and ultimately rewarding her with kings among her descendants, so too will God help the people of Israel escape slavery in Egypt and reach the land promised to their forefathers.

According to Pseudo-Philo, she was admirable. The text reads as follows:

⁵⁶ *De Fuga et Inventione* 153.

⁵⁷ *De Mutatione Nominum* 134.

⁵⁸ He covered his face out of fear.

⁵⁹ Gen. 38:24.

⁶⁰ Ex. 2:2.

For when our wives conceive, they will not be recognized as pregnant until three months have passed, as also our mother Tamar did. For her intent was not fornication, but being unwilling to separate from the sons of Israel she reflected and said, ‘It is better for me to die for having intercourse with my father-in-law than to have intercourse with gentiles.’ And she hid the fruit of her womb until the third month. For then she was recognized. And on her way to be put to death, she made a declaration saying, ‘He who owns this staff and this signet ring and the sheepskin, from him I have conceived.’ And her intent saved her from all danger.⁶¹

Tamar risked her life in order to avoid relations with Gentiles. Her cause was a worthy one; therefore Tamar’s actions are acknowledged as part of the Divine plan, and she is saved.

By bestowing upon her the title “mother,” Pseudo-Philo further enhances Tamar’s portrayal and elevates her status to that of a matriarch.⁶² He emphasizes her commitment to Israel and to the covenant and, in this way, enhances her representation. “It is not that Judah is ‘our father,’ but that Tamar is ‘our mother,’ and this can only be meant as the highest praise of this woman, elevating her to matriarchal status.”⁶³ Tamar’s intent, her desire to remain connected to Israel and to God, is associated with Israel’s relation to God. Pseudo-Philo uses the Judah and Tamar account as a model for Israelites in times of crisis, relaying the message that if Israel stands up for its values and beliefs, God will certainly protect them.

In addition to Philo and Pseudo-Philo, one other writer from the Greco-Roman era must be considered. In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus claims to “embrace the entire ancient history of the Israelites.”⁶⁴ He maintains that he will not add nor omit any details.⁶⁵ After having completed his rewritten Bible, he claims to have told the story in full.⁶⁶ This claim cannot be upheld because of the

⁶¹ LAB 9:5.

⁶² See Howard Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, with Latin Text and English Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 409.

⁶³ See Frederick J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 56.

⁶⁴ See Josephus Flavius, *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960) 1:5.

⁶⁵ Ant. 1:17.

⁶⁶ Ant. 20:260.

obvious fact that he does indeed omit several significant biblical episodes such as Genesis 27, which describes Jacob deceiving his father in order to receive the blessing of the firstborn. Ex. 2:12, where Moses is described as killing an Egyptian, is also omitted. Furthermore, the account of the golden calf in Exodus 32 is excluded from Josephus' accounts. Several other narratives are conveniently omitted from his *Antiquities*, including that of Judah and Tamar.

The narratives he omits are similar to those listed in Mishnah Megillah 4:10 and BT Megillah 25a and 25b, which discuss which biblical accounts are to be read and translated and which are not. Both the list I provided above and the rabbis' include episodes that depict the Israelites, or certain significant figures, unfavorably. The difference between the rabbinic list and those omitted by Josephus, however, lies in the fact that according to the rabbis Genesis 38 was to be both read and translated.⁶⁷ Omitting the episode allows Josephus to continue his history of the Jews in a way that does not require justification.⁶⁸

Translations and Versions of the Bible

While this study limits itself to Jewish Bible interpretations, it examines early texts written by both Jewish and Christian communities. These sources form part of the larger dialogue that exists within the interpreters, and in many instances the issues addressed recur in later commentaries thereby illustrating the continuum throughout interpretive history. Two such texts are the Septuagint⁶⁹ and the Vulgate.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Mishnah Meg. 4:10. BT Meg. 25a-b.

⁶⁸ His claims of accuracy and complete recounting of the antiquities of the Jews may have been given as a response to the views of the Samaritans, according to some scholars [see Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 37]. Whereas the Samaritans maintained that the biblical books only up to and including Joshua were accurate, Josephus incorporated narratives from other biblical books. Therefore, his claims of accuracy should be considered declarations that he did not add anything to the Bible – he may have omitted parts of the Hebrew original, but he did not add to it.

⁶⁹The Septuagint was originally produced by Jewish communities as a Jewish translation of the Bible; however these communities stopped using it around the first century C.E. as it had been adopted by Christians. The time of composition for the Septuagint and its canon is thought to be from the third century B.C.E. up until the second century C.E. See Emanuel Tov, "The Septuagint," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) 162-163 for more details concerning its dating, and its use, or lack thereof, by the Jewish communities.

These sources provide similar translations of the original Semitic text. For example, both resolve the confusion that arises because of the different genders of the verb אָמַר. ⁷¹ They remove the first form of the verb and thereby suggest that Judah's wife names all three sons⁷² and, in this way they provide uniformity and stability in the text.

Moreover, they diminish the ambiguity related to the levirate law. Whereas Genesis simply refers to the obligation in terms of producing a child for the deceased,⁷³ the translators address the seemingly difficult nature of the law – that procreation is expected without a binding marital contract; hence, they add that Judah asked his son to marry Tamar.⁷⁴ By including the element of marriage as part of the levirate law, the Bible becomes more relevant to the masses since they can more easily relate to this practice.

With regard to specifying the displeasing behavior of Er and Onan, both the Septuagint and the Vulgate provide details concerning Onan's actions. They emphasize the intentional nature of his action and assert that he spilled his seed to be certain that Tamar would not conceive and would remain unable to fulfill her wifely duties to her dead husband.

Along the same lines, in addition to Tamar simply covering herself with a veil, the Septuagint adds that she “ornaments” her face.⁷⁵ This expansion both emphasizes the deceptive nature of her actions while simultaneously justifying the fact that Judah does not recognize his

⁷⁰ The Vulgate is a later text, translated by Jerome (also known as Eusebius Hieronymus) c. 382. See Benjamin Kedar, “The Latin Translations,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) 314.

⁷¹ Gen. 38:3-5.

⁷² Instead of writing the masculine form, אָמַר, these texts are consistent in writing the feminine form, אָמַרְתָּ. For an example in translation, see *The Septuagint Bible: The Oldest Text of the Old Testament*. Ed. C. A. Muses. Trans. Charles Thomson, (Indian Hills: The Falcons Wing Press, 1960) 63.

⁷³ The Hebrew text describes Judah telling his son Onan to “Join with [his] brother's wife and do [his] duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for [his] brother.” Both Greek and Latin translations add the concept of marriage.

⁷⁴ I write “seemingly” because if one jumps from Gen. 38:8 to Gen. 38:14 the latter passage states that Tamar “had not yet been given to him as wife” (וְהִיא לَا נָתַנְתָּ לוֹ לֶאֱשָׁה), implying that the element of marriage may have been part of the levirate practice.

⁷⁵ See Septuagint, Gen. 38:14.

daughter-in-law. Ultimately, the suggestion that she ornamented her face reduces the degree to which Judah is to blame for his behavior.

For the most part, the Samaritan Pentateuch⁷⁶ differs from the masoretic text in terms of verse division.⁷⁷ For example, verse 12 in the masoretic text states: “A long time afterward, Shua’s daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite.” The Samaritan text reads: “And the days were many. And the daughter of Shua, Judah’s wife, died, and Judah was comforted and went up to Timnah, with his friend, Hirah the Adullamite, to the sheep shearers.”⁷⁸ The Samaritan Pentateuch offers an alternative verse division, and in this way clarifies some of the narrative’s ambiguities.

For example, while the masoretic text states, “And she took off her widow’s clothing from herself, and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself up, and sat at Petah Enaim that is on the way to Timnah because she saw that Shelah had grown up and she had not been given to him as wife,” the Samaritan source divides Gen. 38:14 into two sections: “And she took off her widow’s clothing from herself, and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself up, and sat at Petah Enaim that is on the way to Timnah because she saw that Shelah had grown up. And she had not been given to him as wife.”⁷⁹ That Tamar had not been given to Shelah is isolated from the fact that she sat at Petah Enaim. While the Hebrew text clearly describes the two clauses as being interconnected, the Samaritan source denies the close relation. Tamar’s behavior

⁷⁶ Avraham Tal’s version of the Samaritan Pentateuch bases its spelling and punctuation on Tabya ibn Darta’s book, written in the 1100s [see Avraham Tal, *Hamishah Humshe Torah lefi Nusah Shomron* (Tel Aviv: ‘Universitat Tel-Aviv, 1994) 8]. The majority of my comments are based on Tal’s verse divisions, which may not have been the originally intended divisions of the Samaritan community. Nevertheless, the verse divisions suggest particular understandings of the Genesis 38 account, and are therefore relevant to this analysis of its history of interpretations.

⁷⁷ Similarities can be drawn between the Samaritan Pentateuch and its counterparts, the Septuagint and Vulgate. For example, the biblical passages concerning the naming of Judah’s three sons are modified to suggest that his wife named all three. This interpretation is based on several early manuscripts [See Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) 214].

⁷⁸ This is my own translation of the Samaritan passage. For the Hebrew see Tal 38-9.

⁷⁹ Tal 29.

is therefore unrelated to Judah's non-fulfillment of his promise to give her to his son, an act that would allow Tamar to realize her marital duty.

While the Septuagint and Vulgate have been preserved by Christian communities, and the Samaritan Pentateuch by the Samaritans, the targumim have been preserved by Jewish communities. With regard to Genesis 38, these Aramaic translations are most concerned with the portrayals of Judah and Tamar and they illustrate the early tendency to improve their images.

Targum Onkelos, one of the more literal Aramaic translations of the Bible,⁸⁰ is concerned with justifying Judah's actions. In Gen. 38:14, for example, Onkelos writes that Tamar adorned herself and sat at the crossroads of Enaim. A literal translation of the text would read something like: "So she took off her widow's clothing, covered her face with a veil, and wrapped herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim which is on the way to Timnah."⁸¹ With an emphasis on Tamar's adornments, her efforts to seduce and deceive Judah are highlighted and, in this way, Judah no longer carries the responsibility for his behavior; the fault lies with Tamar's successful adornments.

Onkelos' literal approach is evident when he interprets פֶתַח עֵינִים as an open place on the road to Timnah. He writes that Tamar sat at פרשׁוֹת עֵינִים, the "crossroads of Enaim."⁸² He interprets the Hebrew expression as a descriptive label, and he translates each word separately in order to arrive at his conclusion.

Though primarily literal, Targum Onkelos occasionally modifies the text in a way that shifts the focus. Verse 9, for example, states that Onan, knowing that the child would not be considered his, corrupted "his way"⁸³ on the ground.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ The Samaritan Targum is considered to be even more literal in its approach. Take note, Onkelos was the official Babylonian targum. See Philip S. Alexander, "Jewish Aramaic Translations of Hebrew Scriptures," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004) 217 for a brief discussion of the translation.

⁸¹ This is my own translation of the first part of Gen. 38:14.

⁸² T. Onk. 129.

⁸³ T. Onk. 129.

⁸⁴ Targum Pseudo-Jonathan expands on both Er's and Onan's displeasing behavior. Er "did not have intercourse with his wife according to the manner of all the earth," and Onan destroyed his "seed" upon the ground. See Ps. Jon. 128.

Unlike the Hebrew text which speaks of his “seed” being wasted, Onkelos refers to the sexual act in which Onan is engaged.

Rather than interpret Gen. 38:26 as Judah’s confession and his acknowledgment of Tamar’s righteousness,⁸⁵ Onkelos takes the same approach as other contemporary texts.⁸⁶ “She is right. By me she is pregnant.”⁸⁷ He creates two separate clauses and, in this way, emphasizes Judah’s role in Tamar’s pregnancy while simultaneously toning down Judah’s confession. The focus switches from Judah’s lack of fulfillment of his original promise to give her to Shelah to his role in her pregnancy. In this way, Tamar’s behavior is justified and she is depicted admirably. Similarly, Judah is not reprimanded for his lack of action, but shed in a positive light – he confesses to his role.

Finally, Onkelos addresses the prophetic nature of Genesis 38 in his conclusion: “What great power is upon you to have such strength,”⁸⁸ alluding to the fact that Peretz will be a central ancestor of the Davidic line, and, ultimately, of the Messiah.⁸⁹

Targum Neofiti⁹⁰ is replete with glosses and midrashic expansions of the Bible and parallels can be drawn between it and the earlier translations that have been discussed thus far. For example, like the Septuagint, Vulgate and Samaritan Pentateuch, Neofiti changes the Hebrew in order to resolve the textual inconsistency regarding the naming of Judah’s three sons – Judah’s wife becomes the active participant.⁹¹

This targum, however similar to other early sources, introduces a new understanding of Genesis 38 when it translates ציְב – usually interpreted as a place

⁸⁵ The Hebrew is as follows: צדקה מני.

⁸⁶ The same approach is taken in the Samaritan Pentateuch, Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.

⁸⁷ T. Onk. 130.

⁸⁸ T. Onk. 130. Some may consider this a case of multiple translations. B. Barry Levy explains multiple translations as being part of a “conscious or unconscious editorial process” and claims that “obvious duplications...represent a later aspect of textual development.” See B. Barry Levy, *Targum Neophyti 1: Introduction, Genesis, Exodus*, vol. 1 (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986) 52-53.

⁸⁹ Similar foreshadowing and allusion takes place in Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo Jonathan. See Neofiti 250; Ps. Jon. 130.

⁹⁰ This translation, originally miscataloged as Targum Onkelos, was “discovered” by A. Diez Macho in the Vatican Library in 1956 (see Alexander 218).

⁹¹ T. Neo. 33. The same approach is taken in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan.

name – as a verb referring to Judah’s wife, implying that she ceased to give birth.⁹² Furthermore, Neofiti introduces another novel interpretation when it expands the narrative and explains that Judah did not recognize Tamar because she had always covered her face when living in his house.⁹³ Gen. 38:15 suggests that he did not recognize her because she had covered her face, but it is not clear whether this was normal wear for her or whether being covered at Petah Enaim indicated a special occasion.

Like Neofiti, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan contains a great deal of expansion and is considered to be the “most paraphrastic of all the Pentateuchal targumim: it is estimated to be about twice the length of the original Hebrew text. It is a highly mixed tradition, an amalgam of interpretations from widely different periods.”⁹⁴ With regard to Judah’s descent from his brothers, Pseudo-Jonathan maintains that Judah “lost his possessions,” symbolic of his greatness,⁹⁵ and therefore left his brothers. While offering an explanation for Judah’s departure from his brothers, Pseudo-Jonathan simultaneously provides a sense of continuity; Judah’s descent is what makes for a smooth transition from Genesis 37 to the account of Judah and Tamar.

In addition to Judah’s “descent,” another conceptual difficulty is introduced at the very beginning of Genesis 38. How could Judah, a patriarch of the Israelites, marry a woman of foreign origins, more specifically, a Canaanite? Such relations are clearly frowned upon in the books of Genesis and Exodus;⁹⁶ therefore, those who look to Judah as a role model, an ancestor of the ever-significant Davidic line, are forced to provide an interpretation that resolves this issue. Hence, like later interpretations, Pseudo-Jonathan translates the term כנען (Canaan) as מרים (to bear children).

⁹² ציָב פָּקַת שֵׁם מִקְמָה (“And he was at Chezib; she ceased [to bear children after this]”). A similar interpretation appears in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, as well as Gen. R. 85, 4. I have been unable to locate the origins for the connection between Chezib and the woman’s inability to bear anymore children.

⁹³ This interpretation is one that recurs throughout the history of Jewish Bible interpretation. Some rabbis have expanded the idea further, suggesting Tamar’s modest nature. For a rabbinic example see BT Sotah 10a.

⁹⁴ Alexander 219.

⁹⁵ This interpretation is repeated in the rabbinic literature and will be discussed in further detail when examining Gen. R. 85 and BT Sotah 13b.

⁹⁶ Gen. 24:3 and Ex. 34:11-16.

as “merchant.”⁹⁷ Moreover, the targum claims that the כנעןी, in this narrative, converted. Even if Judah’s wife was originally Canaanite, she converted, thus clearing him of any possible transgression. However, confusion arises from this translation – if she was not of Canaanite origin, conversion was unnecessary.

While the Bible generally explains the names given to its characters, Genesis 38 does not. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan notes this inconsistency and attempts to resolve it by offering its own explanations, both of which allude to the future deaths of Er and Onan. Pseudo-Jonathan maintains that Er’s name represented his destiny “to die childless,” playing on the Hebrew עירני, “lonely” or “childless.”⁹⁸ Similarly, Onan’s name symbolizes the grief that he would cause his father, building on the word ענה, which means to “afflicted” or “humiliate.”⁹⁹ In addition to simply resolving the textual irregularity, Pseudo-Jonathan’s interpretations establish God’s involvement in both Er and Onan’s deaths, and, in this way, the narrative forms part of the larger Divine plan.

Without referring directly to Lev. 21:9, Pseudo-Jonathan adheres to the view that Tamar was the daughter of Shem, a high priest and thereby justifies the decree meted out to her by Judah.¹⁰⁰ This claim recurs in the targum’s version of verse 25 – a major midrashic expansion of the narrative to be discussed below.

The further exploration of verse 25 requires two preliminary observations. Pseudo-Jonathan’s translation of פתח עיניהם as the “crossroads” to which “all eyes look,” a double translation, may be understood literally, as a place on the road that leads to other towns, where one must literally use one’s eyes to decide which path to follow. Later rabbinic, medieval, and modern commentaries provide a similar interpretation in which פתח עיניהם is understood metaphorically. Rather than as a physical place, it is interpreted as a description of Tamar’s actions – she looks to

⁹⁷ For a rabbinic discussion of the term, please see BT Pesahim 50a. This interpretation is based on biblical passages such as Hos. 12:8, Isa. 23:8, and Prov. 31:24.

⁹⁸ T. Ps. Jon. 127.

⁹⁹ T. Ps. Jon. 128. One should note that the Hebrew text never mentions Judah’s grief over the deaths of his two sons; however Judah does grieve because of their actions. As a result of their displeasing behavior, God takes their lives, ultimately resulting in Tamar’s sitting at פתח עיניהם where Judah meets her and engages in sexual relations with her. He grieves and is distressed not as a direct result of his sons’ deaths, but indirectly, because he is ashamed of what he has done and is responsible for—impregnating Tamar (Gen. 38:26).

¹⁰⁰ For other sources see Note 24.

the heavenly gates and prays to God that she should not leave this place empty-handed.¹⁰¹ Hence, Pseudo-Jonathan combines a literal and metaphorical approach to the Bible. Another possibility is that later commentaries used the targum's literal approach as the foundation for their symbolic readings. Regardless of the particulars, one cannot deny the relation between these earlier and later sources.

To explain why Judah did not recognize his daughter-in-law, Pseudo-Jonathan asserts that he "did not love her" because of her "sullen" appearance.¹⁰² Unlike Onkelos, who maintains that Tamar adorned herself, Pseudo-Jonathan offers a different interpretation – she was not physically appealing, so he never took notice of her. He paid attention only now because he "compared her to a harlot."¹⁰³

Finally, Pseudo-Jonathan's midrashic approach is apparent in verse 25, which says:

So Tamar was brought out to be burned, and she looked for the three pledges but did not find them. She lifted up her eyes to the heavens on high and said thus: "I beseech by the mercies before you, O Lord, answer me in this hour of my distress, and enlighten my eyes that I may find my three witnesses. And I will raise up for you from my loins three holy ones who will sanctify your name by going down to the furnace of fire in the valley of Dura." That hour, the Holy One, blessed be he, beckoned to Michael, and he enlightened her eyes so that she found them. She took them and threw them at the feet of the judges and said, "The man to whom these pledges belong, by him I am pregnant. Yet even if I were burned I would not make him known. But the Lord of the world will put it in his heart to recognize them, and he will deliver me from this great judgment." And when Judah saw them he recognized them. Then he said in his heart, "It is better for me to be ashamed in this world, which is a passing world, than to be ashamed in the presence of my fathers, the righteous ones, in the world to come; it is better for me to be burned in this life in extinguishable fire than to burn in the world to come in inextinguishable fire. For this is measure for measure, according to what I said to my father Jacob: 'Identify, I pray, your sons's cloak.' Because of that I must hear in

¹⁰¹ For one example, see BT Sotah 10a.

¹⁰² Ps. Jon. 128.

¹⁰³ Ps. Jon. 38:15.

*the courthouse: '(Identify, I pray), whose are these, the signet-ring, the fringes, and the staff?'*¹⁰⁴

Inasmuch as their behavior may seem unfavorable, Pseudo-Jonathan depicts both Tamar and Judah in a positive light by giving the impression that the events of Genesis 38 were part of a Divine plan.

These translations provide public access to the Bible and its messages. Their interpretations fill the gaps present in the biblical narrative and resolve its ambiguities and inconsistencies.

Conclusion

The early interpretations of Genesis 38 reflect the interests and concerns of the time in which they were composed. For example, Philo's texts demonstrate obvious influence from Greek philosophical thinking. Similarly, Josephus' omission demonstrates a concern with the narrative that suggests it should be avoided in order to evade the difficulties it presents. Frequently, however, the early interpretations contain only minor variations, because the majority of them have the same goal in mind – to improve the biblical portrayals of Judah and Tamar. These figures play significant roles in the history of the Israelites and therefore must be portrayed in a way that is consistent with the manner in which that history needed to be understood. Through apologetics, the addition of certain details within the narratives, and the omission of others, the figures begin to emerge in a more positive light.

The story of Judah and Tamar provides an account with which one is able to trace the line from them, all the way to David, and until the end of time, with the Messiah. Yet the only early interpretations to highlight this significance are the inner-biblical commentaries greatly interested in genealogy. Instead, the

¹⁰⁴ See Michael Maher, ed., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis, Translated, with Introduction and Notes* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992) 129-30. The text in *italic* is to highlight that which has been added or changed from the original Hebrew. This development, or a version of it, appears in three of four *targumim* that cover Genesis 38 (see Targum Neofiti; the Fragment-Targums). This interpretation also exists in midrashic and rabbinic texts [See parallels in Gen. R. 85, 10; Sot. 10b; *Tanh. B.*, *Va-Yeshev* 17 (1, 187); Ketub. 67b; Mez. 59a; Sot. 1, 7].

primary concerns for the early interpreters are the reputations of Judah and Tamar.

These early interpretations form the foundations for later rabbinic, medieval and modern commentaries. While disregarding the unique character of Genesis 38, these early sources are significant as they introduce the themes and motifs that become predominant in the common effort to understand the biblical episode throughout history.

Chapter Two

The Early Rabbinic Corpus

Introduction

This chapter will explore Talmudic and midrashic texts and will demonstrate the extent to which the early rabbinic corpus relies on the themes and concerns noted in earlier sources and, in this way, enters into dialogue with them. In addition, these works introduce original interpretations that form the foundations of later works.

Inasmuch as rabbinic texts are replete with conflicting interpretations,¹⁰⁵ one should not consider this an indication of different approaches to the Bible; rather, the interpreters of this period rely on a range of midrashic methods.¹⁰⁶ They attempt to fill in the gaps, to explore all the potential interpretations of passages and its ambiguities, and to avoid likely misunderstandings.

Talmudic Texts

As noted in the previous chapter, Josephus omits several major biblical narratives from his *Antiquities of the Jews*, including the account of Judah and Tamar. Mishnah Megillah 4:10 provides a rabbinic list of biblical episodes and a discussion of whether they are to be read and translated.¹⁰⁷ For the most part, the narratives Josephus excludes describe the Israelites and some of their central figures in an unfavorable light. Thus, the omission of such accounts allows for

¹⁰⁵ This feature, which some may describe as “alternative” instead of “contradicting” interpretations, is expected because of the argumentative nature of these discussions.

¹⁰⁶ The term שָׁרֶב derives from the word שְׁרֵג, which means to “seek” or “ask,” and suggests exposition of the Bible text. See H L Strack & G Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 255. This somewhat creative approach presupposes expansion and omission of details. Midrash does not only refer to the exegetical approach but also to the work that results from such exposition; thus midrashim are common among interpretive sources.

¹⁰⁷ This Talmudic comment recurs in Tosefta Megillah 3:31, BT Megillah 25a and 25b.

one to communicate the history of the Israelites without having to explain the conceptual problems in some narratives. Regardless of its confusing nature, this rabbinic passage states that Genesis 38 is to be read and translated.¹⁰⁸

Like its predecessors, the early rabbinic corpus is concerned with the problematic portrayals of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. BT Sotah 7b, for example, describes Judah confessing for his wrongdoings and consequently inheriting “the life of the world to come” – he is rewarded. This passage furthermore asserts that Judah’s confession – considered to be model behavior – leads his brother Reuben to acknowledge his own sinful behavior.¹⁰⁹ The rabbis seek to depict Judah in an appealing manner and insist that his confession was the primary factor that preserved one of the twelve tribes.¹¹⁰

Gen. 38:2 states that Judah “saw the daughter of a certain כנען whose name was Shua and he married her and cohabited with her.”¹¹¹ This suggests that Judah married a woman of Canaanite origin, and such marriage is frowned upon in both Genesis and Exodus.¹¹² Like the targumim, rabbinic interpreters in BT Pesahim 50a understand the term כנען to refer to a “merchant.”¹¹³ Furthermore, BT Pesahim says, “Is it possible that Abraham came and admonished Isaac, Isaac came and admonished Jacob, and then Judah went and married a Canaanite?” Marriage to such a woman is inconsistent with the traditional rabbinic perception of Judah as a central ancestor; thus rabbis interpret the text in such a way that corresponds to their view and, in this way they relieve Judah of fault.¹¹⁴

Another conceptual difficulty noted by the rabbis concerns Tamar’s punishment. How can Judah, who impregnates Tamar, sentence her to death for

¹⁰⁸ The rabbis do not explain why some passages ought to be read, others translated, and still others ignored.

¹⁰⁹ See Deut. 33:6. This passage places Reuben’s blessing before Judah’s and the rabbis understand this placement as a causal relation. It is because of Judah that Reuben confessed.

¹¹⁰ Inasmuch as Judah caused Reuben to confess to his sins, Judah prevented his brother’s tribe from being punished for his behavior.

¹¹¹ See Gen. 38:2.

¹¹² See Gen. 24:3 and Ex. 34:15-16.

¹¹³ For support they draw on passages such as Hos. 12:8, (A trader who uses false balances, who loves to overreach”), and Isa. 23:8, “Whose merchants were nobles, whose traders the world honored?”).

¹¹⁴ Moreover, such interpretations clearly respond to those who maintain Judah did marry a woman of foreign origins, such as the Testament of Judah and the Book of Jubilees.

her alleged behavior? More specifically, how does Judah reach such a harsh punishment for Tamar? To explain his judgment, the rabbis argue that she is a descendent of the court of Shem.¹¹⁵ If she is a daughter of a priest who has committed adultery the appropriate punishment is to be put to the fire.¹¹⁶

PT Sotah 1:8 uses Gen. 38:12¹¹⁷ and Jud. 14:1 and 5¹¹⁸ to explain Judah's ascent to Timnah. Two alternative interpretations are offered. One view holds that there are two Timnahs, while the other asserts that only one exists. Those of the latter opinion interpret the text symbolically and maintain that Judah's ascent is in terms of his reward for his involvement in God's divine plan, while Samson's descent refers to the punishment he receives for his transgression.

Similarly, BT Sotah 10a states that Samson disgraced himself in Timnah, while Judah's role in Peretz's conception resulted in exaltation. Moreover, this passage offers alternative interpretations with regard to Timnah and its location. One view claims that two cities with the same name existed; one was northbound (up), while the second was further south (down). Another view claims the existence of only one Timnah, but depending on one's point of departure one must either travel northbound or southbound. While demonstrating the rabbinic interest in biblical geography, such passages are better understood as examples of both literal and figurative approaches amongst the rabbis.

In BT Sotah 10a for example, interpreters use Josh. 15:34, a reference to פֶתַח עֵינִים, to argue that פֶתַח עֵינִים is also a place name.¹¹⁹ Others offer symbolic interpretations and claim that פֶתַח עֵינִים refers to Abraham's home and draw on the common perception that he was hospitable and that his home was a place where

¹¹⁵ BT Avodah Zarah 36b.

¹¹⁶ This follows the practice outlined in Lev. 21:9. However, the question still remains if she has actually committed a punishable act.

¹¹⁷ This passage described Judah's travels to Timnah. He is described as "going up."

¹¹⁸ These verses describe Samson's travels to Timnah. He is described as "going down."

¹¹⁹ The literal translation of פֶתַח עֵינִים is "opening of the eyes," or "entrance to the eyes." Josh. 15:34 is used as a proof text because it refers to a place called עֵינִים, thought to be the same place mentioned in Genesis 38. This interpretation reappears in later works such as: R. Boruch Halevi Epstein, *The Essential Torah Temimah* (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1989) 160; Samuel David Luzzatto, *Perush Shadal 'al Hamisha Humshe Torah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965) 158-9.

all people were welcome.¹²⁰ BT Sotah 10a provides an alternative interpretation based on midrashic expansion that Tamar “gave eyes to her words.”¹²¹ Judah questions Tamar before proposing a sexual encounter, whereby she follows by making it clear that she is available to him – she is a proselyte; she is unmarried;¹²² she is an orphan; she is clean.

The above interpretation exemplifies the midrashic approach that dominates rabbinic literature – it expands the narrative details and also defends Judah. His responsibility and role in the narrative are not denied, but Tamar’s misdirection plays a more central part. In order to explain why Judah thinks she is a harlot, rabbis assert that she always covered her face while in his home. Thus, even had she sat uncovered by the road, Judah would not have recognized her. It was because he did not recognize her, and because she sat alone at Petah Enaim, that he concluded she must be a prostitute.

Another observation worth noting with regard to BT Sotah 10a is the stated principle that every modest daughter-in-law is rewarded with kings and prophets among her descendants; the rabbis use Tamar as a prime example of such a woman. BT Megillah 10b expands on this and claims that Amotz and

¹²⁰ A notion seemingly based on earlier Genesis narratives, such as Genesis 18, the story of the three guests appearing at his home.

¹²¹ שָׁנְתָנָה עִירִים לְדִבְרֵיהֶה "

¹²² See PT Qiddushin 1:1 for a discussion of whether or not a woman is still considered married once her husband is deceased. This passage outlines three ways by which a widow can gain freedom, one of which is through the rite of *halitsah* (see Deut. 25:10). That is, if the brother of the deceased refuses to fulfill the custom of the Levirate, as described in Deut. 25:5-10, there is a practice whereby the widow takes off his sandal, spits in his face, and makes a declaration in front of the elders, “Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother’s house! And he shall go in Israel by the name of ‘the family of the unsandaled one.’” Hence, according to the Deuteronomy text, Tamar’s statement about being unmarried is possible. The difficulty rests in the fact that this custom is not included in Genesis 38. The levirate law may have undergone a process of development whereby the right of the widow was, initially, only conception. Later on the right of marriage seems to have become part of the custom. Considering this, one may argue that the law, as reflected in Genesis 38, represents an earlier form where *halitsah* does not yet exist. (See A. S. Herbert, *Genesis 12-50: Abraham and his Heirs* [London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962] 126; Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies: Volume 1- Bible* [Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1973] 36). This is clear when one notes the fact that Onan is punished because he spilled his seed. If the custom of *halitsah* had existed at the time of Tamar, why would Onan’s behavior displease God to the point where death is an appropriate punishment? It is possible that at the time of Tamar, the levirate law was still in its early form, where *halitsah* was not an option. Thus the midrashic explanation that Tamar was unmarried, though possible if it had taken place a later period, does not seem likely in its earlier context.

Amatziah are brothers.¹²³ Tamar's act of covering her face is considered one of modesty; accordingly, she merits kings and prophets among her descendants. Moreover, her humility is what prevented Judah from recognizing her. According to BT Sotah 10a and BT Megillah 10b, Tamar's elevated status is a result of her modest nature, as demonstrated in Gen. 38:15.¹²⁴

PT Ketubot 13:1 interprets פתח עיניהם metaphorically and asserts that Tamar looked at the gate to which all eyes look and prayed to God, asking that she not leave empty-handed.¹²⁵ Similarly, PT Sotah 1:4 maintains that Tamar opened Judah's eyes, but that she did not sit at the entrance to a city – even the most immoral harlots do not sit by the gates. Rather, פתח עיניהם is merely a description of Tamar's behavior – she looked to the heavens and prayed to God requesting that she conceive and fulfill her obligation to her deceased husband.

Apologetically, PT Sotah 1:4 suggests that Tamar's honorable motivations – her loyalty to God, to her husband, and to the Israelites – makes her praiseworthy. Judah, too, is presented in a sympathetic manner by implying that he would not have engaged in sexual relations with Tamar had she revealed her identity to him.

Unlike the passages discussed thus far, which mainly are concerned with the portrayals of Judah and Tamar, BT Sotah 13b draws on Gen. 38:1 to outline a general principle. Whoever “performs a task without finishing it and another comes and completes it, Scripture ascribes it to the one who completed it as though he had performed it,” thereby deposing the first “from his greatness.”¹²⁶ Interpreters relate this principle to Judah who “goes down” from his brothers and, as part of his descent, buries his wife and sons. Because he begins to save

¹²³ Amotz, father of Isaiah, and Amatziah, king of Judah, are both descendants of the Davidic line (as observed in BT Megillah 10b).

¹²⁴ The Tosafot of BT Sotah 10a develops this further and explains that even though Tamar committed an act of harlotry, she did so with כוונה לשם שמיים, for God and the heavens—her motivation was virtuous. That is why she deserved kings and prophets among her descendants. BT Horayot 10b asserts that Tamar was rewarded with kings and prophets because her ultimate goal was the propagation of her tribe, as opposed to sexual enjoyment.

¹²⁵ PT Ketubot 13:1 also provides the interpretation already noted in BT Sotah 10a – that Tamar opens Judah's eyes when she responds to all of his questions.

¹²⁶ *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nashim (Nazir, Sotah) Translated into English with notes, glossary and indices.* Trans. I. Epstein. (London: Soncino Press, 1961) 69.

Joseph's life but allows for the sale to take place, his brothers no longer look to him as a leader. This provides a causal relation between Judah's inaction and the resulting deaths and reduces the degree to which guilt is placed on Judah's wife and sons.

BT Niddah 13a provides yet another example of the tendency of rabbinic interpreters to delineate general rules and principles from the Bible. This passage draws on Gen. 38:9 to conclude that "whosoever emits semen in vain deserves death." The proof is that Onan's behavior results in his premature death.

In a similar fashion, BT Yebamot 34b maintains that conception is possible on first contact. Rabbis use Tamar as their primary example and assert that she took her own virginity by exercising friction with her finger.¹²⁷ Er and Onan never engaged in actual intercourse with her, having spilled their semen on the ground. Thus, when Tamar and Judah engaged in sexual relations this was her first act of intercourse and she conceived. How can one be certain that Er spilled his seed just like his brother? Scripture describes Onan's behavior and his underlying motivation;¹²⁸ but, with regard to Er the text is ambiguous. The rabbis suggest that Er did not want Tamar's beauty to diminish through pregnancy and so he spilled his seed like Onan.¹²⁹ On the one hand, this interpretation may be considered an attempt to justify Er's behavior, suggesting that he cared for his wife so greatly that he did not want her to become unattractive. Alternatively, this passage worsens Er's image and seemingly implies that his selfish motivation was the cause of Tamar's unfortunate circumstances.

BT Yebamot 34b uses biblical language to generate an interpretation of its own when it relies on the word *וְ*, "also," in verse 10 to support the assertion that Er and Onan committed the same transgression. This also implies that their intentions were similar – possibly for Tamar to lose her social standing. While there is no direct link, one may draw a connection to the Testament of Judah and

¹²⁷ According to Epstein, this act destroys her virginity (see *Yebamoth*, 215).

¹²⁸ According to Gen. 38:9 Onan was aware that the child born would not be considered his.

¹²⁹ Ironically, at a time when a woman's social standing depended very much on her ability to bear children specifically male heirs (this element of biblical society is evident through the many narratives describing the distress felt by barren women), Tamar's inability to conceive would only result in a loss of social status.

the Book of Jubilees. Both sources have been shown to shift the blame from Judah to his wife – she prevented Tamar from being given to Onan and Shelah, and she discouraged her sons from engaging in sexual relations with Tamar because she was not of Canaanite origin. The rabbis may have adopted this negative view toward Judah’s wife and incorporated it into BT Yebamot 34b. Er does not want Tamar to bear his children possibly because of his mother’s influence. Moreover, he wants others to look down on Tamar as he does.

BT Megillah 25a and 25b, already mentioned with regard to Josephus and Mishnah 4:10, provide a list of biblical accounts,¹³⁰ the majority of which describe the sinful acts of the Israelites and their ancestors, and delineate whether they are to be read and translated. While Genesis 38 clearly portrays its central figures in an unfavorable light, BT Megillah 25a and 25b prescribe that the narrative should be both read and translated for the masses.¹³¹ Aware of the difficulties that arise from this episode, this Talmudic passage explains that when Judah saw Tamar by the road he did not intend to approach her but was coerced by an angel.¹³² Moreover, Genesis 38 does not embarrass Judah; rather, it praises him.¹³³ By reaffirming Judah’s innocence, as well as incorporating the Divine presence into the account, as a whole it is interpreted more positively.

Midrashic Texts

Inasmuch as the rabbis use Bible stories as examples of the human condition – as models of proper or improper conduct – it is a didactic tool that allows the interpreters to define morals and halakhot to be applied to daily life.

¹³⁰ This list recurs in Tosefta Megillah 3:31.

¹³¹ The same comment is provided in PT Megillah 4:11.

¹³² This is reminiscent of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan’s midrashic expansion of Gen. 38:25 and BT Megillah 25b.

¹³³ The rabbis use Gen. 38:26 as a prooftext and suggest that **צדקה מני** is an admission of guilt on Judah’s part. Nevertheless, the corpus of interpretive literature makes it obvious that the Hebrew expression is unclear – who says it and what it suggests. Thus, sources, such as Tosefta Sotah 9:3, state that Tamar asked “to whom do these things belong?” and Judah said **צדקה מני**. In this way, the Tosefta passage resolves the difficulty of who said what; however, the implication of the biblical verse remains unclear.

Genesis Rabbah 85,¹³⁴ for example, is a compilation of several midrashim, most of which are concerned with the portrayals of Judah and Tamar. The midrash first attempts to situate this account in a biblical context by placing the narrative on a chronological timeline. It states: “while the fathers of the tribes were taken up with the sale of Joseph, Jacob was taken up with his sackcloth and fasting, and Judah was taken up with finding himself a wife, and the Holy One, blessed be he, was creating the light of the king messiah.”¹³⁵ The narrative of Genesis 38 is placed during the Joseph story that begins a chapter earlier. In addition to highlighting the similarities between the stories of Tamar and Potiphar’s wife, the narrative’s placement also “juxtapose[s] a passage that deals with a fall from glory to another passage that deals with a fall from glory.”¹³⁶ Hence, thematic connections are stressed¹³⁷ and more importantly, insight is given into the greater significance of this narrative – it foreshadows the greatness that originates through the described circumstances.

Genesis Rabbah 85 introduces a novel interpretation with regard to Judah’s descent from his brothers. As a father, one of Jacob’s responsibilities is to find wives for his sons; but, because he is mourning for Joseph he does not fulfill this duty;¹³⁸ consequently, Judah leaves to find a wife.

While this midrashic text is concerned with the portrayals of Judah and Tamar, it does not completely deny the unfavorable depictions of the Bible. For example, with regard to Judah’s descent,¹³⁹ the midrash says that he committed a

¹³⁴ The translations of Genesis Rabbah, throughout this thesis, are taken from Jacob Neusner, ed. and trans., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation*, vol. 3 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985).

¹³⁵ Gen. R. 85:1(3).

¹³⁶ Gen. R. 85:1(1).

¹³⁷ Another parallel is noted in Gen. R. 85:9(1), when the midrashic commentary observes that Tamar deceived Judah just as he deceived his own father. Also see Gen. R. 85:11(3). Thematic associations are noted and further developed by later commentators such as Robert Alter [See Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004)]. In his introduction he writes that he is interested in “thematic” and “literary links,” (xlvii) and this is apparent throughout his commentary, which will be examined thoroughly in Chapter 4.

¹³⁸ Gen. R. 85:2(6).

¹³⁹ Judah “went down” – some interpret this literally, as going down to the region of Adullam, while others interpret it symbolically, as does the above midrash.

transgression by marrying a woman of foreign origins.¹⁴⁰ Surprisingly the passage does not attempt to resolve this difficulty but simply states the situation as it is described.

While the Bible mentions little about Judah's grief, the rabbis maintain that Judah waited twelve months before going to shear his sheep.¹⁴¹ This suggests that he grieved during that period and thereby reduces the negative image put forth by the original biblical passages in which his wife died, and he went directly to the sheep-shearing festivities.¹⁴²

Like BT Megillah 25b, Genesis Rabbah claims that when, Judah saw a woman by Petah Enaim, he paid no attention to her; however, an angel came to him and said, "Where are you going, Judah? From whence will kings arise, from whence will redeemers arise?"¹⁴³ This suggests that Judah approached her only because of the angel's intervention. Moreover, it alludes to the future messiah¹⁴⁴ and incorporates the notion of divine intervention to explain the behaviors of both Judah and Tamar. Had Judah not stopped at the sight of Tamar by Petah Enaim or had Tamar revealed her identity to him, the two would have hindered the emergence of the future kings and redeemers of Israel. Through divine intervention, however, the two were essentially involved in ensuring the continuity of the Israelites.

Like Targum Pseudo-Jonathan,¹⁴⁵ Genesis Rabbah 85 explains the names Er and Onan.¹⁴⁶ While the interpretations differ slightly, they resolve the same inconsistencies and ambiguities. Similarly, parallels can be drawn between this midrash and BT Yebamot 34b; both texts claim that Er and Onan committed the

¹⁴⁰ Gen. R. 85:1(1). This critique is expanded in Gen. R. 85:3(1), a passage in which the midrash draws on a common rabbinic understanding that Judah descended in greatness as a result of an incomplete task. He started to save his brother, Joseph; however, he never finished the job. Consequently, he "went down" and buried his wife and two sons.

¹⁴¹ Gen. R. 85:6(1).

¹⁴² Gen. 38:12 – "A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers" (וַיָּרַב הַיָּמִים וְחִתָּה בַּת עַל גְּזֵי צָאן שׁוֹעַ אֲשֶׁת יְהוָה).

¹⁴³ Gen. R. 85:8(2).

¹⁴⁴ The future messianic figure is thought to be among the descendants of Judah and Tamar. Similarly, Gen. R. 85:6(2), Gen. R. 85:9(2) and Gen. R. 85:14(1) allude to the lineage that is created.

¹⁴⁵ T. Ps. Jon. 127-8.

¹⁴⁶ Gen. R. 85:4(3-4).

same transgression – they avoided conception and therefore deserved the punishment of death.¹⁴⁷ The difference between the two texts lies in the fact that the midrash refers to the levirate law and claims that it was a religious duty.¹⁴⁸

Because of the difficulty in locating a place called Petah Enaim, several rabbis encouraged a symbolic reading. Genesis Rabbah reflects this approach and provides several interpretations, all of which recur in other rabbinic texts or later works. For example, some understood פתח עינים to refer to Tamar's behavior and mindset. She lifted her eyes and looked to the gate to which all eyes are directed and prayed. Another common interpretation is that Tamar opened Judah's eyes by telling him that she was clean and unmarried and therefore available to him for sexual relations.

What is unique in this midrash is the principle drawn from Gen. 38:15, that a man should acquaint himself with the sisters and friends of his wife so that nothing resembling the incident of Tamar and Judah would recur.¹⁴⁹ Not only is this interpretation exclusive to the rabbinic corpus, but it demonstrates the tendency to draw lessons from Scripture in the hopes that the readers will apply such principles to their own lives.

Like Genesis Rabbah, Midrash Tanhuma¹⁵⁰ contains a large amount of early material,¹⁵¹ much of which the rabbis and later commentators built upon. According to Tanhuma, Judah's descent refers to his symbolic decline in greatness. Because he did not complete his task and because he married a woman of foreign origins, he was no longer an accepted role model. His status deteriorated and he was punished with having to bury his wife and two sons.¹⁵²

While Tanhuma repeats interpretations found in Genesis Rabbah, the major difference rests in its depiction of Judah. Genesis Rabbah 85, like most

¹⁴⁷ Gen. R. 85:4(5) and Gen. R. 85:5(3).

¹⁴⁸ Gen. R. 85:5(1).

¹⁴⁹ צרייך אדם להזהר עצמו באחות אשתו ובקרוביותיו שלא יכשל באחת מהם ממי אתה למד מיהודה (Gen. R. 85:8).

¹⁵⁰ This study is concerned specifically with the Buber Tanhuma, a recension of the midrashic text that could not have existed before the 9th century and is believed to have originated in southern Italy. For more details see John T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma: Translated into English with Introduction, Indices, and Brief Notes*, vol. 1, Genesis (Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1989) xii.

¹⁵¹ Some of the material comes from before the fourth century (Townsend xii).

¹⁵² See Townsend 237, 239 and 241.

rabbinic sources, is concerned with enhancing Judah's image, whereas Tanhuma depicts him in a way more consistent with Scripture. As a result of his transgression, i.e., marrying a Canaanite, his wife and sons die prematurely.

However different their perceptions of Judah may seem, similarities do exist between Tanhuma and Genesis Rabbah. These texts interpret Gen. 37:35, which says, "To Adullam shall come the glory of Israel," as the forewarning of Judah's physical arrival. The "glory" alludes to the greatness that is believed to descend from Judah. Similarly, both midrashic compilations contain the interpretation that Hirah was always a friend of the tribe of David, reappearing later in the time of Solomon.¹⁵³ In this way, the midrashim redefine the parallels between the Judah and Tamar episode and the later Davidic line.

Conclusion

Inasmuch as the early rabbis are concerned primarily with teaching the significance of the Bible and reaffirming its authority, they take it upon themselves to resolve inconsistencies between the way the Bible describes its central figures and the way in which they ought to be perceived by contemporary readers. In their efforts to portray Judah and Tamar positively, in a way that corresponds to the views of the interpreters themselves, the rabbis direct much effort in tying them to the messianic figure. By relating Judah to future kings and redeemers,¹⁵⁴ they give Judah and Tamar divine allowance for their behaviors no matter the apparent transgressions.

In general, the rabbis address the same issues and difficulties noted in earlier sources. They confront the problematic depictions of Judah and Tamar and some discuss the genealogical repercussions of the sexual encounter that is described in the chapter.

Though the rabbis rely heavily on the earlier interpretations, they often develop novel ideas and offer alternative understandings of the biblical narrative.

¹⁵³ See 1 Kgs. 5:15 for mention of "Hiram."

¹⁵⁴ See Gen. R. 85:8.

Moreover, the midrashic approach is frequent in the rabbinic corpus as the interpreters attempt to grasp the episode and its original intent.

The rabbinic interpretations of Genesis 38 resolve problems primarily through apologetics and, in this way, project positive lessons to its readers. The Bible is used as a didactic tool from which prescriptions and moral standards are drawn. Moreover, the conceptual difficulties that arise as a result of the unfavorable actions of Judah and Tamar are resolved.

Chapter Three

Medieval and Pre-Modern Interpretations

Introduction

Genesis 38 recounts the circumstances that generate the Davidic line and therefore has been considered a fundamental component of early Israelite history. The difficulties that arise from the encounter are numerous; interpreters have made great efforts to resolve them and have directed much of their efforts to improving the images of Judah and Tamar. Midrashic strategies and apologetics contributed to these results.

Medieval interpreters respond to the same textual and conceptual issues of Genesis 38 addressed by their predecessors. Regardless of similarities in method and interest that carry over from earlier sources, two major developments are noteworthy. Disciplines such as grammar and philosophy, with which the interpreters of the medieval period are familiar, are incorporated into their interpretations of the text. In addition, reason is central to the interpretive approach; if a biblical passage challenges common sense, a figurative analysis is encouraged. Accordingly, despite the emphasis on the literal approach in some circles, allegorical and symbolic interpretations become common.

Shelomo Yitzhaqi (1040-1105)

Shelomo Yitzhaqi (Rashi), perhaps the best known medieval Jewish Bible interpreter, lived in Northern France throughout the eleventh century. He claims to present a plain and simple meaning of each passage¹⁵⁵ but he regularly provides

¹⁵⁵ In Gen. 3:8 Rashi delineates his interpretive approach and writes: “There are many aggadic midrashim on this verse, and our Rabbis have already arranged them in their proper setting, in Bereishis Rabbah and in other midrashim. I have come for nothing but the simple meaning of Scripture and for aggadah, which resolves the words of Scripture with each word stated in its proper framework and with its correct meaning.” [This translation is from Yisrael Isser Zvi

alternate readings that are not literal and are based on earlier rabbinic midrashim. This combination of peshat and derash gives the impression of a multilayered approach to Scripture.

In his very first comment on Genesis 38 he addresses the matter of the narrative's placement. He asks why or how Judah "descended from his brothers" and concludes that there is an essential connection between the sale of Joseph and Judah's descent; the episode's placement is meant to emphasize this close relation. In other words, according to Rashi, Judah was deposed from his leadership role because he did not prevent his brothers from selling Joseph.¹⁵⁶ This interpretation stems from the ambiguity of the Hebrew word *לְמַעַן* to which there are two possible connotations. On the one hand it could denote a tangible location from which Judah physically descended, while on the other hand it could symbolize his spiritual descent. Rashi attempts to contextualize the narrative and he places it into the larger biblical framework by connecting Judah's descent to Joseph's sale.

Rashi agrees with Onkelos and interprets *כָּנָעִנִּי*¹⁵⁷ as "merchant" instead of "Canaanite"¹⁵⁸ and, in this way, absolves Judah of any transgression concerning his marriage. Rashi's concern with Judah and Tamar is clear and his approach is defined by their portrayals. As long as they are described positively, he provides a plain interpretation of the account. Otherwise he relies on midrashic methods to enhance the depictions of the characters.

In Gen. 38:5 Rashi maintains that *כִּיּוֹב* designates a place, and he expands this idea when he relates the name to the earlier proposal that Judah's wife ceased

Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1995) 33.] While Rashi's primary interest lies in the simple and plain meaning of the text, he is inconsistent in approach and he frequently offers the reader alternative understandings that often stray from a literal reading and consequently, make it more difficult to define his method.

¹⁵⁶ *Torat Hayim: Hamishah Humshe Torah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kuk, 1986) 156.

¹⁵⁷ Gen. 38:2.

¹⁵⁸ It is clear from this study that Gen. 38:2 was not the only occasion where *כָּנָעִנִּי* was taken to mean "merchant." For instance, Prov. 31:24 says, *וְחַגּוֹר נָתַנְהָ לְכָנָעִנִּי* in context of selling cloth. Thus, the tendency to interpret *כָּנָעִנִּי* as "merchant" instead of "Canaanite" has precedence in other Bible passages. However, the significance in this study is that such an interpretation appears to respond to the problematic possibility that Judah married a woman of Canaanite origin and thus diminishes the degree to which he is guilty of transgression.

giving birth. Here, he combines a simple reading of the passage with midrashic methods and suggests that the name was assigned only after she stopped bearing children. He further develops this by connecting the words צוֹב and שָׁלָה, both of which he interprets as “she stopped.”¹⁵⁹ Rashi draws on earlier interpretations and provides prooftexts¹⁶⁰ to illustrate the relations between these Hebrew words and his rendering of them.

With regard to the levirate law Rashi states that the “son will be called by the name of the deceased.”¹⁶¹ The difficulty of this interpretation lies in the ambiguous nature of Rashi’s interpretive approach. While he claims to provide the plain meaning of the Bible, he implies that his interpretations are to be understood literally. This suggests that, according to Rashi, the child is to be *named* after the deceased rather than considered the son of the deceased’s. However, he may simply mean to suggest that the child will be *known* by the deceased’s name.¹⁶²

Another area of contention concerns Gen. 38:18, in which Tamar asks Judah for a pledge until she receives her payment.¹⁶³ Rashi’s primary interest is the second item she requests, the פְתִיל, which he interprets as the “cloak with which [Judah] covers [himself].”¹⁶⁴ The reason for this concern remains unclear,

¹⁵⁹ The verb סָלַל means “to end” or “to complete.” Also noteworthy, in Menahem ibn Saruq’s *Mahberet* several prooftexts are brought forth in order to explain the word כָּזֵב, including Isa. 58:11 and Prov. 30:8, two of five passages he refers to that use the Hebrew verb to connote failure, falsity or conclusion (see Menahem ibn Saruq, *Mahberet Menahem* [London: Hevrat Me’orot Yeshenim, 1854] 103). Rashi’s interpretation of צוֹב may indeed be based on Menahem’s *Mahberet*. Along the same lines, there certainly exists a relationship between Rashi’s interpretation and the one provided in Gen. R. 85:4 where צוֹב is given an alternate name – פְּסָקָת נֶפֶשׁ, meaning “stopped” or “ceased.”

¹⁶⁰ The prooftexts he draws on are Jer. 15:18 and Isa. 58:11. These verses use the word כָּזֵב to connote the idea of failure and disappointment and are also included in Menahem’s *Mahberet*, providing further support for the suggestion that Rashi may have based his understanding on the former interpretation.

¹⁶¹ In Hebrew: הבן יקרא על שם המת (Torat Hayyim 159). Ramban, treated below, rejects this interpretation [see Moses Nahmanides, *Ramban (Nachmanides) Commentary on the Torah: Genesis*, Ed. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House Inc., 1971) 469].

¹⁶² Take Menahem ibn Saruq, for example. He is Menahem, son of Saruq. This designation could be what Rashi intends in his interpretation. Unfortunately, I was unable to find super commentaries concerned with Rashi’s interpretation for this particular verse.

¹⁶³ She asks for חותם ופתיול ומטרח.

¹⁶⁴ In Hebrew: שמילוח שאחתה מתכסת בה (Torat Hayyim 159). Nahmanides, along with others, disagrees with this idea and argues that if Tamar had asked for the garment worn by Judah at the time of their relations he would have had to leave naked. He asserts that Tamar would not have

but one might suggest that the other objects – the seal and staff – are status symbols and therefore, Tamar’s request is logical. The nature and symbolism of the פְתִיל however, is unclear and thus Tamar’s request appears to be unwarranted. In Menahem’s *Mahberet* פְתִיל indicates several objects and ideas, but the most relevant passage for our discussion is Ex. 39:3, which uses the word as “thread” or “cord.” It is this understanding on which Rashi bases his own.

Gen. 38:12 describes Judah going to Timnah to his sheep shearers, but the reason for this journey, so soon after his wife’s death, is unknown. Rashi states that Judah went to Timnah to *oversee* his sheep shearers and, in this way, avoids any suggestion that Judah’s purpose had to do with anything other than business.¹⁶⁵ While the Bible does not describe Judah in a state of mourning, Rashi attempts to fill in the gaps and justify Judah’s behavior by contextualizing his actions and explaining them as part of his business obligations. Regardless of the unfortunate circumstances, Judah had responsibilities toward the sheep shearers and had to make his way to Timnah.

Rashi claims that Tamar’s offspring were mighty and righteous like Judah. The positive traits he attributes to her progeny are directly inherited from Judah and, in this way, Rashi ignores Tamar’s contribution.¹⁶⁶ Regardless of the Bible’s attitude toward Judah and his behavior, Rashi attempts to improve his image so that it corresponds to his elevated status in Israelite history. Along the same lines, he makes an effort to rationalize Tamar’s actions, which can be considered devious and scheming. He claims that her behavior reflects a deep desire to bear children from Judah’s line and since Shelah had matured and she had not yet been given to him, she did what was necessary to fulfill her marital obligation – a praiseworthy objective. In order to further support his view, he divides Gen. 38:26

asked for such an item, nor would Judah have given it to her, and thus concludes that Rashi’s interpretation is improbable. See Nahmanides 474.

¹⁶⁵ The inclination to justify Judah’s travels to Timnah so soon after his wife’s death is present in earlier midrashic works such as Gen. R. 85:6. Later interpreters have associated times of sheep shearing with periods of celebration (for example, Joseph Bekhor Shor) and thereby suggest that Judah’s intentions were related to the festivities. For a discussion on sheep shearing and its significance in the biblical period, see Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, “Israelite Sheepshearing and David’s Rise to Power,” *Biblica* 87, 1 (2006) 55-63.

¹⁶⁶ The Hebrew text is even more insistent on overlooking Tamar’s role: גְבוּרִים צִוָּצָא בָו צְדִיקִים צִוָּצָא: בז.

into two clauses: “She is right. It is from me,”¹⁶⁷ and in this way acknowledges Tamar’s behavior as both righteous and honorable.

Shmuel ben Meir (1085-1158)

Born in France and a grandson and student of Rashi, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam) wrote a Torah commentary devoted to the simple and contextual meaning of the text. Consequently, his interpretation of Genesis 38 is replete with grammatical concerns, as well as attempts to provide unembellished readings.

Rashbam agrees with Onkelos, Rashi and other early interpreters when he relates כנענִי to “merchant.”¹⁶⁸ Like his predecessors, Rashbam views Israelite ancestors as flawless figures and therefore claims that none of Jacob’s sons would ever have considered marriage to a Canaanite. He integrates his contemporary moral standards into his understanding of the ancient Bible story: if intermarriage is considered inappropriate for his own community, so too would it have been in biblical times.¹⁶⁹

As evidence that Er and Onan committed the same transgression, Rashbam draws on the word וְ in verse 10.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, like BT Yebamot 34b, he claims that Er wanted to preserve Tamar’s beauty, suggesting that the appeal of her physical appearance would diminish during and after pregnancy. This interpretation illustrates his concern with the particulars of the Bible and the influence of early writers on his thoughts.

Some early midrashim and interpretations, such as Gen. R. 85:4, claim that ציַב indicates Judah’s wife’s inability to bear anymore children after Shelah. Rashbam interprets it otherwise, as a formal place designation. Furthermore, he rejects readings of Genesis 38 that suggest

¹⁶⁷ This same approach is taken in Targum Onkelos (see Chapter 1, Note 86).

¹⁶⁸ See Samuel ben Meir, *Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir’s Commentary on Genesis: An Annotated Translation*, Martin I. Lokshin, trans. (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989) 261. He draws on prooftexts (Isa. 23:8; Hos. 12:8).

¹⁶⁹ This does not only reflect his own moral standards, but such marriage is clearly frowned upon throughout the Bible.

¹⁷⁰ This is similar to the rabbinic interpretation in BT Yebamot 34b (see Chapter 2).

Judah was absent from his son Shelah's birth and claims that Chezib is where it all took place.¹⁷¹ The difficulty arises from the Hebrew **והיה** because its subject is unclear – it has been commonly understood to refer to Judah, however, this biblical passage is vague. Rashbam's interpretation reinstates the problem concerning the naming of Judah's three sons – both the feminine form, **ותקרא**, and the masculine form, **ויקרא**, appear in Gen. 38:3-5 – and surprisingly, Rashbam makes no attempt to explain this change.

In response to Judah's inability to identify Tamar as his daughter-in-law, Rashbam fills in the gaps and enhances the already-suggested explanation in the biblical passage: "When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face."¹⁷² Several interpreters deny that Tamar's act of covering herself caused Judah to confuse her for a harlot.¹⁷³ However, Rashbam attempts to provide a simple reading of the narrative and states that covering oneself with a veil was not common practice for a widow.¹⁷⁴ Thus, as a widow Tamar should not have been covered – it was precisely because she covered herself that Judah did not recognize her.

Along the same lines, Rashbam illustrates his preference for peshat when he disagrees with those who interpret פתח עיניהם as a place name or a description of Tamar's behavior;¹⁷⁵ instead, he claims that it is a fork in the road. He draws on Gen. 38:21 and notes that the vowel which appears under the ב in בפתח עיניהם is not the *sheva*, the vowel which, according to

¹⁷¹ See ben Meir 262. Gen. 38:5 states: ותספַח עוֹד ותלֶד בָן ותקְרֹא אֶת שְׁמוֹ שֵׁלָה וְהִיא בָּכָיָב בְּלֹדָתָה אֲתָה ("Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.").

¹⁷² Gen. 38:15.

¹⁷³ Rabbinic interpretations, for example, claim that she always covered herself and that this was an indication of her modesty. See BT Sotah 10a and BT Megillah 10b.

¹⁷⁴ With regard to Gen. 38:14. See ben Meir 264. Rashbam does not provide evidence to support this assertion, but it is possible that such behavior was uncommon in his own time, and thus he reflects a practice contemporary to his time onto his understanding of the Bible.

¹⁷⁵ Gen. 38:14.

him, introduces a formal place name.¹⁷⁶ Consequently, he explains that פתח עיניהם describes a public area where one can be seen by others.¹⁷⁷

When Rashbam interprets Gen. 38:15, he does so in a way that suggests a causal relation between Tamar covering her face and Judah not recognizing her. He proposes that the passage describes her behavior while sitting at פתח עיניהם, and he rejects the common interpretation that she covered herself in her father-in-law's house.¹⁷⁸

In their mutual quests for the simple and plain meanings of the Bible, Rashi and Rashbam often reached different conclusions. For instance, while Rashi suggests that Tamar requested Judah's outer garment, Rashbam states that the פתיל, generally understood to be a thread or cord, in addition to the ring and staff, was merely a decorative piece, a symbol of Judah's high standing and an item unnecessary for his public appearance.¹⁷⁹

Rashbam notes that the Bible does not explain the name Zerah, and therefore attempts to provide an explication. He relates it to the red thread that was tied to Zerah's wrist during his birth and also notes a similarity to the Hebrew word זריחה, "sunrise." He explains that during sunrise the sky becomes red, but the color is not always detected because of the amount of light radiating on that particular day; he draws support for his interpretation from in 2 Kgs. 3:22,¹⁸⁰ which describes the red light that emanates during sunrise.

When Judah sends Hirah to find Tamar to give her the promised payment, Rashbam notes that the verse uses the simple grammatical form

¹⁷⁶ He claims that when a place is introduced the *sheva* is placed under the ב. The examples he offers are as follows: "in Jericho," "in Bet-El," and "in Jerusalem." See ben Meir 264-265.

¹⁷⁷ This may suggest that Tamar was a prostitute and that she was not waiting specifically for Judah.

¹⁷⁸ BT Sotah 10a and BT Megillah 10b. This rabbinic interpretation emphasizes Tamar's modest nature and explains why Judah did not recognize her.

¹⁷⁹ A similar response and interpretation is present in Nahmanides' commentary.

¹⁸⁰ The passage reads: "Next morning, when they rose, the sun was shining over the water, and from the distance the water appeared to the Moabites as red as blood." השמש זרחה על המים ויראו (מוֹאָב מִנְגַּד אֶת הַמִּים אֲדֻמִּים כְּדָם)

instead of the transitive form.¹⁸¹ From this construction he deduces that Judah intended to send the kid with a messenger, rather than go himself. Another instance illustrating Rashbam's interest in the text's grammar concerns verse 26, which, according to him, says that Judah and Tamar no longer engaged in sexual relations.¹⁸² He claims that if the text meant to suggest otherwise the passage would have been written differently.¹⁸³

Avraham Ibn Ezra (1093-1167)

Avraham Ibn Ezra, a grammarian, astronomer, philosopher, physician and poet born in Spain, wrote a Bible commentary focused on the text's literal meaning. One of the clearest examples of this approach is in his interpretation of Gen. 38:1, where his primary concern is the timing of the Judah and Tamar episode. This deliberation is prompted by the peculiar placement of Genesis 38 – it interrupts the Joseph story with what appears to be a new and unrelated anecdote – and Ibn Ezra attempts to provide a chronological explanation. He claims that the account took place before Joseph's sale, but that it is recounted at this point in order to clearly contrast the behaviors of Joseph and Judah when they are tempted.¹⁸⁴ He further maintains that only twenty-two years passed between Joseph's sale and the settlement of the Israelites in Egypt,¹⁸⁵ and the events described in Genesis 38 could not have taken place in that period of time. This mathematical approach to the Bible illustrates the extent to which Ibn Ezra devoted himself to offering a literal interpretation of it.

¹⁸¹ See Lockshin 265. Rashbam maintains that this simple grammatical construction is common in the Bible when it comes to sending gifts and draws on Gen. 32:19 and Gen. 38:23 as prooftexts.

¹⁸² See Lockshin 269. Presumably the levirate obligation had been fulfilled so there was no longer a need for them to engage in sexual relations.

¹⁸³ Rashbam writes out the passage the way it would have been if the Bible had meant that the two continued to engage in sexual relations: *וְלֹא יִסֶּף עוֹד מִלְדוּתָה*.

¹⁸⁴ Judah is tempted by Tamar and Joseph is seduced by Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39). See Avraham Ibn Ezra, *Perushe Ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at Mosad ha-rav Kuk, 1976) 109.

¹⁸⁵ Ibn Ezra claims that Joseph is 17 years old when he is sold and 13 years later, he is given a leadership role in Egypt. Moreover, Jacob goes to Egypt after seven plentiful years and two years of hunger. According to Ibn Ezra this adds up to twenty-two years.

Along the same lines, with regard to Judah's descent in Gen. 38:2, Ibn Ezra acknowledges the common rabbinic interpretations but rejects the idea that the passage refers to a symbolic descent. Judah traveled from the north to the south and in this way he "went down from his brothers" – his descent was a physical one. Similarly, when Tamar sits at פֶתַח עֵינִים, Ibn Ezra asserts that Enaim is a place name and that Tamar was sitting beside two springs, one beside the other, that created a type of entrance to Enaim.¹⁸⁶

Contrary to his affinity for the literal and simple meaning of the Bible, when Tamar covered her face Ibn Ezra agrees with the earlier rabbinic interpretations that suggest she always covered herself, a sign of her modest nature.¹⁸⁷ These interpreters make an effort to explain Tamar's behavior by filling in some textual gaps. Moreover, this appears to be an attempt at improving Tamar's image; whereas some readers may understand her actions as rooted in deception, Ibn Ezra and the earlier rabbis deny such understandings.

In Gen. 38:26 Judah states "צדקה ממנה," which some interpret as his confession while others understand it to be a simple acknowledgment of Tamar's appropriate behavior. Ibn Ezra does not clarify whether it is or is not an admission of guilt, but he does suggest that there is an essential clause missing from the Bible – "she did this because."¹⁸⁸ Judah's statement concerns Tamar's actions; she behaved this particular way simply because Judah did not fulfill his original promise to her – to give her to his youngest son Shelah so that she could fulfill her marital obligation to her deceased husband.

For the most part, Ibn Ezra's approach to the Genesis 38 narrative is consistent¹⁸⁹ – he seeks to disclose the significance of the biblical

¹⁸⁶ Ibn Ezra 110.

¹⁸⁷ BT Sotah 10a.

¹⁸⁸ Ibn Ezra 111.

¹⁸⁹ An exception to this literal approach is Ibn Ezra's agreement with earlier interpreters that Tamar's veil indicates her modest nature.

episode without straying from its literal meaning. This primary concern and approach is evident throughout his commentary.

David Kimhi (1160-1235)

David Kimhi (Radak), a twelfth- and thirteenth-century exegete born in Provence, was concerned with language, grammar, a literal approach, and remaining faithful to rabbinic tradition, as well as with historical and geographical issues. Moreover, he frequently noted ethical and moral principles to be drawn from the biblical narratives.¹⁹⁰

Like his predecessors, Radak notes the problematic placement of Genesis 38 and he addresses this issue in several ways. He offers a chronological explanation and maintains that the episode actually takes place after Joseph is sold.¹⁹¹ Radak offers two reasons for this disruption. The first is midrashic and emphasizes Judah's figurative descent from greatness caused by his brother's sale. Radak's second interpretation maintains that the narrative is meant to juxtapose one נא הָכָר with another נא הָכָר.¹⁹² In other words, the account's location highlights thematic and linguistic parallels that exist between the Joseph story and that of Judah and Tamar.

Like those before him, Radak interprets כנענִי as "merchant" and in his attempt to support this claim, like Rashbam he maintains that Jacob's sons would never have married Canaanites. While this is enough of a statement for most interpreters, it may simply be Radak's attempt to provide a classic interpretation, not an attempt to agree or disagree with it. I say this only because of the proposal that follows: that Judah's wife converted.¹⁹³ If כנענִי does indeed mean "merchant," why is there a need to provide a secondary explanation? The latter comment appears to be Radak's own interpretation of the biblical passage. For

¹⁹⁰ For more about Kimhi and the historical context in which he wrote see Frank Talmage, *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

¹⁹¹ See David Kimhi, *Perushe Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak) 'al Ha-Torah: Sefer Bereshit bi-shlemuto kefi sheyatzah ha-mekhaber ve-lakat peirushav 'al Shmot, Vayikrah, Bamidbar, Dvarim, mitokh sifre ha-Radak* (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-rav Kuk, 1970) 181.

¹⁹² A literal translation of the Hebrew would read as follows: "Examine" or "Recognize"

¹⁹³ See Kimhi 182. For those who interpret Judah's marriage as problematic, if his wife converts she is no longer a stranger to the Israelites and the difficulty ceases to exist.

him, it is necessary to offer an explanation that invalidates any reading that might imply Judah's marriage to a woman of foreign origin. Thus, in Radak's attempt to reiterate a literal meaning of the Bible, he combines a classic understanding of the text with his own.

The Bible uses two genders of the verb קָרַא¹⁹⁴ and thereby indicates that Judah names his firstborn son while his wife names the second and third. Radak maintains that the naming process, as described in Genesis 38, was a matter of custom and unfortunate circumstances.¹⁹⁵ It was common for the husband and wife to take turns – the husband was to name the firstborn, while the wife named the second, and so on. Judah should have named their third son but he was in Chezib at the time of birth and could not take part in the naming; thus, the responsibility was left to the child's mother.

Radak's interest in language is evident in Gen. 38:12, which states: "A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went to Timnah עַל his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite." The difficulty rests with the word עַל, generally elsewhere translated as "on" or "above." Radak explains that עַל and אֶל can be used interchangeably and, in this way, suggests that Judah did not go "above" but "to" his sheep shearers.¹⁹⁶

Radak draws general principles from the Genesis 38 narrative and one such example emerges in his discussion of Gen. 38:8, where Judah tells Onan to perform the levirate duty with Tamar in order to provide a child for his deceased brother, Er. Radak uses this passage as evidence that the levirate law existed before the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Another principle is drawn from Gen. 38:19, which describes Tamar taking off her veil and putting on her widow's

¹⁹⁴ Gen. 38:3-5. The masculine form is used for the first son and the feminine form is used for the second and third.

¹⁹⁵ Kimhi 182.

¹⁹⁶ Radak provides a similar explanation in his *Sefer Ha-Shorashim* where he writes that, in some cases, אֶל is like עַל [see David Kimhi, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim le-rabbi David ben Yosef Kimhi ha-sefaradi* (Berolini: Bethge 1847) 31]. Ibn Ezra offers a similar interpretation when he claims that "on" or "above" his sheep shearers makes no sense; thus he interprets עַל as "unto." See Avraham Ibn Ezra, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch (Genesis)* (New York: Menorah Publishing Company, Inc., 1988) 12.

clothing after her sexual encounter with Judah. According to Radak, this proves Tamar's honorable intentions – she wanted to conceive through Judah, to have a child belonging to Abraham's lineage, and to fulfill the levirate law.

Similarly, Radak attempts to improve upon Judah's problematic portrayal when he claims that he had the right to mete out punishment to Tamar. She had been promised to his son Shelah, thus her behavior was considered adultery.¹⁹⁷ To explain Tamar's sentence, Radak draws on the levirate law and manages to remove some of the liability from Judah ultimately implying that he was just in his response.

Joseph Bekhor Shor

Joseph Bekhor Shor, a twelfth-century French Tosafist, was a student of Rashbam. As a member of the French school of literalists, his approach to Gen. 38:1 explains that Judah's descent was a physical one; it was not one of greatness, but a literal movement.

Unlike others who claim that Judah traveled back and forth between his home and his father's,¹⁹⁸ Bekhor Shor, in his attempt to provide a literal and simple interpretation of the text, suggests that Judah isolated himself completely. Similarly, in verse 12, he maintains that Judah went to his sheep shearers because of the festivities related to such a season.¹⁹⁹ Another straightforward explanation concerns Tamar's veil and her act of wrapping herself, customs seemingly associated with harlotry and widowhood. Bekhor Shor claims that she covered herself simply to conceal her identity from Judah.

¹⁹⁷ Some interpreters claim that Tamar was not married (for an example see Jub. 41:27-28). According to these works, Er and Onan never consummated their marriages, and thus Tamar was never legally bound to them. Accordingly, she could not have been considered to have committed an act of adultery. Others explain Judah's actions by arguing that she was Shem's daughter (see BT Avodah Zarah 36b and Gen. Rab. 85:10). The punishment designated for a priest's daughter who has committed harlotry, as outlined in Lev. 21:19, is that of fire.

¹⁹⁸ For an example see Levi ben Gershon's discussion of Genesis 38 and its placement in the Bible [Levi ben Gershon, *Perushe Ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag)*, (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-rav Kuk, 1992)].

¹⁹⁹ Interpreters such as Rashi and Ramban clearly disagree with such an understanding. Rashi relates Judah's travels to business responsibilities while Ramban relates them to Judah's grieving process.

Like Radak, Bekhor Shor considers Tamar married because of the levirate law.²⁰⁰ This helps explain the sentence meted out to her – if she is a married woman and has committed an act of adultery, the appropriate punishment is death by fire. Bekhor Shor’s interest lies in the literal surface of the Bible and this primary concern is further illustrated when he refutes interpretations of symbolic or midrashic nature.

Moshe ben Nahman (1194-1270)

Moshe ben Nahman Gerondi, also referred to as Nahmanides or Ramban, wrote an interpretation of Genesis 38 that illustrates an interest in halakha, and familiarity with common customs of the biblical period.

Like Rashi, Rashbam and Radak, Ramban agrees with Onkelos’ Aramaic translation of כנען as “merchant,” but he expands this idea and says that the כנען was a “merchantman who came to dwell in the land of Canaan for business reasons.”²⁰¹ He explains that Shua must have been a merchant, “for why would Scripture find it necessary to state that he was a Canaanite by descent when all people of the land were Canaanites, of the Perizzites and Jebusites and their brothers, as well of these traced their genealogy to Canaan?”²⁰² His suggestion rests on the assumption that the majority of inhabitants of Canaan are of Canaanite descent, but the inconsistency in his interpretation lies in his observation that Tamar was not of Canaanite descent but rather a daughter of a “stranger living in the land.”²⁰³ If he acknowledges that some of the land’s inhabitants are not of Canaanite origin, why does he find it difficult to understand the need to note Shua’s Canaanite origin?²⁰⁴

Ramban’s interest in Rashi’s interpretations is evident when he questions the former’s understanding of Gen. 38:2. He wonders why a place would be

²⁰⁰ See Gen. 38:24.

²⁰¹ Nahmanides 463.

²⁰² Nahmanides 464.

²⁰³ תמר הייתה בת אחת מן הגרים בארץ (Nahmanides 466).

²⁰⁴ Along the same lines, why would the text note Shua’s Canaanite nature but ignore Tamar’s foreign origin? This may be a matter of emphasizing Judah’s sinful behavior – marriage to a Canaanite – as a cause of some of the events described, while Tamar’s origins are irrelevant to the narrative’s outcome.

named to honor such a non-event,²⁰⁵ referring to the idea that Judah's wife stopped bearing children and that Chezib was so called to commemorate the fact. Similarly, Ramban rejects Rashi's interpretation of Gen. 38:8 and asserts that no prescription to name the child after the deceased was ever made.²⁰⁶ This leads to a brief discussion about *halitsah*²⁰⁷ and the parallels between Genesis 38 and the story of Ruth and Boaz.²⁰⁸

Ramban clearly disagrees with those earlier interpreters who blame Judah's marriage and his role in Joseph's sale for Er's death.²⁰⁹ He states that Er died because of his own behavior;²¹⁰ but while he rejects this classic understanding, he does remain faithful to the rabbinic attempt to improve Judah's image when he shifts the blame from Judah to Er himself.

When Judah tells Tamar to return to her father's house, Ramban argues that Judah meant for her to conduct herself like a widow until Shelah matured.²¹¹ Rather than interpret the passage as an indication of Judah's unwillingness to fulfill his promise – to give Tamar to Shelah as a wife – Ramban manages to reduce the degree to which Judah is held responsible for Tamar's unfortunate circumstances. His judgment is considered just, because, even though a widow, she is still thought to be married and therefore deserves the punishment

²⁰⁵ Nahmanides 467. This idea is related to the earlier interpretations about ציון in Genesis Rabbah and the targumim.

²⁰⁶ Some claim that the "name" referred to in the Genesis 38 passage suggests inheritance of the deceased's property (see Davies 141-2). Still others maintain that the name implies the preservation of the deceased's soul through the child born of the levirate law (see Burrows 1940, 33). Davies claims that "the 'name' was clearly associated in some way with inheritance, and the purpose of the levirate marriage was therefore not simply to ensure the continuity of the family but also, by implication, to prevent the alienation of the ancestral estate."

²⁰⁷ This practice is described in Deut. 25:5-10, and allows the brother of the deceased to refuse the levirate duty.

²⁰⁸ In addition to noting the similarities between the two accounts, Ramban indicated some differences as well. For example, Boaz is referred to as a גואל, redeemer, instead of a מובן, levir. This demonstrates Rambans' interest in the particulars of halakha and traditional practices. See Nahmanides 470.

²⁰⁹ BT Sotah 13b; *Midrash Tanhuma* 241.

²¹⁰ Nahmanides 468. Ramban is not the only interpreter to suggest this – Yaakov ben Asher, a later interpreter, agrees with this understanding. [See Yaakov ben Asher, *Tur on the Torah: Commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Yaakov ben Rabbeinu Asher (R'osh)* (Jerusalem: Lambda Publishers, 2005) 320.] One may argue that this is one example of Ramban's halakhic comments; it agrees with two legal biblical passages, Deut. 24:16 and 2Kgs. 14:6, which state that "Fathers shall not be put to death because of sons, and sons shall not be put to death because of fathers; a man should be put to death for his own sin."

²¹¹ Nahmanides 471.

designated appropriate for adultery. This interpretation also provides a possible explanation for Judah mistaking Tamar as a common prostitute. As a widow she should have been wearing the appropriate garb, but because she was not and did not appear to be a widow, Judah never considered the woman sitting at Petah Enaim to be his daughter-in-law.

Along the same lines, Ramban rejects Rashi's interpretation that Judah never intended to give Tamar to Shelah. He asserts that had this been the case, Judah, as a leader in the region, would have told Tamar to return to her father's home and marry whomever she desired. Instead, Ramban maintains that Judah did intend to give Tamar to Shelah and he supports his claim by drawing on Judah's anger when he is told about Tamar's alleged act of adultery.

As a leader and role model for the early Israelites, Judah should be a conscientious and moral being, and he should experience natural, human emotions, all of which are missing in the Bible's descriptions. Ramban attempts to resolve this incongruity when he writes that Judah went to the sheep shearing festival²¹² in order to forget the losses in his family²¹³ and, in this way, he alludes to a state of mourning. Because he was a leader, Judah was expected to take part in public practices such as the celebration associated with the sheep shearing season.²¹⁴

Like Rashi, Ramban maintains that Judah thought Tamar was a harlot because she sat at the crossroads. The difference between the interpreters, however, is that Ramban draws on a passage from Proverbs in order to support the claim.²¹⁵ He states that, since harlots had sexual encounters with their closest relatives, it was common for them to sit at crossroads partly covered and veiled so they could conceal their identities.²¹⁶ This illustrates Ramban's assumption of customs of the day and also provides a possible explanation for why Tamar covered herself.

²¹² See Gen. 38:12.

²¹³ Nahmanides 472.

²¹⁴ This interpretation incorporates his novel idea, that Judah went to Timnah to distract himself, as well as Rashi's understanding that he went to his sheep shearers for business reasons.

²¹⁵ Prov. 9:14-15 reads as follows: "She sits in the doorway of her house, Or on a chair at the heights of the town, Calling to all the wayfarers, Who go about their own affairs."

²¹⁶ Nahmanides 473.

Ramban concludes his discussion of Genesis 38 by acknowledging that Tamar's behavior was appropriate for her circumstances. However, he notes the need to explain the proposed punishment and, in his attempt to do so, he claims that it was all a result of the embarrassment her actions caused Judah.²¹⁷ These concluding observations illustrate the degree to which Ramban relies on the same apologetic methods as his predecessors.

Bahya ben Asher (died 1340)

A thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Spaniard, Bahya ben Asher was among the earliest exegetes to incorporate mysticism in his works. Inasmuch as he also attempted to demonstrate the embodiment of philosophical truths in the scriptural text, Bahya interprets the Bible by including simple, midrashic and philosophical observations.

Throughout his commentary of Genesis 38, Bahya attempts to reveal the hidden and mystical meanings of the narrative.²¹⁸ The concept of *gilgul*,²¹⁹ for instance, underlies a large part of this interpretation, and Bahya maintains that both the souls of Er and Onan were reborn through Peretz and Zerah.²²⁰ In this way, Judah is considered to have fulfilled his promise to Tamar and his obligation to his deceased son. Since his responsibility was completed, Judah and Tamar had no reason to continue engaging in sexual relations. This responds to those who interpret Gen. 38:26 as an indication that the two figures continued to engage in sexual relations.²²¹

²¹⁷ Judah was a man of high standing in the region and having a daughter-in-law who allegedly committed an act of adultery or harlotry is a threat to his personal reputation. See Nahmanides 476.

²¹⁸ Many of the concepts that Bahya discusses are central matters of deliberation in the *Zohar*'s interpretation of Genesis 38. See Moses de Leon, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, volume three* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 134-147.

²¹⁹ This is a kabbalistic concept and refers to the ongoing cycle and rebirth of souls.

²²⁰ Bahya ben Asher, *Sefer Rabbeinu Bahya 'al Ha-Torah im Perush Tuv Ta'am mi-Ba'al ha-Tosafot Yom Tov* (Bnei Brak: Avraham Shmuel ha-Levi Heiler, 1992) 231.

²²¹ The claim that Judah and Tamar continued to have sexual relations did not appear in my research. There are several possible explanations for this discrepancy. It is possible that those who made such claims were a rejected minority, so much so that their writings were never transmitted to the masses or over the generations – they were lost with the exception of references in the works of those who responded against them. It is also possible that this claim was being made by

Bahya relates to the third of ten kabbalistic emanations, ציון²²², בינה²²³ and associates it with a woman's ability to bear children.²²³ He connects the idea of fertility to Judah's awareness that his first three sons would be insignificant for the history of Israel; therefore, Judah prays to God and asks for the continued fertility of his wife so she can bear him a worthy child.²²⁴ He names this place Chezib with the hope of ensuring his wife's fertility, but his request is fulfilled only later, through Tamar who bears twins, one of whom is Peretz, an ancestor of David.

Whereas the Bible usually explains the names of its central figures, Genesis 38 does not, and this prompts Bahya to address this inconsistency. He relates the name Er to עיר, “evil” and further expands this concept by drawing a connection to the story of Sodom. He claims that the same act was committed in both contexts – like Er, the people of Sodom spilled their seeds, and thus deserved the same punishment of death.²²⁵

With regard to Zerah, like Rashbam, Bahya associates the name with “shining,” and along the same line, relates it to the sun. Bahya’s interpretation differs from Rashbam’s, however, in that he takes a more mystical approach and understands the twins to symbolize the two lights created by God; they personify two different sources of energy – male and female. The sun represents the male element, Zerah, and the moon represents the female element personified by Peretz. Furthermore, the sun shines consistently while the moon waxes and wanes, uneven in its strength.

members of non-Jewish communities, and as my research concerns only Jewish Bible interpretation, these proposals did not appear. See Bahya 235.

²²² Due to restrictions in length it is impossible to discuss kabbalistic concepts in great detail. For further discussions of kabbalah and its methods of exegesis, see Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941); Pinhas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of Kabbalah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeneutics” in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the Zohar” in *Religion* 18 (1988) 311-345.

²²³ This is reminiscent of Gen. R. 85 and earlier interpreters such as Rashi, who maintain that ציון designates a place named after Judah’s wife and her inability to bear children after her third son Shelah.

²²⁴ Bahya 233. This is reminiscent of the midrash that describes Tamar praying to God so that she will not leave empty-handed.

²²⁵ See Gen. 13:13.

Regardless of Bahya's primary focus on the mystical significance of Genesis 38, he does provide some noteworthy simple interpretations. For instance, he claims that Judah thought Tamar was a harlot merely because she had covered her face and therefore could not be identified.²²⁶ Another example concerns Tamar being told to wait at her father's until Shelah is older. Here, Bahya agrees with Ramban and maintains that Judah's intention was to give her to Shelah, who, at this point in the narrative, was too immature.

Bahya's primary concern for the mystical and hidden meanings of the Bible is evident, but his inclusion of several simple, plain understandings cannot be overlooked. More specifically, these simple interpretations may illustrate the view that all layers of meaning are essential because without one, it is impossible to comprehend the other.

Yaakov ben Asher (1270-1340)

Yaakov ben Asher, also known as the Tur or the Baal Ha-Turim, lived in Spain. His interpretations of Genesis 38 frequently repeat earlier ones. For example, in his comment to verse 1, he shows interest in the expression “about that time.”²²⁷ Rather than provide a novel interpretation, he reiterates the comments made by Rashi and Avraham Ibn Ezra and often gives a sense of the dialogue that took place among these interpreters, while he remains indifferent and rarely demonstrates any sign of personal preference of one understanding over another.

As expected in a work of this nature, inconsistency and contradictory remarks abound. While the Baal Haturim seems to provide his readers the opportunity to decide on the most appropriate interpretation, he also risks leading his audience into a state of further confusion. For instance, he offers

²²⁶ Like Ramban, Bahya adds that harlots covered themselves so that they could have relations with even their closest relatives (see Bahya 233) perhaps suggesting that Judah's assumption was not so presumptuous – Tamar may indeed have been a harlot.

²²⁷ בָּאֵל הַתּוּרִים וְיַעֲשֵׂה בְּעֵת הַזֶּה (see Yaakov ben Asher, *Baal Haturim Chumash: The Torah with the Baal Haturim's Classic Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*, trans. Avie Gold [Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2004] 352). Yaakov ben Asher wrote his Torah commentary in two parts; I used his *Baal Ha-Turim*.

“merchant”²²⁸ and “Canaanite”²²⁹ as two possible interpretations of – two divergent understandings.

Gen. 38:3-5 says, “She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him.” The Tur begins with an explanation of the names Er and Onan and repeats the common interpretations that relate these names to the concepts of childlessness and mourning. He takes this further when he draws a connection between Judah’s grief and Jacob’s state of despair. In this way, the Tur demonstrates the close relationship between the two narratives and, inasmuch as they are similar, the placement of Genesis 38 becomes more reasonable.

The Tur is most concerned with verse 5 because, unlike the conception mentioned with regard to the first two births, this passage diverges from the pattern and does not mention Shelah’s conception. The Tur notes this inconsistency and attempts to resolve it. He explains that Onan and Shelah may have been born within a short interval and, as such, Shelah’s conception was unnecessary to point out.²³⁰ But, if this had been the case, and the two had been born within a short period, why would Judah have had to send Tamar to her father’s home until Shelah matured?²³¹ Would he not have been almost the same age as Onan who, presumably, was old enough to perform the levirate duty? The Tur responds to this when he asserts that Judah never intended to give Tamar to Shelah. Despite the preceding interpretation, the Tur offers another contradictory reading that maintains Judah did intend to give Tamar to Shelah. But aware of the displeasing behavior of his two older sons, Judah knew his youngest had to mature, otherwise he would sin like his brothers.²³²

²²⁸ Yaakov Ben Asher 316.

²²⁹ He does not give this second interpretation directly, but explains that Judah’s sons did not follow in their ancestors’ tradition, just as Judah had not (having married a Canaanite) – his sons therefore died young. See Yaakov ben Asher 317.

²³⁰ Yaakov ben Asher 318.

²³¹ Gen. 38:11.

²³² This view holds that the actions of Er and Onan were rooted in their immature age. Other medieval commentators who provide this interpretation include Moshe Alshich [see Moshe Alshich, *Midrash of Rabbi Moshe Alshich on the Torah*, Trans. Eliyahu Munk (Jerusalem: Lambda Publishers, 2000) 250]; Yaakov Culi [see Yaakov Culi, *The Torah Anthology: MeAm*

The Tur claims that Tamar's proposed punishment was not one of death, but of branding.²³³ He does not find it necessary to use Lev. 21:19 to explain Judah's sentence – there is no need to relate her to a priest, nor is there a need to establish her marital status. This interpretation views Tamar's actions as simply indicating her harlotry and, as such, she is to be branded like other harlots. The primary concern here is not to justify Judah's judgment but to define the significance of Tamar's actions.

The Tur's interpretation of Genesis 38 is more of an anthology than an original explanation. Through his work he demonstrates major interest in classic interpreters such as Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban and, in this way, illustrates the ongoing dialogue and responses that are generated.

Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344)

Born in France, Levi ben Gershon, also known as Gersonides or Ralbag, was a philosopher, mathematician, and an important astronomer. His interpretation of Genesis 38 is divided into three sections beginning with a clarification of the text itself, explaining the terms and expressions within it. This is followed by a section concerned with context – an attempt to place the narrative within the framework of the larger Bible. The third and final section recognizes the episode as a homiletical tool from which Ralbag draws various lessons and principles.

In the first section, Ralbag takes a literal approach and addresses the ambiguities and difficulties that arise from the text. For instance, he interprets both כזיב and פתח עינים as place designations; however, with regard to the latter he provides a somewhat open understanding and maintains that it is a place where eyes “rule.”²³⁴ This interpretation could mean one of two things: that it is a place where people must physically use their eyes, a crossroad, or it could suggest a place where God’s eye rules.

Lo’ez, Trans. Aryeh Kaplan (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1978) 284]; Sforno [see Sforno, *Commentary on the Torah (Bereshit)* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1987) 185].

²³³ Yaakov ben Asher 324.

²³⁴ Levi ben Gershon, *Perushei Ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag)*, (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-rav Kuk, 1992) 458.

When Judah does not recognize Tamar, Ralbag explains this as a result of Tamar having covered her face. Along the same lines, he addresses the use of two different terms to refer to Tamar – **תָּמָר** and **שָׁלָד**.²³⁵ The only explanation he offers is that **שָׁלָד** refers to those women approached specifically for sexual encounters.²³⁶

The second section of Ralbag's interpretation consists of a contextual discussion in which he offers two central explanations for the narrative's placement. He agrees with Ibn Ezra's chronological analysis and maintains that the episode took place during the sale of Joseph.²³⁷ Similarly, like Ibn Ezra, he claims that the narrative is placed intentionally to emphasize the contrast between Judah and Joseph at their times of temptation.²³⁸ Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph, but he rejects her efforts;²³⁹ Judah, on the other hand, is easily enticed when he sees a woman by the road.

Ralbag's final section, the *to 'alot*, revolves around the different ethical, philosophical and religious teachings that can be drawn from the narrative. For example, he maintains that the strong friendship between Judah and Hirah, demonstrated by the fact that Hirah protects Judah's reputation by searching for the harlot himself, illustrates the necessity and the benefits of relationships when settling in a new area. The transition becomes much easier.

Another observation concerns the custom of a father naming his firstborn child. Ralbag draws on the fact that Judah named Er, Peretz and Zerah, all firstborns.²⁴⁰ What remains unclear, however, is whether the father names *only* the firstborns, or if he is permitted to name the other children as well.

²³⁵ See Gen. 38:15, 21.

²³⁶ Ben Gershom 459.

²³⁷ The two interpreters claim that the amount of time that elapsed between the sale and the time Jacob's family went to Egypt was not enough to allow for all of the events of Genesis 38 to happen. Therefore, the episode began *during* the Joseph story. The events that take place in this episode – the births, Tamar waiting for Shelah to grow older, and Tamar's births – could not have taken place within the span of 22 years that the Joseph story covers. For Ibn Ezra's discussion, see Ibn Ezra 354-355.

²³⁸ Ben Gershom 460.

²³⁹ Gen. 39:7-12.

²⁴⁰ See Gen. 38:3, 29-30.

Furthermore, Ralbag notes that the Bible consistently provides a reason when a figure dies prematurely. Thus, when the narrative neglects to describe Er's displeasing behavior, this should not be considered an indication of its inconsistency, but it simply implies that he died for the same reason as his brother – he spilled his seed instead of giving Tamar the opportunity to conceive.²⁴¹ This interpretation contributes to an understanding of the brothers' problematic behavior and also relieves Judah of responsibility relating to his sons' deaths.

Throughout Ralbag's commentary Judah and Tamar are described in a positive manner. For instance, the statement that a man cannot return to his work before completing his mourning period²⁴² suggests that Judah grieved before going to his sheep shearers. More importantly, Judah did not go to the sheep shearers in order to take part in festivities; rather, it was a matter of work and responsibility.²⁴³ Similarly, Ralbag claims that Tamar, through her wisdom and loyalty, fulfilled her marital obligations and was rewarded accordingly. He views this as proof that those who are driven by virtuous motives and intentions, even if their actions are shameful, are helped by God.²⁴⁴

While Ralbag interprets the Genesis 38 account in a simple way, he also demonstrates an interest in classic rabbinic interpretations. He claims that pregnancy is recognizable only after three months, and he draws on Tamar as evidence.²⁴⁵ He respects the rabbinic understandings of the text and attempts, in his own way, to enhance the portrayals of Judah and Tamar.

The Zohar

²⁴¹ See Gen. 38:9.

²⁴² Ben Gershom 460.

²⁴³ Rashi and Ramban offer similar interpretations.

²⁴⁴ Ben Gershom 461.

²⁴⁵ This is reminiscent of PT Yebamot 4:11.

The Zohar, a thirteenth-century medieval kabbalistic text written by Moses de Leon,²⁴⁶ attempts to reveal hidden meaning in the Bible.²⁴⁷ This mystical work borrows an assumption from the midrashim that each word is noteworthy and contributes to the greater significance of the text.

In its interpretation, the Zohar relies heavily on earlier rabbinic material. For example, כָּנָעַן is interpreted as “merchant,” as in the earlier sources. By remaining faithful to this understanding and other classic interpretations like it, the Zohar continues the early attempts to enhance Judah’s image.

However, this mystical text does not always agree with the rest of the rabbinic corpus. For instance, where some interpreters attempt to explain the use of both the masculine and feminine forms of the verb אָרַק,²⁴⁸ the Zohar claims that the Bible varies these forms intentionally. In this way, the Zohar responds to earlier and more common interpretations.

A common interpretive method of this mystical text is its play on words, linking Er’s name to עֵר, “evil” or “wicked,”²⁴⁹ for example. In this way, the Zohar emphasizes Er’s evil inclination and justifies his premature death. In its reading of Genesis 38, the Zohar interprets Er and Onan’s displeasing behavior as representing the dark forces that exist. Because the universe was created in order to be inhabited and procreation is essential to humanity’s well-being, wasting a seed is considered equivalent to spilling blood. Such behavior allows the dark

²⁴⁶ The text is attributed to Shimon Bar Yochai, a third century figure, though studies have proven that it was written in the 13th century by Moses de Leon. See Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 85.

²⁴⁷ Kabbalah maintains that Scripture holds within it hidden secrets and ultimate truths, and thus it “is reduced to expressions of the interplay of the sefirot... [It is] written in code... [and] meant to be read in ways going beyond the plain meaning.” Pinhas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 4-5. Kabbalists maintain that there are four levels of meaning to the biblical text. These levels, as described in the passage “How to Look at Torah,” [see Daniel C. Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 4-5] are dependent on one another, and correspond to the four types of Jewish exegesis: *peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod*. *Sod* is the secret, symbolic and mystical layer of understanding. It is the mystic’s objective to understand the text’s essence only if “it leads to the exploration of deeper levels of meaning inherent in every word” [see Daniel C. Matt, *Zohar: Annotated & Explained* (Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2002) 7].

²⁴⁸ Gen. 38:3-5. These interpreters view this as an instance of textual inconsistency requiring justification, and thereby attempt to “fix” the text by modifying it or by providing an explanation (see the early translations and versions of the Bible).

²⁴⁹ Bahya provides the same interpretation.

forces to gain strength and pose a threat to the power of the divine image.²⁵⁰ Thus, according to the Zohar, it is essential for the seed to be concealed from evil forces in order to hide its potential power, and this can be achieved only through procreation, something that both Er and Onan prevented.

The account of Judah and Tamar stimulates a discussion of perfection, redemption, sin, and reincarnation. These themes relate to the kabbalistic doctrine of the soul, which maintains that procreation and the levirate law ensure perfection of one's soul and, in this way, a place in the world to come. With regard to Genesis 38 the Zohar's primary concerns are *gilgul*²⁵¹ and the necessity of procreation as it relates to the soul's future. Those who do not bear children have no place in the world to come and therefore are incapable of union with God. Inasmuch as the perfection of humanity is necessary for the perfection of the universe, ultimate redemption is dependent on this cycle.

Thus, Tamar's obligation to conceive a child in Er's name is necessary in order to ensure the reincarnation of his soul. Knowing that God wishes all souls to be perfect and to reach the world to come, Tamar conceives through Judah and, in this way, creates an opportunity for Er to find a place in the world to come.

The Zohar notes the parallels between the circumstances and behaviors of Tamar and Ruth. Both were ancestresses of the Davidic line, and both were rewarded for their proper treatment of the dead. Through procreation they ensured the growth and strength of the divine light; moreover, they were rewarded by God because, according to the Zohar, God rewards those who protect this heritage by placing their souls in the world to come. Hence, Tamar fulfilled her personal obligation and helped execute a larger plan.

Rather than interpret the biblical account itself, the Zohar employs the narrative as a device to further develop its own kabbalistic doctrines, such as those of the soul and reincarnation. The Zohar attempts to motivate its readers to behave in a particular way with the hope of influencing the future condition of their souls.

²⁵⁰ See Daniel C. Matt, ed., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, volume three* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 137, and Gen. R. 34:14.

²⁵¹ Giller 36.

Yitzhak Abravanel (1437-1508)

Yitzhak Abravanel, born in Lisbon, wrote a Bible commentary in which each chapter or episode is introduced with a delineation of the questions and difficulties he hopes to address. Some of the questions he asks with regard to Genesis 38 are as follows: Whereas Hirah and Tamar are mentioned by name, Judah's wife is not – why? Why is Chezib, the place where Shelah is born, referred to? Why did Judah tell Tamar to wait in her father's home until Shelah matured? Were Tamar's actions appropriate for her circumstances? What is the significance of the Judah and Tamar episode? Why recount it?

Abravanel maintains that the stories of Judah and Joseph reflect the history of the tribes and later kings of Israel.²⁵² Furthermore, the Genesis 38 narrative distinguishes Judah from his brothers and also demonstrates the relentless divine presence with regard to Jacob, Judah and their sons. Along the same lines, Abravanel asserts that the deaths of Er and Onan should not be considered punishments; they are noted in order to emphasize the births of Peretz and Zerah. Abravanel uses the narrative to convey personal ideological and religious opinions to his readers. More importantly, these views underlie his interpretation of Genesis 38.

For the most part, Abravanel's interpretation is literal in approach, but this is not the case when he addresses Judah's descent described in Gen. 38:1. He remains faithful to the classic rabbinic understanding of the passage and maintains that Judah's descent was symbolic – his friendship with his brothers changed because of his role in Joseph's sale.²⁵³

Contrary to the rabbinic interpretation of Gen. 38:2, which understands פָּנָה to mean “merchant,” Abravanel attempts to provide a simple reading of the verse and claims that Judah did indeed marry a woman of Canaanite origin. In addition to the literal analysis, he explains that Judah's marriage to a woman of

²⁵² See Yitzhak Abravanel, *Peirush 'al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Hotsa'at Sefarim Bnei Arbal, 1963) 371.

²⁵³ Abravanel 371.

foreign background, specifically, a Canaanite, explains the evil nature of Er and Onan.²⁵⁴

Abravanel understands Chezib to be a place name rather than a reference to Judah's wife's inability to bear anymore children after Shelah (a subject debated by the earlier writers). This literal interpretation is enhanced with a gloss that attempts to resolve the difficulty concerning the naming of Judah's three sons.²⁵⁵ Abravanel suggests that Chezib is mentioned because that is where Judah was located at the time of his son Shelah's birth. Ordinarily, the father and mother take turns naming the children; because he was not there, but in Chezib, his wife named their third son, and this explains the use of both the feminine and masculine forms of the verb קָרַב.

According to Abravanel, Tamar's actions were appropriate. When she sat at Petah Enaim her hope was for Judah to see her and take her home so that she could fulfill her marital duty through Shelah. Unfortunately, Judah did not recognize her because she had covered herself. Nevertheless, the sexual encounter between Judah and Tamar was not inappropriate, as some would suggest. Without drawing on any specific evidence, Abravanel explains that if the brother of the deceased does not fulfill the levirate duty, the father is next in line. Moreover, he claims that the motivation that inspired Tamar to act is לִשְׁמָם, "in the name of the heavens."²⁵⁶ In other words, her intention was to fulfill a biblical law and follow in the ways of God and this makes her an admirable woman.

Abravanel's principal concern is to provide his readers with an explanation of the narrative that relies heavily on its content. Regardless of his literal approach, he does not hesitate to continuously develop his ideas and those of his predecessors. He offers a plain meaning of the Bible and then goes beyond in an attempt to give further insight.

Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1550)

²⁵⁴ This gloss seems to contradict Abravanel's earlier response where he claims that Er and Onan's deaths should not be considered punishments (see 371). That previous statement appeared to indicate that their behaviors were not as sinful as the Bible described.

²⁵⁵ In Gen. 38:3-5 both קָרַב and תִּקְרֹב are used – the question arises as to who named the three children.

²⁵⁶ Abravanel 373.

An Italian commentator of the fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries, Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno²⁵⁷ wrote a brief apologetic interpretation of Genesis 38. He maintains that, had Judah recognized Tamar, he would have remembered his promise to give her to his youngest son Shelah and would have done so. The difficult nature of this interpretation lies in the fact that Judah is portrayed passively. He would have fulfilled his promise had Tamar revealed her identity, but he should have taken care of his responsibilities and satisfied them independently of any external influences.

Along the same lines, Sforno claims that Tamar sat at Petah Enaim in the hope that Judah would see her and ask why she had removed her widow's garments. At that point she would have told him that Shelah had matured and that it was time to engage in sexual relations with him. Unfortunately, Judah did not recognize her and Tamar did not reveal her identity to him, because she assumed that after speaking to him, Judah would recognize her voice and she could carry out her plan.

In Sforno's attempts to explain Tamar's behavior, he emphasizes her honorable motives, particularly her desire for a child from Judah's line. Moreover, he claims that conceiving through Judah, who was worthy of having kings and prophets descend from him, was part of the divine plan.²⁵⁸ In this way, their sexual encounter is portrayed as a necessary step toward the emergence of the future savior of the Israelites. Through this creative approach, Sforno successfully improves the images of both Judah and Tamar.

The Karaites

Inasmuch as the Karaites reject the Oral Torah, a central tenet of the Jewish rabbinic tradition, they attribute sole authority to the written scripture. Consequently, their liturgy is replete with biblical passages. In this way, they provide their own interpretations of the Bible and find practical and ethical uses for it. For example, the Karaite marriage ceremony includes several ritual

²⁵⁷ He will be referred to as Sforno throughout this paper.

²⁵⁸ Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno, *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah (Bereshit)* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1987) 186.

blessings, two of which refer to the episode of Judah and Tamar. They portray the narrative and its circumstances as a sanctified event to which the married couple should aspire. The partners are blessed with the prayer that their house should be “like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore unto Judah,”²⁵⁹ a passage taken directly from the Book of Ruth.²⁶⁰

This demonstrates the central role of Scripture in Karaite communities. Furthermore, the above liturgical passage illustrates the positive perception of Genesis 38 by the Karaites in a way that develops and emphasizes the outcome of the narrative. The sexual encounter between Judah and Tamar is a positive one and this is highlighted by alluding to the powerful and elevated status of Peretz and his lineage. While most interpretations attempt to justify the incident and start with a point of controversy in the narrative, the Karaite liturgy ritualizes the community’s positive attitude and, in this way, emphasizes the episode’s significance.

The Sixteenth- to Eighteenth Centuries

The field of biblical exegesis saw major developments between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, most of which can be attributed to a major technical invention in 1450 – the Guttenberg printing press. Earlier interpretations were short and concise; those from the 1500s on tended to be more exhaustive. Writers were now able to develop their ideas almost without length restrictions. The printing press generated opportunity for one’s readership to expand, it provided easier access to textual works and literacy as a whole increased. I will now sample two of the better known works produced during this era.

Yehudah ben Bezalel Loew (1525-1609)

Yehudah ben Bezalel Loew, also known as the Maharshal of Prague, interprets Genesis 38 in *Gur Ariyeh*, and his approach combines the simple and the midrashic. He asserts that all inhabitants of the region were Canaanite and

²⁵⁹ Leon Nemoy, ed., *Karaite Anthology: Excerpts from the Early Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) 285.

²⁶⁰ Ruth 4:12.

therefore suggests that the term כנעני is redundant as a reference to national origin. Instead, he concludes that it has to do with conversion²⁶¹ and, in this way, implies that Judah's wife was originally of foreign origin but was no longer an outsider. This is a clear attempt to resolve the difficulty concerning Judah's wife who is designated as a בַת כְּנָעַנִי in Gen. 38:2, presumably alluding to her foreign background.²⁶²

The Maharal's approach is apparent in his comment to verse 5, where he addresses the same issue noted by Ramban and tries to understand why,²⁶³ how and when a place would have been named after Judah's wife. The Maharal explains that Chezib was named after Judah's wife, but made permanent only after it became apparent that she would no longer bear children.²⁶⁴ He states that the name confirms the fact that Judah's wife was meant to have more children, but did not בַּדְרֵךְ עֲלֹם.²⁶⁵ The implication of this Hebrew expression is unclear: It could simply suggest that his wife was too old to bear additional children, or it could imply divine intervention – God decides how many children one does or does not have.

Throughout the Judah and Tamar account God is mentioned only with regard to the deaths of Er and Onan. This poses a problem for those concerned with the divine image; therefore, the interpreters attempt to incorporate divine presence through midrashic methods. For example, the Maharal draws a thematic parallel between this narrative and the story of Joseph's sale when he states that, just as Judah deceived his father with a kid, so too would Tamar deceive him with one.²⁶⁶ Similarly, he adds that the narrative teaches the principle of a measure for a measure²⁶⁷ and, in this way, furthers the idea of divine control.

²⁶¹ Yehudah ben Bezalel Loew, *Humash Gur Ariyeh Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 1989) 237. It is highly possible that he based this interpretation on Radak's earlier commentary.

²⁶² Marital relations with Canaanites are clearly frowned upon throughout the Bible and consequently, interpreters consistently justify Judah's marriage to this woman.

²⁶³ He poses the question but does not provide an answer.

²⁶⁴ This interpretation is present in several commentaries, such as Genesis Rabbah, Rashi and Bachya.

²⁶⁵ Loew 241.

²⁶⁶ This comment is made with regard to Gen. 38:23 by the Maharal as well as Rashi and Radak.

²⁶⁷ Loew 250.

Judah's statement, צדקה מני (Gen. 38:26), is ambiguous and therefore requires interpretation. The Maharal argues that this statement is Judah's acknowledgment of Tamar's righteous words.²⁶⁸ He disagrees with those who consider this to be a confession of Judah's unfavorable behavior. More specifically, because Judah did not know that the woman sitting at Petah Enaim was his daughter-in-law, he cannot be held responsible for the described circumstances. Judah's declaration merely indicates Tamar's righteous nature, illustrated by the fact that she did not shame Judah publicly and she is deemed innocent.

Yaakov Culi (d. 1732)

Yaakov Culi lived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and his most popular work was the encyclopedic Ladino commentary, *MeAm Loez*, which includes material from the Mishnah, Talmud, midrashim, Zohar and other rabbinic interpretations. It exemplifies a dominant trend that the eighteenth century brought to Bible interpretation – the encyclopedic and anthological commentaries.

Essentially, *MeAm Loez* is a collection of early interpretations and provides the reader with numerous alternative understandings of the Bible. For instance, with regard to Gen. 38:2 Culi provides three possible readings. First, he asserts that כנען cannot refer to a woman of Canaanite origin, because this would contradict tradition; therefore it should be understood as “merchant” or “trader.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore, he reiterates the view that Shua’s daughter converted before marrying Judah, and, finally, that Judah wanted to marry Shua’s daughter only because he was a leader in the region.²⁷⁰

Culi addresses the issue of Tamar’s origins and offers the view that she was the daughter, or at least a descendant, of Shem. Meanwhile, he also provides the contradicting interpretation and thus illustrates that his goal is not to present a

²⁶⁸ Loew 254.

²⁶⁹ Yaakov Culi, *The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez*, Trans. Ariyeh Kaplan (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1978) 272.

²⁷⁰ This interpretation does not explain the Hebrew word כנען per se, but gives the impression that it is related to societal status.

single, exclusive interpretation but rather a synthesis of previous understandings. In this way, Culi's work shows the narrative's possible layers of meaning.

While at first glance he appears only to reiterate previous interpretations, Yaakov Culi does dedicate some of his own efforts to the issue of Genesis 38's placement. He states that "God always brings the remedy before the illness."²⁷¹ In other words, he introduces Peretz, from whom the messianic figure is thought to descend, before Pharaoh, the oppressor. Culi also asserts that Genesis 38 demonstrates a common concern among Judah and his brothers, that they would all find themselves in Egypt.²⁷² Accordingly, they separate from one another and settle in different areas.²⁷³ Finally, Culi writes that "God always makes the punishment fit."²⁷⁴ Just as Judah deceives his father, so too would Tamar deceive him. This thematic link is a clear attempt to relate this narrative to the one it so evidently interrupts.

Conclusion

The interpreters covered in this chapter rely on the earlier work of their rabbinic predecessors and, in this way, exemplify the dialogue that took place and that continues to this day. The same issues are addressed and similar methods are applied. While some offer straightforward versions of the narrative, others fill in the gaps and use midrashic methods. The principal difference between the earlier works and those of the medieval and pre-modern era is the shift in focus from an interest in the Bible and its narratives to a concern with its early interpretations.

Inasmuch as the early interpretations function as foundations upon which later interpreters build, it is common for these later writers to compile many classic understandings and present them in one volume. The readers are intentionally provided with alternate understandings of the Bible and, in this way, the text appears to consist of several layers of meaning, each one somewhat dependent on the other. This type of work, which becomes more prevalent in

²⁷¹ Culi 298.

²⁷² Why this would concern them remains unknown.

²⁷³ This provides a possible explanation for Judah's descent in Gen. 38:1.

²⁷⁴ Culi 298.

modern times, demonstrates that the realization of the text's original meaning and intent cannot be disclosed with certainty. The text cannot be broken down to a single, exclusive understanding; thus interpretations are best studied as a group of complimentary proposals – a challenge faced by all those who study the field of Bible interpretation.

Chapter Four

The Modern Commentaries

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, a rift began to take place within the Jewish communities; this fracture continued to increase in the 1800s with the development of two central camps – the Maskilim and the Hasidim. The Maskilim, followers of the Jewish Enlightenment, attempted to ensure the revival of the Jewish people through reform. They encouraged the study of secular subjects, specifically modern languages, and also adopted nationalistic views and supported cultural assimilation. The Hasidim, on the other hand, viewed the Diaspora as their major obstacle, and were therefore primarily interested in messianic redemption and the return to Zion. They reacted to harsh decrees from their European governments and to the Jewish Enlightenment.²⁷⁵

Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign to Egypt in 1798 initiated an era of widespread study of the ancient Near East.²⁷⁶ As a result it became common for modern Bible interpreters to incorporate archeological findings into their explanations of the text, and often they tried to prove or disprove the historical veracity of the Bible. While earlier interpreters generally assumed the historicity of the narratives, disciplines that revolve around the ancient Near East and archeology frequently come to question its reliability.

Modern interpreters have attempted to synthesize a range of interpretations of the Bible and its parts, and they frequently provide collections

²⁷⁵ Raphael Mahler states that the Hasidic teachings of the early nineteenth century reflected “the social distress and political oppression of the Jewish masses and their yearning for Redemption.” [see Raphael Mahler, *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1985) 18].

²⁷⁶ J. Christopher Herold, *The Age of Napoleon* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co. Inc., 1963) 67.

of earlier interpretations. These offer large numbers of readers easy access to centuries of interpretations; moreover, the reader is informed about the implications of each interpretation and is thereby enabled to decide which one best explains the text and its difficulties.

These modern commentaries present the earlier interpretations as a dialogue that took place throughout the centuries and to this day. They reiterate the plethora of interpretations and the influence of their particular contexts on the understandings of the Bible becomes clear.

Yaakov Tzevi Mecklenburg (1785-1865)

In his introduction to *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah* Yaakov Tzevi Mecklenburg wrote the following: “Let me assure you that the relevance of Torah on the day it was formulated has not been impaired in any respect in the years which have elapsed since then. Just as my teachings were useful and inspiring for the generations preceding you, the reader, so they remain as topical in your day and age.”²⁷⁷ Mecklenburg’s primary concern is the dependent relationship between the Written and the Oral Torahs,²⁷⁸ as well as the Bible’s relevance to any historical period.

With regard to Genesis 38, Mecklenburg asserts that Tamar had never been legally bound to Er, nor to Onan; their marriages were never consummated,²⁷⁹ therefore, she was never considered Judah’s daughter-in-law. Furthermore, according to Mecklenburg, Er was a minor when his marriage to Tamar was said to have taken place;²⁸⁰ therefore, it is even more improbable that the contract was binding. Since the marriages were not consummated, there was

²⁷⁷ Yaakov Tzevi Mecklenburg, *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah: Torah Commentary by Rabbi Yaakov Tzevi Mecklenburg*, Eliyahu Munk, trans. (Jerusalem; New York: Lambda Publishers, 2001) viii.

²⁷⁸ יתלכדו ולא יתפזר – the two should not be considered independent of one another. See Yaakov Tzevi Mecklenburg, *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah: Biur 'al Hamisha Humshe Torah (helek 1)* (Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1880) v-vii.

²⁷⁹ When Er and Onan spill their seeds on the ground, Mecklenburg considers this an act that signifies a lack of sexual engagement (see Mecklenburg 2001, 522).

²⁸⁰ According to my research, this is the first appearance of this interpretation. The problem with being a minor is not clear – is he physically incapable of consummating the marriage? Or is the sex considered inconsequential?

no need to implement the levirate law.²⁸¹ More importantly, the sexual encounter between Judah and Tamar is no longer considered morally problematic.

Mecklenburg refers to Rabbi Yehezkel Landau's claim that Judah acted appropriately when he sent Tamar back to her father's home.²⁸² Along the same lines, Mecklenburg interprets the expression *צדקה מני* as Judah acknowledging Tamar's honorable motives and virtuous actions. Her behavior is considered a reflection of her fear of God and is an attempt to fulfill a biblical commandment.²⁸³ These interpretations demonstrate Mecklenburg's faithfulness to Jewish law and its traditions. Moreover, his positive perceptions of Judah and Tamar result from his religious views.

Consequently, Mecklenburg uses the biblical figures to encourage his readers to live up to a certain level of moral standards. For instance, when Judah does not want to become a laughingstock,²⁸⁴ Mecklenburg writes that "people who practiced a higher standard of moral behavior would refrain from sleeping with a woman without benefit of a legal union even before the Torah had been given."²⁸⁵ In other words, Judah engaging in sexual acts with a harlot would be considered sinful only after the giving of the Torah.²⁸⁶ According to Mecklenburg, Judah knows that his behavior will prompt a negative reaction from those around him – his actions did not reflect positively on him or on his high standing in the community. In this way, Mecklenburg uses Judah as a model and relays particular moral standards to his readers.

Like his predecessors, Mecklenburg relates the names *ציזב* and *שללה* to the concept of disappointment, but whereas some interpreters attribute this sentiment to Judah's wife and associate it to her inability to bear anymore children, he explains that she was upset because Judah was absent at the time of birth; she therefore gave their son a name connoting disappointment.²⁸⁷ More significantly, Mecklenburg relates the significance of Shelah's name to the nature of the Judah

²⁸¹ Mecklenburg 2001, 520.

²⁸² Mecklenburg 2001, 518.

²⁸³ Mecklenburg 2001, 524.

²⁸⁴ See Gen. 38:23.

²⁸⁵ Mecklenburg 2001, 523.

²⁸⁶ Mecklenburg 1880, 71.

²⁸⁷ Mecklenburg 1880, 70.

and Tamar account. He states that “everything which transpired between [Judah] and Tamar was the result of error, disappointment, not planned falsehood,” and he refers to the “string of errors...in which [Judah] and his family would become involved.”²⁸⁸ In this way Mecklenburg alludes to future difficulties that would arise during the kingdom of Judah.

He uses the biblical narrative as a means of relaying his personal and religious views; he provides classic interpretations and also draws lessons from it. Inasmuch as his interpretation is saturated with interest in religion and law, he demonstrates the close relationship between the Written and Oral Torahs.

Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865)

Samuel David Luzzatto (Shadal) was a nineteenth-century Italian scholar whose Bible interpretation illustrates a traditional approach and a keen interest in the literal and plain meaning of the text. He frequently refers to his predecessors, mainly Onkelos and Rashi, and also draws parallels between the Bible and the ancient context from which it arose.

When the Bible refers to Judah’s wife as the daughter of a, כנען, Shadal disagrees with his predecessors and interprets the text literally.²⁸⁹ He relates the Hebrew word to the inhabitants of the region – the Canaanites – and, in this way, rejects the views held by Onkelos, Rashi, Rashbam, Ralbag and Ramban, all of whom translate the term as “merchant.” Shadal’s simple approach is also evident in his interpretation of Gen. 38:5, where he asserts that Judah was in Chezib during Shelah’s birth. He claims that Chezib is the same place referred to in Josh. 19:29²⁹⁰ and thus strengthens his assertion that it was indeed a place name.²⁹¹ Along the same lines, though he does not quote him, Shadal agrees with Ramban and maintains that the child born of the levirate practice is not *named* after the

²⁸⁸ Mecklenburg 2001, 515.

²⁸⁹ See Samuel David Luzzatto, *Perush Shadal ‘al Hamisha Humshe Torah* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965) 158.

²⁹⁰ Luzzatto 158.

²⁹¹ Whereas some interpreters and midrashim relate the Hebrew word to a sense of disappointment, or to Judah’s wife’s inability to bear anymore children, Shadal maintains that it is a location.

deceased, as Rashi suggests,²⁹² but is considered to be the deceased's descendant.²⁹³ This is yet another demonstration of his simple approach.

Shadal draws possible parallels between the descriptions in the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern practices when he discusses the items Tamar requests from Judah as a pledge.²⁹⁴ He explains the significance of these objects by reiterating that in the Babylonian culture there was a custom of walking about with a seal and staff.²⁹⁵ This provides a possible explanation for Tamar requesting those specific items. Shadal also claims that the seal was attached to the פְּתִילָה²⁹⁶ and therefore, the three objects may actually have been only two.

He addresses a less commonly discussed issue when he asks why Tamar's father did not protect her from punishment, and why he did not blame Judah for not fulfilling his original promise to her.²⁹⁷ Shadal adopts a two-way solution: He takes a creative approach and maintains that Tamar's father knew that she had taken items as a pledge and that they would save her life.²⁹⁸ Furthermore, he provides a sociological explanation – the heads of families were responsible for judging their members; therefore, as head of family, Judah's role in sentencing Tamar was justified.²⁹⁹ This interpretation illustrates Shadal's simple method but also demonstrates the creative approach he sometimes took to better understand the text.

The difficulty in Judah's final statement, זֶה מַנִּי פְּתִילָה³⁰⁰ rests in its ambiguity – what is more important, Tamar's behavior as compared to Judah's or the fact that she was right in her actions? More specifically, if this expression is

²⁹² See Rashi's commentary to the Pentateuch, Gen. 38:8.

²⁹³ Luzzatto 158.

²⁹⁴ Gen. 38:18.

²⁹⁵ Shadal does not describe the Babylonian custom in further detail; however, Herodotus, who gives testament of a similar practice, may have been a possible source for Shadal's proposal. See Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis* (Chicago: Open Court, 1907) 416; Beach 294.

²⁹⁶ While some interpreters, such as Rashi, have suggested that the פְּתִילָה referred to a garment worn by Judah, others, such as Radak and Bachya, asserted that it referred to a scarf worn either on one's head or around one's neck (See Radak and Bachya 38:18).

²⁹⁷ This interpretation is with regard to Gen. 38:24. Judah's original promise was to give Tamar to Shelah when he was grown up.

²⁹⁸ Luzzatto 159.

²⁹⁹ Luzzatto 159.

³⁰⁰ This expression (Gen 38:26) is generally translated as "She is more righteous than I," or "She is more in the right than I."

considered an apology or an act of admission of guilt, issues arise because of the negative light it sheds on Judah's character. In order to resolve this possible difficulty, Shadal maintains that Judah did not acknowledge Tamar's righteousness in relation to his own;³⁰¹ rather, he recognized Tamar's right to behave as she did. Hence, according to Shadal, both Judah and Tamar should be considered righteous and moral.

Shadal tries not to stray from the simple and plain meaning of the text, but he takes a more creative approach when necessary to improve the portrayals of Judah and Tamar. Also noteworthy is the way in which he draws possible parallels between the circumstances described in the Bible and those practices believed to have been common in other ancient Near Eastern contexts.

Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1942)

In the introduction to his *Torah Temimah*, Baruch Halevi Epstein, a Russian writer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reminds his readers of Mecklenburg's *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah*. He discusses the interdependence of the Written and Oral laws and claims that one is incomplete without the other.³⁰² He reflects on the circumstances in which he lived and writes of a time

when we are confronted with manifold tribulations, the struggle for survival, the yoke of earning a livelihood, the proliferation of secular studies, the comings and goings from one country to another, the study of the Oral Law flickering out, so that both sage and disciple are constrained to find a short paved path for their studies – how much more are we compelled for the survival of the Oral Law, to conjoin it, clearly and concisely, with the Written Law.³⁰³

This statement expresses the fear that the Oral Law will one day be forgotten as a result of the threats that modernity poses for the Jewish religion and its

³⁰¹ Luzzatto 160.

³⁰² Boruch Halevi Epstein, *The Essential Torah Temimah*, Trans. Shraga Silverstein (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1989) xiv.

³⁰³ Epstein xv.

traditions.³⁰⁴ It is this mindset through which Epstein writes his Bible interpretations; his hope is to transmit the traditional understandings and practices to his readers.

Epstein gathers earlier rabbinic texts and interpretations³⁰⁵ and offers literal and midrashic understandings of the Genesis 38 episode, and he rarely alludes to his personal preference concerning approach. His objective is to emphasize the close relation between the Written and the Oral Torahs, and he maintains that no distinction should be made between them. Nevertheless, Epstein is aware of the influences of modernity and therefore concludes that modern circumstances would cause the two to be separated. Regardless, he attempts to diminish such effects and returns to tradition by providing the classic interpretations of the Bible.

In his attempt to reestablish the authority of the Jewish tradition, Epstein relies heavily on the rabbinic corpus, in particular, on the Mishnah. While his interpretations do not incorporate modern disciplines, the compilation reflects the historical context from which it arose. He reiterates classic interpretations and makes an effort to ensure the continuity of the Jewish religion and its traditions and, as such, reflects modernity in terms of the threats and the fears it poses.

Joseph Herman Hertz (1872-1946)

Born in Slovakia in the nineteenth century, Joseph Herman Hertz emigrated to North America where he was educated and held his first ministerial post in New York. He later moved to South Africa until 1913 when he became chief rabbi of the Orthodox United Hebrew Congregations of Britain. He lived through the Boer War and World War I – two political situations that influenced his religious and ideological views and, consequently, the way in which he relayed his messages.

³⁰⁴ Epstein claims that texts such as the Mishnah, *tosefta*, *sifre*, and *mechilta* were composed with this same concern in mind. Epstein xiv.

³⁰⁵ It would be redundant to review the interpretations since they have all been discussed in earlier sections.

Hertz begins his examination of Genesis 38 by addressing the fact that it seems to interrupt the Joseph story, which begins a chapter earlier. He claims that this placement is intentional – it draws a contrast between Judah and Joseph in the “hour of temptation.”³⁰⁶ Joseph rejects Potiphar’s wife and her forthcoming attempts to seduce him,³⁰⁷ while Judah is easily tempted by Tamar. In this way, Hertz provides a possible explanation for the disruption of the Bible’s narrative flow.

An interest in geography is clear when Hertz provides Adullam’s location – seventeen miles west of Jerusalem.³⁰⁸ Similarly in his reference to verse 12 he claims that Timnah was located a few miles south of Hebron. Such comments pose difficulties since they attempt to illustrate the Bible’s historical reliability and accuracy, a point of modern controversy.

Hertz writes that sheep-shearing festivities were common among the Canaanites³⁰⁹ and, in this way, implies that Judah adopted such foreign practices as his own. Similarly, Hertz notes that Tamar’s name reappears in the narratives about David’s family.³¹⁰ This intimates a greater relation between the account of Genesis 38 and the later history of the ancient Israelites. In these examples Hertz introduces his knowledge and familiarity of other biblical books and customs to better understand Genesis 38.

He takes a literal approach when he explains that Tamar covered herself in order to conceal her identity from Judah. He adds that veils were worn by votaries of Astarte,³¹¹ an ancient Near Eastern goddess and, in this way, suggests that this may prove Tamar’s non-Israelite origin. On the other hand, this may be an attempt to provide another possible instance where Israelites adopt the cultural practices of those around them; just as Judah participated in the sheep-shearing festival, so too Tamar veiled herself.

³⁰⁶ J. H. Hertz, ed., *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary* (London: Soncino Press, 1981) 145.

³⁰⁷ See Gen. 39:7-12.

³⁰⁸ The difficulty with offering such precise details is that they rest on the assumption that the Bible is accurate. Moreover, they suggest the existence of this city in Antiquity and today.

³⁰⁹ Hertz 146.

³¹⁰ King David’s daughter would be given the same name. Hertz 145.

³¹¹ Hertz 146.

In Genesis 38 Tamar is referred to as both a נוֹגָה and a נְשָׁקָר. Hertz notes and attempts to explain this inconsistent use of terminology. He claims that נְשָׁקָר refers to a woman dedicated solely to “heathen worship;”³¹² a common practice in Phoenicia and Babylonia considered to be “repulsive” by Israelites and prohibited among them.³¹³ This is yet another instance where Hertz may be suggesting that Israelites adopted cultural practices from those around them.

Hertz claims that “Scripture does not hide the sins of its heroes and heroines”³¹⁴ and, in this way, implies that he did not approve of the behaviors of either Tamar or Judah. Nonetheless, they are central to Israelite history and must be admired for their courage and determination. Hertz provides simple interpretations of the account, and he does not see the need to enhance the portrayals of Judah and Tamar; they are human – the Bible does not idealize them, so there is no need for the interpreter to do so.

Menahem Kasher (1895-1983)

Menahem Kasher’s interpretation, in which he presents virtually all extant Talmudic and midrashic material, is structured in two parts: the anthology and the commentary. He provides a detailed overview of ancient interpretations and proceeds with expositions of them.³¹⁵

With regard to the episode’s placement, for example, Kasher provides two explanations: that it took place *before* Joseph’s sale, and that it occurred *during* the sale. He bases the majority of his understanding on Ibn Ezra’s interpretation³¹⁶ and explains that Judah “went down from his brothers” before the sale, but that events such as Shelah’s birth, took place at the exact time of Joseph’s sale.³¹⁷

³¹² Hertz 146.

³¹³ Hertz 146.

³¹⁴ Hertz 147.

³¹⁵ Anthologies of Bible interpretations appeared earlier than the modern period. For example, the *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, was a medieval source that gathered the numerous classic interpretations into one work. See *Midrash Ha-Gadol: 'al Hamisha Humshe Torah (Sefer Bereshit)*. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1967.

³¹⁶ See Chapter 3.

³¹⁷ See Menahem Kasher, ed., *Humash Torah Shelema ve-hi ha-Torah she-bi-ketav 'im biur Torah she-be'al peh (helek 6)* (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1949-) 1443. While he does not offer an explanation as to Judah’s participation in Joseph’s sale at this moment,

Kasher demonstrates an interest in geography when he explains that Adullam, a city later included in the tribe of Judah, was located in southern Israel.³¹⁸ Along the same lines, in addition to providing the classic interpretations of צַיָּב,³¹⁹ Kasher interprets it as a place name and locates it near Adullam. He further explains that it was conquered by Joshua and settled by those who returned after the Exile.³²⁰

Kasher's modern tendencies do not overshadow the tradition of interpreters that improves the images of Judah and Tamar. Whereas Judah's wife is described as a daughter of a man living in the Canaanite region – a clear attempt to contrast Tamar with Judah's wife.³²¹ While he provides classic understandings of in his comment to verse 2,³²² he also manages to improve the reader's impression of Tamar while indirectly shedding negative light on Judah's wife. Kasher's interpretation of Gen. 38:6 further enhances Tamar's portrayal when he explains that, unlike Judah's wife, who is only recognized with respect to her father and who is important only insofar as her role in producing sons, Tamar's name is disclosed in the text. Her father and origin are irrelevant because she is significant in her own right.³²⁴

Kasher insists that Er and Onan committed the same sin – they spilled their seed instead of facilitating conception through Tamar. Moreover, he notes

the Bible clearly suggests that Judah was in Chezib at the time of Shelah's birth. Hence, he and his brothers may have been in Chezib when they sold their brother Joseph.

³¹⁸ See Menahem M. Kasher, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation: a millennial anthology (Genesis: Volume V)*, Trans. Harry Freedman (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1953) 58.

³¹⁹ Such as its possible relation to Judah's wife and the fact that she ceased bearing children after Shelah.

³²⁰ Kasher 1953, 62. He also adds that this is the same place referred to in Josh. 19:29 and 1 Chron. 4:22 (צְבָא and אַכְזָב respectively).

³²¹ Gen. 38:2.

³²² Kasher 1953, 62.

³²³ He maintains that the Hebrew word refers to a trader and that Judah converted her to monotheism before marriage.

³²⁴ Kasher 1949, 1449.

the structure of the biblical passages: Er was “displeasing to the Lord” – no explanation is provided;³²⁵ Onan “let [his seed] go to waste... What he did was displeasing to the Lord.”³²⁶ Kasher recognizes this as the fundamental difference between the brothers, and he concludes that Er was inherently evil, while Onan was evil only in this case.³²⁷

Unlike other interpreters who contrast Judah’s ascent to Timnah with Samson’s descent,³²⁸ Kasher compares Judah’s ascent with his descent described earlier in the chapter and maintains that Adullam was in the south and Timnah was in the north.³²⁹ This explains Judah’s change in direction and also illustrates Kasher’s interest in biblical geography; he uses the Bible’s language to produce a feasible plan of the region at the time the story allegedly took place.

The length and depth of Kasher’s work is a result of his approach – he gives his readers the opportunity to decide which interpretation best suits the text instead of offering a single “right” way to understand the episode. He reiterates classic interpretations and provides insight into the narrative all the while incorporating the knowledge of his times. More significantly, Kasher’s *Torah Shelema* attempts to explain existing ambiguities, both in the Scripture and in its oral tradition, by presenting the Written and Oral Torahs side by side. He supplements this with notes and further clarifications, and he manages to produce a most thorough encyclopedia of Bible and Talmud interpretations and thus, Kasher contributes to the field of Bible interpretation like no other writer before him.

The Soncino Chumash

The *Soncino Chumash*, compiled by Amnon Cohen, consists mainly of medieval interpretations and rarely contributes novel understandings. With regard to the account of Genesis 38 and its placement, Cohen offers two contradicting chronological explanations. The former being that the episode took place after the

³²⁵ See Gen. 38:7.

³²⁶ See Gen. 38:9-10.

³²⁷ Kasher 1953, 64.

³²⁸ See Jud. 14:1, 5

³²⁹ Kasher 1953, 66.

sale of Joseph,³³⁰ while the latter claims that it occurred before his sale.³³¹ He provides alternative understandings of the text when he cannot resolve the difficulties that arise from it.

According to Cohen, Judah thinks Tamar is a harlot because she sits at Petah Enaim.³³² This simple reading suggests that Tamar's behavior was common among prostitutes from surrounding cultures. Along the same lines, Cohen explains that Judah did not recognize Tamar because she had covered her face, and he relates this to a practice in the East.³³³ Furthermore, with regard to the objects Tamar requests from Judah, Cohen maintains that these were "insignia of a chief"³³⁴ – a conclusion that likely resulted from familiarity with other similar signs of status.

Cohen's interpretation of Genesis 38 is a product of heavy reliance on medieval texts as well as possible incorporation of contemporary anthropological, archeological and sociological findings.

Ephraim Avigdor Speiser (1902-1965)

Speiser's interpretation of Genesis 38 takes a modern scholarly approach to the narrative. He provides the literal meaning of the biblical passages without attempting to enhance the portrayals of Judah and Tamar. More notable, he includes comparative study and also makes use of the Documentary Hypothesis in his analysis.³³⁵

³³⁰ A. Cohen, ed., *The Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth* (Hindhead: The Soncino Press, 1947) 236.

³³¹ He writes the following: "between [the sale] and the family's descent to Egypt twenty-two years elapsed, whereas we are informed that Onan, Judah's second son, grew up until he was capable of begetting children, which means that he must have been at least twelve years old. After a considerable interval Perez was born, and he grew up and had two sons by the time they came to Egypt. In the aggregate considerably more than twenty-two years must have elapsed." See Cohen 237. Without making a clear reference, this is an obvious reiteration of Ibn Ezra's interpretation.

³³² Cohen 239.

³³³ It is not clear what practice he is referring to (see Cohen 239).

³³⁴ Hertz 239.

³³⁵ The Documentary Hypothesis is a theory that the books of the Bible consist of work from different sources, namely *P* (Priestly), *J* (Yawhist), *E* (Elohist), and *D* (Deuteronomist). For the most part, Genesis is considered to be a work of the *J* author. For more on the Documentary Hypothesis see the following: Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994); John van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); John van Seters,

Speiser notes the chronological inconsistency between the Joseph narrative and the Judah and Tamar episode³³⁶ and concludes that the two are unconnected; in other words, the Genesis 38 account is an independent literary unit.³³⁷ He explains that the biblical authors, in this case J, have their specific interests but rarely attempt to harmonize conflicting parts. Speiser argues that the history of Judah and his tribe is important and it should not be tampered with or ignored and, in this way, he rationalizes the inconsistencies in Genesis.³³⁸ He asserts that the author carefully considered the placement of this narrative, and that its location directly following Joseph's sale is appropriate; there is no better place to introduce a different tale.

Speiser interprets Genesis 38 as a reflection of the history of tribal Israel. He maintains that the narrative describes the initial expansion of the tribe of Judah – the adoption of Canaanite elements was a central factor that led to its prominence. He argues that Judah descended from the hill country, where he lived his with father and brothers, to a Canaanite region. Judah married a woman of Canaanite origin and Tamar, the woman he chose for his son, was of that same background. Speiser ignores the Bible's attitude to such relations and attempts only to provide his readers with a literal, simple understanding of the narrative by including contemporary knowledge and disciplines into his study.

He goes into great detail when he explains the items Tamar requested from Judah as a pledge, specifically the seal and cord.³³⁹ He begins with a linguistic comment and says that the Hebrew for “pledge,” עֲרָבָן, is adopted from Akkadian³⁴⁰ and, in this way, illustrates his ability to incorporate contemporary knowledge from other ancient languages into his understanding of the Bible. Speiser continues and claims that Tamar requested particular items for the

Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian of Genesis (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

³³⁶ This is reminiscent of Ibn Ezra's interpretation, but Speiser does not go into detail.

³³⁷ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1964) 299.

³³⁸ At this point, the conflicts being referred to are those between the Joseph story and the Judah and Tamar episode.

³³⁹ For her request see Gen. 38:18.

³⁴⁰ He also notes that a version of the word is used in Greek as well.

purposes of personal identification. The seal is a religious and legal replacement – it is like a personal signature.³⁴¹ Moreover, he refers to Herodotus who suggests that no Babylonian “of any standing” would be seen without one.³⁴² He goes into further detail and states that ancient seals, apparently used throughout Mesopotamia and the Near East, were perforated so they could hang from a chain. Accordingly, the seal and cord Tamar requested are one unit; the cord is insignificant by itself. With regard to the staff, Speiser draws on cuneiform records from the old Babylonian period that refer to a similar object also used for personal identification.

Speiser’s combined literal and comparative approach to the biblical narrative confirms his reputation as a modern scholar. He uses contemporary findings and developed disciplines in order to place Genesis 38 within the larger framework and, in this way he is able to better understand it and the circumstances it describes.

Gunther Plaut (1912-)

The Bible commentary written by Gunther Plaut, a twentieth-century Reform rabbi, is divided into three sections: a verse by verse commentary, an epilogue that discusses central issues, and a synthesis of classic interpretations and early midrash.

Modern interpreters concern themselves with the analysis of earlier understandings of the Bible and they make remarks about previous interpretations without necessarily demonstrating a preference. For instance, Plaut translates כנען as “merchant” and then states that interpreters presented this understanding in order to “deny that intermarriage was involved”³⁴³ and, in this way, absolve Judah from any potentially inappropriate behavior.

³⁴¹ Speiser 298.

³⁴² Speiser 298. Shadal seems to have noted this same observation from Herodotus.

³⁴³ Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981) 249.

Like Hertz, Plaut notes the two terms used in Genesis 38 to refer to Tamar: הַשְׁלֵמָה and זָנוֹנָה.³⁴⁴ In order to explain the terminological inconsistency, he asserts that Judah and his friend Hirah used the term הַשְׁלֵמָה in public to give Judah's relationship with Tamar "a somewhat more acceptable status."³⁴⁵ Hence, while he does not explain the former term, Plaut's interpretation suggests that it is more negative in connotation and that Judah knew that his actions were unacceptable to the public.

Unlike those who draw a parallel between Timnah, mentioned in Genesis 38, and Timnah, mentioned in the Samson story,³⁴⁶ Plaut relates it to another passage³⁴⁷ and provides the city's location – the hill country, south of Jerusalem.³⁴⁸ The details he presents demonstrate a familiarity with the region, as well as possible knowledge acquired from archeological studies of the area.³⁴⁹ Still, they pose difficulties for those who claim the text's lack of historicity.³⁵⁰

Like his predecessors, Plaut attempts to justify Genesis 38's literary placement. While the episode contains within it older traditions, he explains that it remains a "tale of wider implications"³⁵¹ and notes the historical significance attributed to the narrative when Judah is described as the "ultimate preserver of the house of Israel."³⁵² Similarly, Plaut relates the account to the book of Ruth and draws on parallels which emphasize David's remarkable origins. He attributes divine presence to the biblical episode and maintains that "the Judah-Tamar interlude is...not merely an old tribal tale but also an important link to the main theme: to show the steady, though not always readily visible, guiding hand of God

³⁴⁴ Gen. 38:21 and 15 respectively.

³⁴⁵ Plaut 251.

³⁴⁶ See Jud. 14:1.

³⁴⁷ Josh. 15:10: "From Baalah the boundary turned westward to Mount Seir, passed north of the slope of Mount Jearim—that is, Chesalon—descended to Bethshemesh, and passed on to Timnah."

³⁴⁸ Plaut 251.

³⁴⁹ Another detailed comment concerns the items Tamar received from Judah as a pledge. See Plaut 251, regarding Gen. 38:18.

³⁵⁰ When exact details are offered the implication is that the text is accurate – the text can be used to work out geographical locations and other particulars. The problem rests in the fact that the Bible, for the most part, is considered an unreliable source of history.

³⁵¹ Plaut 249.

³⁵² Plaut 253.

who never forgets His people and their destiny.”³⁵³ While his interpretations generally consist of a synthesis of earlier understandings, his concluding remark reiterates his ideological perspective: God was present throughout the narrative, and thus the episode should be considered part of the divine plan.³⁵⁴

Nahum Sarna (1923-2006)

Nahum Sarna states that “Genesis is a book about origins,”³⁵⁵ and the theme of the promise of “nationhood and national territory” is what rests behind the books of Genesis and Exodus.³⁵⁶ These introductory statements permeate his interpretations of the Judah and Tamar account.

Sarna begins his analysis with a discussion of the seeming disruption of the Joseph story. He claims that, despite the apparent digression, there is continuity throughout the chapters,³⁵⁷ that the Joseph and Judah-Tamar stories are intrinsically connected. The amalgamation of the Genesis 38 narrative into the larger Joseph story is so well realized that, according to Sarna, the account of Judah and Tamar is not intrusive, but it is an intentional departure.³⁵⁸ He notes verbal and thematic links between the narratives and, in this way, attempts to support his assertion.

³⁵³ Plaut 253.

³⁵⁴ Hertz translates “Tamar” as “date palm,” (see Hertz 145) and Plaut translates it as “palm tree” (see Plaut 250). These literal interpretations bring forward possible parallels to the Babylonian myth of Adonis, later adopted by the Greeks. The story describes an incestuous encounter between King Cyniras and his daughter, Myrrha, during the festival of the corn-goddess. Myrrha conceives and out of embarrassment, runs off to live in the nearby forest. She miraculously transforms into a myrrh tree, which later bursts open and gives way to the emerging Adonis. [See Sir James George Frazer, *Adonis, Attis, Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*, (New York: University Books, 1961) for the complete myth.] The similarities in characters and motifs are, most likely, a result of close cultural contact, and they are noted by Eleanor Ferris Beach [see Eleanor Ferris Beach, “An Iconographic Approach to Genesis 38,” *Reading the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 292].

³⁵⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) xii.

³⁵⁶ Sarna xiii.

³⁵⁷ Sarna notes that the cities and towns referred to in Genesis 38 were contained within the later territory of Judah. Moreover, he observes that these places and names are closely associated to the biblical figures that appear in the Davidic period – for instance, the names Bat Sheba and Tamar. See Sarna 264.

³⁵⁸ Sarna 263.

Sarna interprets the Genesis 38 narrative as a reflection of tribal history, specifically the tribes of Peretz and Zerah.³⁵⁹ He claims that the account alludes to future tribal circumstances, as well as to future kingdoms. In this way, he situates Judah's significance in Israelite history.³⁶⁰

According to Sarna, the narrative "reflects the isolation of Judah from the other tribes in premonarchic times caused by the presence of Canaanite enclaves."³⁶¹ In other words, Judah's descent from his brothers, in Gen. 38:1, indicates his isolation from the other Israelite tribes, caused by the adoption of Canaanite elements.³⁶²

Since he views the account as a reflection of tribal history, it follows that he draws on links between the described details and the future Davidic kingdom. For instance, when Gen. 38:1 refers to Adullam, Sarna notes that this city is mentioned later with regard to David. Similarly, since Judah's wife is not given a name in the Bible but designated as Bat-Shua, Sarna draws a possible parallel between her and David's wife, Bat Sheba.³⁶³ He takes the same approach with regard to Tamar's name and notes its recurrence in the Davidic family.³⁶⁴

Sarna writes that those who interpreted כנען as "merchant" did so because they were "conscious of the later prohibition on intermarriage with Canaanites,"³⁶⁵ and in this way he criticizes their anachronistic tendencies. This statement also implies that, if the narrative indeed describes Judah as marrying a woman of Canaanite origin, the prohibition did not yet exist, and thus Judah did nothing wrong.

A modern scholar, Sarna notes similarities between the Middle Assyrian and Hittite laws and the levirate law. Moreover, he asserts that the custom of *halitsah* did not exist at the time of the Genesis story and thus implies that the

³⁵⁹ A similar proposal is made by Goldin 43.

³⁶⁰ Sarna alludes to future polarities between the kingdoms of Judah and Joseph, even as he claims the antiquity of the narrative.

³⁶¹ Sarna 265.

³⁶² This is reminiscent of Hertz's interpretation, in which he frequently alludes to the Canaanite or foreign cultural influences on Judah and Tamar.

³⁶³ Sarna 265.

³⁶⁴ Sarna 266.

³⁶⁵ Such relations are clearly frowned upon throughout the Bible. See Deut. 7:1-3 for the prohibition.

practice was a later development.³⁶⁶ Along the same lines, Sarna claims that the law changed with regard to those who were obliged to fulfill the duty. In its earlier stages the levirate law applied to all close relatives including the father-in-law; the Deuteronomy text modifies the practice, and only brothers of the deceased are obligated.³⁶⁷

According to Sarna, the narrative's climax is when Tamar bore twins. The birth itself reflects the rivalry that would take place between the Perezites and Zerahites. Furthermore, Sarna notes that Peretz is the only character in Genesis 38 whose name is explained and, from this, he deduces that Peretz's birth is a turning point in history.³⁶⁸

Sarna's interpretation of Genesis 38 is based on the assertion that the episode reflects premonarchic tribal history. As such, he uses scholarly arguments to reinforce the reliability of the Bible and to validate the episode's antiquity.

The Stone Chumash

The Stone Chumash contains an anthology of rabbinic commentaries and, according to its general editor, Rabbi Nosson Scherman, the objective is to reiterate the words spoken at Sinai in "today's vernacular."³⁶⁹ To ensure its comprehensiveness, in addition to collecting earlier sources and presenting the compiler's conclusions, Targum Onkelos and Rashi are presented alongside the biblical text. What is more significant, the author gives insight into the passages by prefacing them with introductory remarks and often dividing one narrative or chapter into several sections as is demonstrated in Genesis 38.

Genesis 38 is given a title: "Judah and Tamar: The roots of the Messiah and the Israelite monarchy."³⁷⁰ This instantly discloses the interpreter's underlying message -- that the episode is significant because of the figures of Judah and Tamar and their important role in Israelite history. Moreover, the

³⁶⁶ It is described in Deut. 25:5-10, presumably, a later text.

³⁶⁷ Sarna 267, 270. See Deut. 25:5-10 for the full biblical description of the levirate law.

³⁶⁸ Sarna 270.

³⁶⁹ Rabbi Nosson Scherman, ed., *The Chumash, Stone Edition: The Torah: Haftaros and Five Megillos with a Commentary Anthologized from Rabbinic Writings* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1998) xiii.

³⁷⁰ Scherman 208.

emphasis on the Messiah's origin is an element alluded to in several earlier works, but rarely declared with finality.³⁷¹

The interpretation of Gen. 38:1 is a clear example of the reliance on and collection of earlier works. According to the Stone Chumash, Judah's descent from his brothers is a figurative one.³⁷² Moreover, the narrative is placed in the larger Joseph story because the two episodes are interrelated. Judah's descent was caused by his role in Joseph's sale and the grief it caused their father Jacob. This interpretation draws on earlier sources such as Rashi, Sforno and midrashim, to produce its own understanding of the passage.

Another example of reliance on earlier rabbinic writings is with regard to Judah's wife and her uncertain origins, where the Stone Chumash acknowledges the common understanding that she was the daughter of a merchant; however, the interpreter agrees with BT Pesahim 50a.³⁷³ Er and Onan's immoral behavior originated from their mother.³⁷⁴

Verses 6 to 10 are identified as a section of the narrative – Judah's sons marry Tamar, but they die for the deviant actions.³⁷⁵ In this segment Tamar's national origins are questioned and the interpreter concludes that, unlike Judah's wife, Tamar was not a Canaanite, but the daughter of a foreigner living in the region. Clearly basing his inference on the negative perception of Canaanites throughout the Bible, the interpreter claims that, because of her significant role in the history of the Israelites, Tamar could not have been Canaanite in origin – this would be inconsistent.

With regard to the levirate law, the Stone Chumash directs the reader to Deuteronomy 25 for further details. It furthermore states that in its early form the obligation was not limited to the brothers of the deceased – any male relative

³⁷¹ The earlier sources frequently refer to the kings and prophets that will descend from Tamar. They sometimes allude to the strength and great power that is produced, but these interpretations rarely mention the Messiah and clearly define the causal relationship between Tamar and Judah account and the messianic figure that arises from their line.

³⁷² Scherman 208.

³⁷³ This Talmudic passage interprets כנעני as Canaanite.

³⁷⁴ Scherman 208.

³⁷⁵ Scherman 209.

could fulfill the duty.³⁷⁶ Along the same lines, this Chumash, like earlier works, explains that Er and Onan spilled their seed because they did not want Tamar's beauty to be spoiled by pregnancy.³⁷⁷

The Stone Chumash recognizes verses 14 to 19 as yet another section, one that describes the "moral basis of the union of Tamar and Judah."³⁷⁸ The discussion that proceeds is concerned with the ongoing struggle between good and evil, and the interpreter suggests that the episode of Genesis 38 expresses this battle. The described events are part of a divine plan, but evil tries to intervene on several occasions.³⁷⁹ Consequently, Tamar can fulfill her marital obligation only by pretending to be a harlot and seducing Judah. In this way, Tamar's actions are justified and deemed appropriate for her unfortunate circumstances.

The Stone Chumash draws on earlier rabbinic writings and, in this way, the reader is provided with alternate understandings of the narrative. While it is a modern work it shows almost no sign of its historical context. Its purpose is to provide contemporary readers with a connection to their heritage and this is accomplished by gathering classic rabbinic and traditional interpretations of the Bible.

Robert Alter (1936-)

Robert Alter considers the Bible to be a literary work, and he seeks out literary and thematic links in order to contrast one biblical narrative with another. He notes parallels with other ancient Near Eastern practices and claims that the comparative approach is necessary for a better understanding of the Bible. He writes: "The informing assumption of my translation and commentary is that the edited version of Genesis – the so-called redacted text – what has come down to us, though not without certain limited contradictions and disparate elements, has powerful coherence as a literary work, and that this coherence is above all what

³⁷⁶ Scherman 209. As opposed to later periods where *halitsah* is an option and only the brothers of the deceased are obligated, the Gen. 38:8 describes an earlier stage of the levirate practice.

³⁷⁷ See BT Yebamot 34b and Rashbam's interpretation of Gen. 38:6 and 9.

³⁷⁸ Scherman 210.

³⁷⁹ Er and Onan sin; Judah does not give Tamar to Shelah as promised.

we need to address as readers.”³⁸⁰ It is this coherence and unity that Alter attempts to demonstrate throughout his commentary.

Like Sarna, Alter notes a universal theme that underlies the Genesis 38 episode, the history of the “family that will become known as the people of Israel.”³⁸¹ The difference between the two interpreters is that Sarna perceives the narrative as an accurate reflection of tribal history, while Alter treats it primarily as literature set in an identifiable context. Both interpreters allude to Peretz’s significance as ancestor of the Davidic line, but Alter focuses his efforts on illustrating the literary connections between this episode and the rest of Genesis.

He draws parallels between Judah and other biblical figures, such as Jacob and Joseph. He also notes the lack of description of Judah’s grief over the death of Er and Onan and suggests this is a necessary literary device to draw a contrast between Judah’s lack of mourning and Jacob’s extreme grief.³⁸² Along the same lines, Alter compares Jacob’s unwillingness to end his mourning for Joseph with the end of the mourning period for Judah’s wife.³⁸³ Moreover, Judah’s actions with regard to Tamar are juxtaposed with Joseph’s restraint when Potiphar’s wife attempted to seduce him.³⁸⁴ Alter’s reliance on the comparative approach results in an impression of Judah as immoral and uncaring. Alter is not concerned with improving Judah’s image; he is interested in the literary character of the tale.

Alter’s comparative approach extends to thematic links as well. He interprets פתח עין as a place designation and translates it as “twin wells.”³⁸⁵ While he offers an interpretation of the Hebrew expression, his focus rests in the allusion to the “betrothal type-scene” found frequently within the Bible.³⁸⁶ He also notes the significance of the number “two;” he draws an allusion to Tamar’s two marriages, to Er and Onan, as well as to the twins Tamar bore.

³⁸⁰ Robert Alter, ed., *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004) 11.

³⁸¹ Alter 15.

³⁸² Alter 215.

³⁸³ Gen. 38:12 (see Alter 216).

³⁸⁴ Alter 217. For a reference to Potiphar’s wife’s attempt at seduction, see Gen. 39:7-12.

³⁸⁵ Alter 216.

³⁸⁶ Alter 216.

He argues for a literary approach to the Genesis text. He compares and contrasts the different biblical figures and claims that these similarities are intentional. Moreover, he notes verbal and thematic links from one chapter to the next and, in this way, he illustrates the fine-tuned connections between the Bible's narratives and supports his underlying assertion that the text is literary by nature.

Conclusion

While the nineteenth century brought with it new discoveries in the fields of archeology and the ancient Near East, modern interpretations continued to rely heavily on earlier work. These classic understandings established the issues that would be addressed for centuries to come. Thus, with the modern period came essentially two types of Jewish Bible commentaries: the anthology-compilation types that provide and synthesize classic interpretations, and those that incorporate contemporary familiarity with the region and the context from which the Bible arose.

Some exegetes became more concerned with the earlier interpretations than with the Bible text itself. Interpreters address the same difficulties noted centuries ago and incorporate knowledge and familiarity with ancient Near Eastern practices and customs, as well as findings gained from contemporary archeological studies; however, there are few novel interpretations added to the corpus. Instead, the focal point for many modern interpreters rests in the greater significance of the text and its narratives. The interest lies in the text's historicity, as well as in its unity with the rest of the Bible.

Jewish communities face ongoing threats of assimilation and modernity. Contemporary Bible interpreters attempt to prevent such threats whether through attempts to demonstrate the inseparability of the Oral and Written Torahs, or through attempts to ensure the continuity of tradition by reiterating classic interpretations. Those who use recently developed disciplines to better understand the Bible confront these challenges; attempts to contextualize the biblical narratives help to illustrate their validity, and in this way, the Jewish people are united.

The dialogue between interpreters becomes clear and more easily recognized through the compilations that are so dominant in the modern period. Moreover, it is this dialogue that informs and generates new interpretations and creates an atmosphere that is accepting of all approaches and understandings. The hope is that readers will consider the implications of each interpretation, and in this way, gain a better understanding of the Bible text.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to trace the history of Jewish Bible interpretations of Genesis 38 in a way that emphasizes the shared concerns and interests of the interpreters. I have attempted to present the history of interpretations as an ongoing dialogue between the writers and, in this way, to expose the intricate relationships that exist between them. These authors are rarely aware of the influences that prompt them to write. With this in mind, I sought to demonstrate the common themes and areas of mutual interest that exist between the interpreters and their understandings of the narrative. While these writers simply react to the difficulties that arise from the biblical episodes, I have considered the proposed interpretations and have defined the issues that they address. Interpreters reflect the intellectual thought of their times and attempt to establish and maintain the relevance of the Bible for their contemporary communities and their particular historical realities; thus, interpretations cannot be isolated from their authors' contexts.

The tendency of most readers is to study a limited group of commentators, often representing one or at most two historical periods of interpretation. I, on the other hand, have made an effort to draw on interpreters from each historical period spanning from biblical to modern times. I have presented the interpretations of Genesis 38 as an ongoing dialogue between interpreters and, in this way, I have shown that, once an understanding is presented, it becomes an essential part of the interpretive literature and it functions as a building block for later writers. The Septuagint and Vulgate, for instance, respond to the textual difficulty about the naming of Judah's three sons Er, Onan and Shelah;³⁸⁷ they modify the original text to provide consistency and write the feminine form of the

³⁸⁷ Gen. 38:3-5.

verb אָמַר.³⁸⁸ While later writers may not have been relying directly on the Septuagint and Vulgate versions of the Bible, they do address this same issue – they note the textual inconsistency and attempt to resolve it. Thus, one must distinguish between the pre-medieval interpreters and the medieval and post-medieval ones; they recognize the problems that arise from the Bible and offer solutions for them, while the later scholars draw on the earlier sources. In this way, these earlier texts set the tone for those interpretations that follow and few, if any, new issues are addressed in subsequent periods.

In an article discussing Bible interpretation in the Talmud, Michael Chernick writes that “returning to...tradition over and over meant hearing its voice and adding one’s own.”³⁸⁹ The history of Jewish Bible interpretation is a layering process in which later writers rely heavily on earlier works and respond to the issues they discuss. They present their own responses with respect to what has already been proposed and incorporate their contemporary concerns and interests into these reactions. The difficulties that arise from Genesis 38 are resolved in various ways, but the similarities in inference are unmistakable. In this way, this study has shown that Bible interpretations are best studied and understood as a group with mutual concerns.

With regard to Genesis 38, the framework within which the interpreters operate is defined by the portrayals of Judah and Tamar. These biblical figures are central to the history of the early Israelites, and therefore interpreters address the issues posed by the narrative in relation to their images. Independent of the Bible’s own attitudes, the interpreters enhance the portrayals of Judah and Tamar because they want the masses to perceive them as role models rather than as sources of shame. They transform the biblical figures according to the ideals they wish to communicate to their communities and thus, they justify the actions and attitudes described in the Bible that may actually reflect negatively on Judah and

³⁸⁸ Instead of using both the masculine וַיִּקְרָא and the feminine וַתִּקְרָא. This may also be a response to textual variances in older Bible manuscripts.

³⁸⁹ Michael Chernick, “‘Turn it and turn it again:’ Culture and Talmud Interpretation,” in *Exemplaria* 12, 1 (2000) 63.

Tamar.³⁹⁰ Consequently, it has become almost impossible in my research to find an interpretation of Genesis 38 that does not explain the episode without seeking, in some way, to rationalize the problematic depictions of the Davidic ancestors.

Historical Developments

Early interpreters reacted to the textual and conceptual difficulties of Genesis 38 and responded to ambiguous passages. These Jewish writers had to confront intellectual challenges posed by others such as Christians, Muslims, and any other community that was critical of Jewish perspectives. With the increasing pressures of assimilation and acculturation, interpreters felt the need to respond to external criticisms in order to maintain the authority of the text and the unity of the Jewish people. Therefore, they attempted to improve the images of biblical figures like Judah and Tamar, who played significant roles in the early history of the Israelites.

Such tendencies are present in Targum Onkelos, for instance, which denies that Judah's wife was of Canaanite origin. Relations with Canaanites are clearly frowned upon throughout the Bible; therefore, when Gen. 38:2 designates Judah's wife as בָת כְּנָעַן, interpreters, beginning with Targum Onkelos, assert that here כְּנָעַן means "merchant." This diminishes some of the fault that is easily attributed to Judah, and the patriarch, who plays a central role in the history of the early Israelites, is depicted in a less problematic light. Through apologetics, expansion of narrative details, as well as omission of certain details, interpreters conveyed messages and moral standards to their readers.

One of the aspects of the early rabbinic period was filling in the gaps of the Bible, and the writers frequently did this according to the ideological and

³⁹⁰ While I do maintain that the interpreters felt the need to justify Judah and Tamar because of their central roles in Israelite history, it is essential to note the relevance of such justifications to contemporary times. Why do interpreters continue to concern themselves with the flawed nature of our ancestors? Some might argue that viewing our ancestors as imperfect motivate us to perfect ourselves and our communities. However, others might suggest that such a perception limits us in our own abilities. In other words, if we perceive our ancestors, those whose acts resulted in our existence, as inadequate in any way, then we risk restricting ourselves. Thus, in order to perfect ourselves and attain a level of communal or universal perfection, we need to create an impression of previous perfection. This becomes our motivating factor.

religious views they hoped to communicate to their readers. Scripture was used as a homiletic tool from which basic principles were drawn. BT Niddah 13a states that a person who emits semen in vain deserves death and Gen. 38:9, which recounts Onan's demise, is used as corroborating evidence.³⁹¹ This illustrates how the early rabbis demonstrated their agreement with or rejection of particular previous understandings and, more significantly, how they attempted to establish Judaism's authority through its biblical history.

In the Middle Ages interpreters began to draw on the recently developed disciplines of grammar, philosophy, and astrology, to explain the Bible. The central role of reason frequently prompted interpreters to abandon a literal, plain meaning of the text, and take a more metaphorical or mystical approach with the hope of resolving any inconsistency between the text and common reason. For example, the Zohar's interpretation of Genesis 38 revolves around mystical ideas such as *gilgul*, a form of rebirth, and the necessity of propagation. Procreation is considered a means of protecting the divine image and bringing the individual to a level of human perfection.

The Bible interpretations of the medieval period were replete with simple understandings, as well as with figurative ones. Ultimately, the pre-modern period functioned as a smooth transition into the modern age and introduced an approach that has become prevalent – the synthesis and compilation of classic interpretations.³⁹²

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries two types of biblical commentaries became widespread. Anthologies of classic Bible interpretations, such as Epstein's *Torah Temimah* and Kasher's *Torah Shlemah*, provide easy access for the masses to hundreds of years' worth of interpretations. The second type applies contemporary knowledge and science to the Bible; developed disciplines such as archeology and studies of the ancient Near East play a central role in understanding the scriptural narratives and laws. For example, Shadal's

³⁹¹ This narrative, specifically, Onan's displeasing behavior, has implications for a number of rabbinic deliberations – subject matters such as the use of condoms, masturbation, appropriate sexual activities and folklore (Lilith). The rabbinic corpus responds to Gen. 38:9 in a variety of ways.

³⁹² Culi's *MeAm Loez*, an anthology of early interpretations, is one such example.

nineteenth century work demonstrates possible familiarity with ancient Near Eastern culture when he compares the items Tamar requests from Judah as a pledge, and the seal, staff and *petil* with which the Babylonians used as status symbols.³⁹³

Until the pre-modern period interpreters focused their efforts on understanding the text, whether they took a literal or figurative approach. In the nineteenth century, and further developed in the twentieth, a new mode of thinking in Bible interpretation opened up; for many, the scriptural text took on a secondary standing and the early interpretations became the primary concern. This shift in focus compelled writers to synthesize the classic interpretations and to provide anthologies. For these individuals the objective of interpretive literature changed – it was no longer to seek out a single, exclusive understanding of the narrative, but to offer the Bible's readers alternate explanations and different ways to approach the passages.

Moreover, the inclusion of the newly developed disciplines of the modern era into the interpretation of the Bible demonstrates the attempts either to prove or disprove the contents of Scripture. Modern writers expanded the spectrum of relevant data and, in this way, were able to better present the Genesis 38 narrative and the context from which it arose. They recognized that their interpretations, and those presented by their predecessors, reflect the circumstances that generated them. Consequently, they realized that an improved understanding of the contexts, which results from studies of the political, religious, and social circumstances, would facilitate a better grasp of the text. Thus, while some modern interpreters focus their efforts on gathering and synthesizing the classic understandings of Genesis 38, rarely contributing any novel ideas to the interpretive corpus, for many the interest lies in the text's historical reliability – a matter that can be resolved only by incorporating modern findings into Bible study.

Throughout the history of the Jewish interpretation of Genesis 38 interpreters have approached the episode with the same diasporic attitude in which they recognize the vulnerability of their people. Faced with constant

³⁹³ Luzzatto 158.

threats, whether exile or anti-Semitism, the interpretations reflect responses to interpreters' predecessors and their contemporary historical realities. The interpretive literature concerning the account of Judah and Tamar, because of its controversial nature, is a prime example of this attitude. Interpreters use this narrative, along with others, in the hope of reestablishing the tradition and its authority by validating it through its biblical history.

Despite the fact that each historical period has its own defining elements, the literal and non-literal approaches to the Judah and Tamar account are not restricted by time or location. One could even argue that the non-literal interpretations are still, in part, simple and plain in the sense that they explain the text as it is depicted in the Bible. However, they go beyond the plain meaning of the narrative when they fill in the gaps to explain elements such as character traits and attitudes of the biblical figures. Regardless of the era, interpreters continue to address the originally established textual and conceptual difficulties caused by the ongoing concern for the portrayals of Judah and Tamar. The same ideas are transmitted from one generation to the next, and, more importantly, they retain the same goal – that of moral education – teaching the masses through the texts which form the foundations of Western civilization.

Genesis 38 is a narrative about the beginnings of the Jewish nation. With the story of Judah and Tamar the genealogy of a people begins through confusion and the uncontrolled passions of an erotic encounter, and it extends to the end of time with the coming of the Messiah. Interpreters have misread the episode and have manipulated it in ways consistent with their historical contexts in attempts to make it relevant to their communities. Consequently, interpreters often neglect the unique nature of Genesis 38; they gloss over the human beginnings of a national genealogy that the story seeks to describe.

The radical character of this narrative is acknowledged by the biblical redactor who placed it in the middle of another larger story. Hence, the event we refer to as the Judah and Tamar episode is literally suspended, and it is in this way that the narrative safeguards its distinctiveness. It is a beginning of a human line,

and it provides a foretaste of the approaching emergence of the Israelites as a nation from Egypt.

Bibliography

Bible Interpretations

Aberbach, Moses & Bernard Grossfeld. *Targum Onkelos to Genesis: A Critical Analysis Together with an English Translation of the Text*. New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982.

Abravanel, Yitzhak. *Perush 'al ha-Torah*. Jerusalem: Hotsa'at Sefarim Bnei Arba, 1963.

Alshich, Moshe. *Midrash of Rabbi Moshe Alshich on the Torah*. Trans. Eliyahu Munk. Jerusalem: Lambda Publishers, 2000.

Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004.

Bahya Ben Asher. *Midrash Rabbeinu Bachya: Torah Commentary by Rabbi Bachya ben Asher*. Trans. Eliyahu Munk. Brooklyn: Lambda Publishers, 2003.

_____. *Sefer Rabbeinu Bahya 'al Ha-Torah im Perush Tuv Ta'am mi-Ba'al ha-Tosafot Yom Tov*. Bnei Brak: Avraham Shmuel ha-Levi Heiler, 1992.

Bekhor Shor, Joseph ben Isaac. *Yosef Bekhor Shor 'al Ha-Torah*. Trans. Yehoshafat Nevo. Jerusalem: Mosad ha-rav Kuk, 1994.

Ben Bezalel Loew, Yehudah. *Humash Gur Aryeh Ha-Shalem*. Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim, 1989.

_____. *Sefer Perushe Maharal Mi-Prag (Bereshit/Shmot)*. Jerusalem: Mesharim, 1991

Ben Gershom, Levi. *Perushe Ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag)*. Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-rav Kuk, 1992.

Ben Isaiah, Abraham & Benjamin Sharfman, eds. *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary: A Linear Translation into English*. Brooklyn: S. S. & R. Publishing Company Inc., 1976.

Ben Jacob Sforno, Obadiah. *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah (Bereshit)*. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1987.

Charles, R. H. "The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs." *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. vol. 2. Oxford: Clarenden Press, 1913.

Colson, F. H. and G. H. Whitaker, trans. *Philo: with an English Translation*. London: Heinemann, 1929.

Culi, Yaakov. *The Torah Anthology: MeAm Lo'ez*. Trans. Ariyeh Kaplan. New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1978.

De Leon, Moses. *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, volume three*. Ed. Daniel C. Matt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006.

Epstein, Boruch Halevi. *The Essential Torah Temimah*. Trans. Shraga Silverstein. Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1989.

Genesis Rabbah. Eds. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon. London: Soncino Press, 1961.

Ginsburg, C. D. *The Pentateuch: Diligently Revised According to the Massorah and the Early Editions with the Various Readings*. London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1926.

Grossfeld, Bernard. *The Targum Onqelos to Genesis: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes*. Wilmington: Michael Glazer Inc., 1988.

Hahut Ha-Meshulash: commentaries on the Torah by Rabbeinu Chananel, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam), Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak), Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno. Trans. Eliyahu Munk. Jerusalem: Lambda Publishers, 2003.

Herbert, A. S. *Genesis 12-50: Abraham and his Heirs*. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962.

Herczeg, Yisrael Isser Zvi, ed. *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1995.

Hertz, J. H., ed. *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text, English Translation and Commentary*. London: Soncino Press, 1981.

Ibn Ezra, Avraham. *Perushe ha-Torah le-Rabbeinu Avraham Ibn Ezra*. Jerusalem: Hotsa'at Mosad ha-rav Kuk, 1976.

- _____. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*. Trans. H. Normann Strickman and Arthur M. Silver. New York: Menorah Publishing Company, Inc., 1988.
- Jacobson, Howard. *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum, with Latin Text and English Translation*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Kasher, Menahem. *Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation: a millennial anthology*. Trans. Harry Freedman. New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1953.
- _____. *Humash Torah Shelema: ve-hi ha-Torah she-bi-khtav 'im biur Torah she-be'al Peh (helek 6)*. New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1949-.
- Kimhi, David. *Perush Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak) 'al Ha-Torah: Sefer Bereshit bishlemuto kefi sheyatza mide ha-mekhaber ve-leket peirushav 'al Shmot, Vayikra, Bamidbar, Dvarim, mitoh sifre ha-Radak*. Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-rav Kuk, 1970.
- Luzzatto, Samuel David. *Perush Shadal 'al Hamisha Humshe Torah*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965.
- Maher, Michael. *Targum Pseudo Jonathan: Genesis*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992.
- McNamara, Martin. *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992.
- Mecklenburg, Yaakov Tzevi. *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah: Torah Commentary by Rabbi Yaakov Tzevi Mecklenburg*. Trans. Eliyahu Munk. Jerusalem; New York: Lambda Publishers, 2001.
- _____. *Ha-Ketav Ve-Ha-Kabbalah: Biur 'al Hamisha Humshe Torah (helek 1)*. Frankfurt: J. Kauffmann, 1880.
- Midrash Ha-Gadol: 'Al 'Hamisha 'Humshe Torah (Sefer Bereshit)*. Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kuk, 1967.
- Midrash Tanhuma*. Ed. Solomon Buber. Jerusalem: Ortal Ltd., 1964.
- Murphy, Frederick J. *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

- Muses, C. A, ed. *The Septuagint Bible: The Oldest Text of the Old Testament.* Trans. Charles Thomson. Indian Hills: The Falcon's Wing Press, 1960.
- Nahmanides, Moses. *Ramban (Nachmanides) Commentary on the Torah: Genesis.* Trans. Charles B. Chavel. New York: Shilo Publishing House Inc., 1971.
- Neusner, Jacob. *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation.* Vol. 3. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985.
- Plaut, Gunther. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary.* New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981.
- Samuel ben Meir. *Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir's Commentary on Genesis: An Annotated Translation.* Trans. Martin I. Lokshin. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis, The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation.* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Scherman, Rabbi Nosson, ed. *The Chumash, Stone Edition: The Torah: Haftaros and Five Megillos with a Commentary Anthologized from the Rabbinic Writings.* Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1998.
- Speiser, E. A. *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes.* Garden City: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1964.
- Tal, Abraham, Ed. *Hamishah Humshe Torah lefi nusah Shomron.* Tel Aviv: Universitat Tel Aviv, 1994.
- The Talmud of the Land of Israel: A Preliminary Translation and Explanation.* Trans. Jacob Neusner. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Torat Hayyim: Hamishah Humshe Torah.* Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kuk, 1986.
- Townsend, John T. *Midrash Tanhuma: Translated into English with Introduction, Indices, and Brief Notes.* Vol. 1 Genesis. Hoboken: Ktav Publishing House Inc., 1989.
- Whiston, William, ed. *Josephus: Complete Works.* Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960.

Wintermute, O. S. "Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction." *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Ed. James H. Charlesworth. New York: Doubleday: 1983.

Yaakov Ben Asher. *Baal Haturim Chumash: The Torah with the Baal Haturim's Classic Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*. Trans. Avie Gold. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 2004.

_____. *Tur on the Torah: Commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Yaakov ben Rabbeinu Asher (R'osh)*. Trans. Eliyahu Munk. Vol. 1 (Bereshit). Jerusalem; New York: Lambda Publishers: 2005.

General Works

Alexander, Philip S. "Jewish Aramaic Translations of Hebrew Scriptures." *Mikra: Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*. Ed. Martin Jan Mulder. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers: 2004. 217-253.

Astour, Michael C. "Tamar the Hierodule: An Essay in the Method of Vestigial Motifs." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966) 185-196.

Belkin, Samuel. "Levirate and Agnate Marriage in Rabbinic and Cognate Literature." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 60 (1970) 275-329.

Bowker, John. *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Brenner, Athalya. "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns within the 'Birth of a Hero' Paradigm." *Vetus Testamentum* 36,3 (1986) 257-273.

Burrows, Millar. "The Ancient Oriental Background of Hebrew Levirate Marriage." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 77 (1940) 2-15.

_____. "Levirate Marriage in Israel." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, 1 (1940) 23-33.

Charlesworth, James H, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. vols. 1 & 2. New York: Doubleday: 1983.

Chernick, Michael. "'Turn it and turn it again.' Culture and Talmud Interpretation." *Exemplaria* 12, 1 (2000) 63-103.

- Clifford, Richard J. "Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66,4 (2004) 519-532.
- Coats, George W. "Redactional Unity in Genesis 37-50." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974) 15-21.
- _____. "Widow's Rights: A Crux in the Structure of Genesis 38." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972) 461-466.
- Davies, Eryl W. "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage." *Vetus Testamentum* 31,4 (1981) 138-144, 257-268.
- Dimant, Devorah. "Use and Interpretation of Mikra in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha." *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*. Ed. Martin Jan Mulder. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers: 2004. 379-419.
- Emerton, J. A. "An Examination of a Recent Structuralist Interpretation of Genesis XXXVIII." *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976) 79-98.
- _____. "Judah and Tamar." *Vetus Testamentum* 29, 4 (1979) 403-415.
- _____. "Some Problems in Genesis XXXVIII." *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975) 338- 361.
- Feldman, Louis H. *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Ferris Beach, Eleanor. "An Iconographic Approach to Genesis 38." *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*. Eds. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997. 284-205.
- Gaon, Saadiah. *Books of Belief and Opinions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948.
- Geoghegan, Jeffrey C. "Israelite Sheepshearing and David's Rise to Power." *Biblica* 87, 1 (2006) 55-63.
- Giller, Pinhas. *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Goldin, Judah. "The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96,1 (1977) 27-44.

- Good, Edwin M. "The 'Blessing' on Judah, Gen. 49:8-12." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82, 4 (1963) 427-432.
- Goodnick Westenholz, Joan. "Tamar, Qedesha, Qadistu, and Sacred Prostitution in Mesopotamia." *The Harvard Theological Review* 82, 3 (1989) 245-265.
- Grossman, Avraham. "The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France." *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*. Vol. 1. Ed. Magnes Saebö. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000.
- Herold, J. Christopher. *The Age of Napoleon*. New York: American Heritage Publishing Co. Inc., 1963.
- Ibn Saruq, Menahem ben Jacob. *Mahberet Menahem*. Lodon: Hevrat Me'orere Yeshanim, 1854. Reprint, Jerusalem, 1967.
- Josephus, Flavius. *Josephus: Complete Works*. William Whiston, Trans. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1960. Reprint, 1982.
- Kedar, Benjamin. "The Latin Translation." *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*. Ed. Martin Jan Mulder. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004. 299-338.
- Kimhi, David. *Sefer Ha-Shorashim Le-Rabbi David ben Yosef Kimhi Ha-Sefaradi*. Berolini: Bethge, 1847.
- Levy, B. Barry. *Targum Neophyti I: A Textual Study (Introduction, Genesis, Exodus)*. Vol. 1. Lanham: University Press of America, 1986.
- Liebes, Yehuda, ed. *Studies in the Zohar*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Mahler, Raphael. *Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of American, 1985.
- Mars, Leonard. "What Was Onan's Crime?" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, 3 (1984) 429-39.
- Matt, Daniel C., ed. *Zohar: Annotated and Explained*. Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2002.
- _____. *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*. New York: Paulist Press, 1983.

- Menn, Esther Marie. *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*. Leiden: Brill, 1997.
- Mulder, Martin Jan, ed. *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.
- _____. “The Transmission of the Biblical Text.” *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.
- Nemoy, Leon, ed. *Karaite Anthology: Excerpts from the Early Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952.
- Robinson, Ira. “bepetah enaim in Genesis 38:14.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, 4 (1977) 569.
- Saebo, Magnes, ed. *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000.
- Skinner, John. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976.
- Strack, H. L. and G. Stemberger, eds. *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991.
- Talmage, Frank Ephraim. *David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985.
- Tarlin, Jan William. “Tamar’s Veil: Ideology at the Entrance to Enaim.” *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible* (2000) 174-81.
- “Talmud.” *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Religion*. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, ed. New York: Adama Books, 1986. 373-375.
- Tov, Emanuel. “The Septuagint” *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*. Ed. Martin Jan Mulder. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004. 161-188.
- Van Seters, John. *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

- _____. *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.
- Wassen, Cecilia. "The Story of Judah and Tamar in the Eyes of the Earliest Interpreters." *Literature and Theology* 8, 4 (1994) 354-66.
- Wellhausen, Julius. *Prolegomena to the history of Israel*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994.
- Wernberg-Moller, P., Trans. *The Manual of Discipline: Translated and Annotated with an Introduction*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957.
- Wolde, Ellen van. "Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives." *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 5,1 (1997) 1-28.
- Wolfson, Elliot R. "Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeneutics." *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*. Ed. Michael Fishbane. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- _____. "The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the Zohar." *Religion* 18 (1988) 311-345.