CHAPTER 33

Judah and Tamar

What is the origin of the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis xxxviii? Why was it told, and by whom? Such are the questions that the present article seeks to answer. I shall take for granted the conclusions reached in two articles published in 1975 and 1976, which are listed, together with works cited elsewhere only by their authors’ names, at the end of the article.

It cannot be taken for granted that a story in Genesis had a single meaning and purpose and retained them unchanged throughout its history first, probably, as an independent unit of oral tradition and then as part of a written document. The present article is concerned with the story of Judah and Tamar at two stages. First, it is concerned with the story when it was joined to other stories to form a continuous written narrative. The narrator is usually believed to have been J, and it will be convenient to use the conventional designation without discussing questions that have recently been raised about the source. It may be doubted whether it would make much difference to the interpretation of the story if a different view of source analysis were adopted. It is also doubtful whether any change in understanding the story may be detected in later stages of the redaction of the Pentateuch. I shall not discuss again the function of the story in its present position between Gen. xxxvii and xxxix ff., which I considered in 1975 (pp. 348–9). Secondly, the article is concerned with the interpretation of the story in oral transmission shortly before it was taken over by J.

It is unnecessary to spend much time on an alleged purpose of the story that is, at best, subsidiary. The view of, for example, A. Dillmann and S.R. Driver, that “a secondary purpose of the narrative” is “to impress the duty of marriage with a deceased brother’s wife” (Driver) cannot be disproved, but there

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1 Various forms of this article were read at the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 1973, at the Fifth International Congress on Biblical Studies in Oxford in 1973, and at seminars in the Universities of Cambridge and Manchester. I am grateful to Professor M. Haran for reading and commenting on an early draft.
is not much in the story to suggest the didactic intention of inculcating such a general principle.

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An obvious, and probably the primary, reason why the story was told was its inherent interest. Yet it is not sufficient to account for all the details of the story, which is about particular people, some of whose names are found elsewhere in the Old Testament as the names of clans. These names are likely to have some bearing on the interpretation of Gen. xxxviii.

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Gen. xxxviii tells of the patriarch Judah settling in the eastern Shephelah near Adullam, and it is a reasonable inference that the story came from that region; it also tells of Shelah, Perez and Zerah, which were names of clans of Judah (see section II of my 1975 article). It has therefore, been thought to reflect the movement of members of the tribe into the region in which it is set, and to be concerned with the history of the clans of Judah.

The precise significance of the references to the tribe and its clans is not easy to determine, and they have been differently interpreted. Some scholars earlier in the twentieth century understood what is ostensibly a story about individuals as an account of Judah's tribal history, in which nearly every detail of the narrative corresponds to something that happened to the tribe. C. Steuernagel (p. 79), for example, drew from the possibility that Judah's sons are, in the story, born in different places the conclusion that the tribe was still nomadic. Such an interpretation is unlikely to win much support to-day. It is illegitimate to assume that what appears on the surface to be a tale about individuals is no more than a veiled way of describing what happened to the clans of Judah, or that the purpose is to convey historical information in an indirect way.2 Yet the unconvincing nature of the conclusions to which too detailed an application of this method of interpretation can lead does not render improbable the view that the story reflects, in a less precise way, the movement of Judah