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Q&A#8 The Chronology of Genesis 38

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See this article for context: <https://alastairadversaria.com/2006/12/08/the-judah-and-tamar-story-in-its-context/>

Today's Question: The story of Judah and Tamar, Chapter 38 of Genesis. You have written a pretty comprehensive piece on this, which is good, but I have one question which you didn't address.

Were the events here 'squished' into about 20 years (the apparent period between Joseph being sold to the Ishmaelites and Judah's move to Egypt with his extended family)? Or is there an argument for saying the period was longer than this? Or did the events somehow overlap Joseph being sold off or perhaps the move to Egypt. It's one of the more difficult 'timeline' questions. I have my own thoughts on this, but I wonder if you have any?

Leave your own questions in the comments, on my blog, or on my Curious Cat account.

<http://alastairadversaria.com/>

<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is another biblical theological question, this time from the book of Genesis. The story of Judah and Tamar, chapter 38 of Genesis.

You have written a pretty comprehensive piece on this, which is good, but I have one question which you don't address. Were the events here squished into about 20 years, the apparent period between Joseph being sold to the Ishmaelites and Judah's move to Egypt with his extended family? Or is there an argument for saying the period was longer than this? Or did the events somehow overlap due to Joseph being sold off, or perhaps the move to Egypt? It's one of the more difficult timeline questions. I have my own thoughts on this, but I wonder if you have any? I'll read out Genesis 38 to give a

sense of what we're dealing with.

Starting at verse 1. It came to pass at that time that Judah departed from his brothers and visited a certain Edomite whose name was Hira. And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and went into her. So she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Ur.

She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. And she conceived yet again and bore a son and called his name Shella. He was a Kezeh when she bore him.

Then Judah took a wife for Ur his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord killed him. And Judah said to Onan, Go into your brother's wife and marry her, and raise up an heir to your brother.

But Onan knew that the heir would not be his. And it came to pass when he went into his brother's wife that he omitted on the ground, lest he should give an heir to his brother. By the thing which he did displeased the Lord, therefore he killed him also.

Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, remain a widow in your father's house till my son Shella is grown. For he said, lest he also die as his brothers did. And Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house.

Now in the process of time the daughter of Shua, Judah's wife, died. And Judah was comforted and went up to his sheep shearers at Timnah, he and his friend Hira the Edomite. And it was told Tamar, saying, look your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.

So she took off her widow's garments, covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself, and sat in an open place which was on the way to Timnah. For she saw that Shella was grown, and she was not given to him as a wife. When Judah saw her, he thought that she was a harlot, because she had covered her face.

Then he turned to her by the way and said, please let me come in to you. For he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. So she said, what will you give me that you may come in to me? And he said, I will send you a young goat from the flock.

And she said, will you give me a pledge till you send it? Then he said, what pledge shall I give you? So she said, your signet and cord, and your staff that's in your hand. Then he gave them to her, and he went in to her, and she conceived by him. So she arose and went away, and laid aside her veil, and put on the garments of her widowhood.

And Judah sent the young goat by the hand of his friend the Edomite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand. But he did not find her. Then he asked the men of that place, saying, where is the harlot who is openly by the roadside? And they said, there

was no harlot in this place.

And he returned to Judah and said, I cannot find her. Also the men of this place said that there was no harlot in this place. Then Judah said, let her take them for herself.

Lest we be shamed, for I sent this young goat, and you have not found her. And it came to pass, about three months after, that Judah was told, saying, Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot. Furthermore, she is with child by harlotry.

So Judah said, bring her out, and let her be burned. When she was brought out, she sent to her father-in-law, saying, By the man to whom these belong, I am with child. And she said, Please determine whose these are, the signet and cord and staff.

So Judah acknowledged them and said, She has been more righteous than I, because I did not give her to Shele my son. And he never knew her again. Now it came to pass, at the time for giving birth, that, behold, twins were in her womb.

And so it was, when she was giving birth, that the one put out his hand, and the midwife took a scarlet thread and bound it on his hand, saying, This one came out first. Then it happened, as he drew back his hand, that his brother came out unexpectedly. And she said, How did you break through? This breach be upon you.

Therefore his name was called Perez. Afterward his brother came out, who had the scarlet thread on his hand, and his name was called Zerah. Now this is an absolutely fascinating passage.

There's all sorts of interesting thematic things going on, which I deal with in my essay, which I'll put in the links below. What we see in part within this chapter is a whole network of thematic connections with the broader text of Genesis, and then with the more immediate context of the Joseph story. The Joseph story is part of a larger story, which is the story of Jacob's sons.

So this is the story of Jacob's sons. And the story of Judah and the story of Joseph are juxtaposed with each other. So you have similar themes in the chapters that surround.

In chapter 37 you have the presentation of the bloodied garment to Jacob, which he thinks is the blood of his son, on the garment of Joseph that he had given to him. And then later on in chapter 39 we see Partach's wife and the presentation of the garment in that case again as proof against Joseph. And so in both cases there are presentations of evidence and moments of recognition.

We see people being divested of certain elements of clothing or accessories that they are wearing, and then presented later on as proof of sexual relations or of some other crime or event that has befallen them. Other things to notice here that Judah and Joseph are juxtaposed as characters within the biblical narrative more generally in the story of

the kingdoms, but also within this narrative they are the two brothers playing off each other in the same way as you see that theme throughout the book of Genesis. Cain and Abel, or you see it in the story of Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob.

And in all of these cases we see very careful literary juxtapositions of these characters. So for instance in chapter 21 and chapter 22 of Genesis we see Ishmael and Isaac held alongside each other as characters, as I've discussed in a previous video. The events that befall them are carefully paralleled, and so we see that they are related to each other.

Same with Esau and Jacob. And in these cases we also have sacrificial themes that keep their heads above the surface. So sacrificial animals, the sacrificial ram, which is associated with both Ishmael and Isaac in their narratives, they're paralleled.

And then the two kids in the story of Esau and Jacob and the deception that occurs there. And in this story there are again two kids. There's the goat that is killed in order to put the blood on the tunic that is presented to Jacob as the blood of Joseph.

And there's also the kid that is sent by the hand of someone else into the area of Timnah to give to Tamar, or the person presumed to be a harlot. And in both of these cases we see two kids, two sons, played off against each other with that particular theme. There's a lot going on there.

I won't get into that here. But what this does teach us is the significance of the placing of this is not just chronological. It's thematic.

It's about the juxtaposition of Joseph and Judah, and that's very significant. The sin of Judah with Tamar is juxtaposed with the righteousness of Joseph in not lying with Potiphar's wife. And both of them are divested of certain aspects of clothing or possessions and are brought forth as evidence against them.

But then there's the contrast between the two, because Joseph is righteous, Judah is not. Now the chronology, let's flesh out a bit of the problem that we face here. The problem is that this passage covers a great deal of, a great scope of time, whereas the story that it appears in the middle of is one that there's very little temporal gap between, there's no real temporal gap for the end of chapter, between the end of chapter 37 and the beginning of chapter 39.

It's Joseph being sold as a slave and then Joseph in Potiphar's house. These are directly related to each other in terms of time. But what we have in chapter 38 is a period of time from Judah separating from his brethren around the same time as Joseph is separated from his brethren.

Then Judah goes to the Hierod, the Adalamite, and then he has all these dealings with Shewa, or he marries Shewa, has all these children by Shewa, these three children, Onan

and later on Shewa. And there's a gap between these sons, at least two years, we must presume, probably several years between Onan and Shewa. There's a significant gap.

And there's also a gap between certain of the events that occur and the death of Shewa. So it says in verse 12, So again, there's a passage of time. And then after all these, after that, there's another period of at least nine months that leads up to the birth of Peres and Zerah.

So we are covering a significant chunk of time here, at least 30 years, I would say, probably more than that. Now, how does this fit with what we see? First of all, the surrounding context where there's no temporal gap between the end of chapter 37 and the beginning of chapter 39, but more troublingly, in chapter 46, we read of the people who go down into Egypt and we read in verse 12, The sons of Judah were Ur, Onan, Shelah, Peres and Zerah, but Ur and Onan died in the land of Canaan. The sons of Peres were Hezron and Hamel.

The sons of Ischia were etc. And then later on, the sons of Rachel were Jacob's wife, or Joseph and Benjamin, and to Joseph in the land of Egypt were born Manasseh and Ephraim, and Manasseh, the daughter of Potiphar, or priest of Aaron, bore to him. The sons of Benjamin were Bela, Beca, Ashpel, etc.

And then at the end it says, All the persons who went with Jacob to Egypt, who came from his body beside Jacob's sons' wives, were 66 persons in all. And the sons of Joseph who were born to him in Egypt were two persons. All the persons of the house of Jacob who went to Egypt were 70.

Now, this includes Peres and Zerah in that list. There's a considerable chunk of time that's covered. Now, also worth remembering that Benjamin probably wasn't even born by the time that Joseph left for the land of Egypt.

Now, the list of the sons of Benjamin who come into the land of Egypt are not just his sons. They include his grandchildren, as we see from 1 Chronicles 7. The sons of Benjamin were Bela, Beca, Gediel, three in all. And then later on it lists other characters that are mentioned within the list of Benjamin's offspring.

So there is a list here that includes three generations, or four generations rather, because you have Jacob, Benjamin, his sons, and then some of his grandsons. And Benjamin probably wasn't even born before Joseph went into Egypt, before the beginning of Chapter 38 as well, when those events begin. Also, Peres and Zerah are mentioned here as people who enter in.

So again, three generations of, four generations of the family entering in. And we should expect that Judah was about 18 or something like that at this time. He's about the same age as Joseph, if you follow the chronology.

And so it strains the bounds of possibility to believe that all these things fit into that small window of time before they enter into the land of Egypt. So I think the list that we have here cannot be, I mean, if you see the list of Benjamin's grandchildren, or mention Benjamin's grandchildren, I think it should just rule out the possibility that this occurs within the window of time, and that the people who are mentioned here are included as people who made that first journey. Now that's what it seems like on the surface of the text, but I think that is an impossibility.

It won't fit. And so I would argue that the events of the chapter also in Chapter 38 are set within the context of the land of Canaan. Again, if we look in 1 Chronicles, we see in 1 Chronicles 7, 20 following, the sons of Ephraim were Shuthalath, or Shuthalath, and Bereth his son, Tahath his son, Haladah his son, Tahath his son, etc.

The men of Gath who were born in that land killed them because they came down to take away their cattle. Then Ephraim their father mourned the many days, and his brethren came to comfort him. And when he went in to his wife, she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name Beriah, because tragedy had come upon his house.

Now his daughter was Shira, who built lower and upper Bethhoran, and Uzun-Shira, etc. Now their possessions, etc. Within that context, what we see is a suggestion that the family of Jacob were active within the land of Canaan, even after they relocated to Goshen.

So presumably they were dealing with their cattle and other things like that. They were based within Egypt, but they had a wide range of activity. It's worth bearing in mind that the family of Abraham, and most likely the family of Jacob, it's not just Jacob and his direct descendants.

There's a huge sheikdom, as it were, gathered around them. Abraham had about 318 fighting men, and so his sheikdom was probably about 2,000 people or something like that gathered around him. And we can often think of it as just Abraham and Sarah and Ishmael and Hagar and Isaac, that those are all the people involved.

But there's a whole group of other people around them. They have hundreds of people as servants, as people who are part of the wider sheikdom and group that they have with them. And it would be the same going down into Egypt.

They had a whole land that was given to them. But yet the family of Jacob would still be active. I mean, we have that clear suggestion within 1 Chronicles 7 that they were active within the land and their activities in Canaan did not end the moment they moved into Goshen.

So I think that helps us to deal with some of the issues here. It still leaves tensions because the list in chapter 46 obviously cannot be the list of those who made the first

journey. It just does not fit the chronology.

But it is a list of the direct descendants of Jacob who were part of that group that first settled within Goshen. Now, for the significance of this story, then, in its place, we need to think thematically. That's the reason why it's in this particular place.

Chronologically, it could fit somewhere else. But thematically and in terms of the literary structure of Genesis, where else would it fit? Where else would it fit without disrupting the thematic movements of the text? The juxtaposition of Judah and Joseph appears best at this particular point. If it occurred later on in the story, it would be at some point, maybe around chapter 49 or something like that.

And that around the death of Jacob, that sort of period of time, that's just too late within the story. It would disrupt the flow of the narrative and the way certain themes are resolved and developed. And so I think for that reason, it's within this particular place.

We see this in other parts of scripture. There are parts of scripture that are out of chronology, out of sequence. And that is not because the chronology is wrong.

It's rather because the text has different concerns. And the thematic ordering of the text is far more important than the ordering of the text in terms of strict chronology. So, for instance, the end of 2 Samuel has the same sort of issue.

That's the events leading up, surrounding the temple. These sorts of things are mentioned at the end of the book in order to give a structure to the text, the whole of Samuel. It gives a sense of where all of this is moving.

Now, elsewhere in scripture, I think this is a thing that we do encounter. Chronology is not the most important thing. Chronology matters, but the most important thing are these thematic connections, that we understand who Joseph is, who Judah is, and the relationship between them.

That we understand the destiny of the people that is played out in embryo here. The themes that we see in the comment I answered yesterday, the question I answered yesterday about the book of Ruth, the Moabites, these are themes that appear there. This chapter resurfaces within the book of Ruth.

And unless we have a sense of how the destiny of Israel is being played out within these narratives, that these aren't just odd events that occur within the history, but they are part of the larger fabric of God forming this nation and its destiny for many generations to come are affected by this particular event. And the interplay between Judah and Joseph, again, is a long running theme within the story of the kingdoms, the divided kingdoms. One associated particularly with Joseph, one associated with Judah.

So reading Genesis, we need to think more than in terms of these questions of

chronology. While taking the chronology seriously, we need to recognize the thematic things that are taking place. And as we pay attention to that, we will recognize a lot more of the meaning and the significance of a chapter like this is very much found at that level.

I would again suggest that you read the long piece that I wrote on this subject, which gets into many of those themes. Not all of them. I could list many others, but it will give you a good start to understand thematically where it fits into the larger structure of Genesis.

I hope this helps to answer a rather good question and one which just raised some interesting issues and open up some broader parts of Scripture that maybe people haven't looked into. See you again tomorrow.