THE MIDRASHIC CAREER OF THE CONFESSION OF JUDAH (GENESIS XXXVIII 26)

PART II

The Rabbinic Midrashim

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The rabbinic midrashim also devote themselves to the kind of gapfilling we have seen in some of the extra-canonical texts and translations (see Part I). In addition they enter even more deeply into questions of the character of Judah. What is the portrait of Judah that emerges from his confession? Indeed, some of the rabbinic midrashic texts clearly view the confession as the essential character-defining act in Judah's life, basing themselves on the verb from which his name derives: hwdw ("to confess"). For example, in Tanhuma B, we read

When she [Leah] gave birth to Judah she immediately praised [or gave thanks to: hwdw] God on his account since he would confess [hwdw] in the Tamar affair.2

Likewise, Bereshit Rabbah 71.4 states:

Rabbi Levi said... Leah grasped the spindle of praising (hwdyh) and all her sons were masters of praising (hwdyh). [In the case of] Judah: "And Judah recognized and said..." (Gen. xxxviii 26). [In the case of] David: "O give thanks (hwdyh) to the Lord for he is good" (Ps. cxxxvi 6). [In the case of] Daniel: "I thank you and praise you (hwdyh), O you, God of my father" (Dan. ii 23).3

If a name encapsulates the essence of a thing or person then confession—this confession—is essential to an understanding of the character of Judah the man and Judah the tribal founder. There-

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fore, how one imagines the circumstances surrounding the confession, the spirit in which it is made and its motivating factors, will determine in the end one’s assessment of Judah. One encounters a division of opinion in the midrashic literature, and for the sake of ease of presentation I have organized the sources into two conceptually similar groups without regard to chronology. The first group of sources views the confession as an extraordinary and heroic act that redounds to the greater glory of Judah in a number of ways. The second group does not see in the confession any special merit, and focuses instead on Judah’s transgressions or his general reluctance to confess at all.

**Positive portrayals**

**B. Sotah 7b**

Our rabbis taught: He [the priest] recounted to her [the sōṭā] the stories and deeds of the patriarchs from Scripture, such as [exemplify the verse] “that which wise men have told and have not withheld from their fathers [ṣârī]” (Job xv 18). Judah confessed and was not put to shame. What was his fate? He inherited life in the world-to-come. [Reuben likewise]... We can understand this in Judah’s case for we read that he confessed, as it is written: “Judah recognized and said, ‘She is more righteous than I...’ ”

It makes sense that Judah should have confessed—it was so that she would not burn...

In this passage Judah is seen as a model character because he was wise enough to confess. But what was the content of his confession—his unrighteous behavior towards Tamar or his sexual liaison with her? The context of this midrash provides the answer. This midrash appears in a passage discussing the words spoken by the priest to the sōṭā (suspected adulteress) prior to her undergoing the ordeal of the bitter waters in the Temple. The priest exhorts the woman to confess to her sexual misconduct if she is indeed guilty, in order to avoid the ordeal (more specifically so that there be no need to blot out the divine name which occurs when the ink of the written curse is dissolved in the water administered to the woman).

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4 My concern is not to show lines of connection among the sources or the transmission and development of individual traditions, but rather to analyse and categorize the traditions that do exist.