

**Alliance Theological Seminary**

**Tamar and Judah  
Genesis 38**

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## Introduction

The story of Tamar and Judah in Genesis is intriguing yet often misunderstood. For modern readers a woman sleeping with her deceased husband's brother and father-in-law is distasteful. However, to close the book on Tamar is to exclude the story of one of five women who are honored to be listed in the lineage of Jesus. Tamar's story is well worth revisiting. When read through the lens of her culture, her story reveals surprising and redeeming insights into Tamar's character as well as her motives. Regrettably, while Tamar has been unable to shake the derogatory term "prostitute", this is an inaccurate label. Genesis 38 reveals her to be submitted to cultural expectations for women, more righteous than Judah and, of crucial significance, scripture does not condemn her. Tamar is a woman who overcomes obstacles in order to preserve her husband's name and legacy through the custom of levirate marriage.

## Fruitless Marriages

Tamar is twice married, twice widowed and no children were produced from either union. The inability to conceive a child is always tragic and painful but in ancient times it carried added weight. As explained by Victor H. Matthews in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament*, "Failure to produce children was one of the greatest catastrophes faced by any family, whether they be simple villagers or the wives of kings (2 Sam. 6:23).<sup>1</sup> The continuity of the family depended on children to carry on the family name. James adds to this by observing, "A man's name lived on through his sons. To die without a male descendant was to be erased from history".<sup>2</sup> Tamar's first husband was Judah's oldest son, Er, who was wicked in the sight of the Lord and so the

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton, eds., *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018) 405.

<sup>2</sup> James, Carolyn Custis, *Lost Women of the Bible: Women We Thought We Knew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 106.

Lord put him to death (Gen 38:7). According to Clifford, “Levirate marriage was a means of continuing the deceased man's line, keeping his landholdings within the family and affording his widow protection and an honored place as a married woman in the family.”<sup>3</sup> “It required that if a woman’s husband died without offspring, it was the duty of his brother to bear a child by her in order to continue his brother’s line”, note Walton and Keener.<sup>4</sup> Keeping land and holdings in the family was necessary in order to have a means of survival. Considering the Lord’s estimation of Er, Tamar likely endured a difficult marriage yet in spite of this, Tamar obediently marries her husband’s brother, Onan. This marriage ends disastrously as well. “Since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went to his dead brother’s wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother” (Gen 38:9). The concept of “name” was significant in ancient cultures. One’s name was tantamount to one's legacy. According to James, “In ancient times, a man’s name lived on through his sons. To die without a male descendant was to be erased from history”.<sup>5</sup> Onan refuses to honor his brother by providing a son to continue his name and selfishly uses Tamar for his pleasure while denying her a child. “What Onan did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also” (Gen 38:10). Tamar endures a second marriage to a wicked man. After the death of Onan, Judah sent Tamar away saying, “Remain a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up”(Gen 38:11). Living again in her father’s house, Tamar is trapped. A widow without children was a woman without legal, economic or social status—a woman without a household.<sup>6</sup> She is unable to remarry because she is “engaged” to Judah’s youngest son. Her position in society is

<sup>3</sup> Richard J.Clifford,Genesis 38: Its Contribution to the Jacob Story.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2004), 525..

<sup>4</sup>John H.Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001),668,

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Custis James,106.

<sup>6</sup> John H. Walton and Craig S. Keener, *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2019), 82.

shaded by shame. *Behind the Scenes in the Old Testament* claims, “Wives obtained honor within their families by producing children and were shamed when they proved to be infertile.”<sup>7</sup> Adding to this dismal picture, Walton states, “Additionally, women who seemed prone to become widows were in danger of being suspected of witchcraft.”<sup>8</sup> In a culture where a woman’s life purpose was to be fruitful and multiply, thus securing her husband’s name and legacy, Tamar is unjustly relegated to near non-existence with little hope of escape.

### **Faithless Father-in-Law**

Judah proves faithless. He does not fulfill his responsibilities to Tamar in order to secure his family line. While Judah states his intention to marry his remaining son to Tamar, as time passes it is clear he is never going to do so. As Clifford points out, “Judah’s refusal to observe levirate law by giving Tamar to his son Shelah constitutes a serious failure to propagate the family and to care for his daughter-in-law. It removes her from his family and reduces her to the state of dependent widow in her father’s household. According to Walton and Keener, “This is unusual in that a dowry would have been initially paid by her father precisely for the purpose of supporting her in a situation such as this. It is unlikely her father had any legal obligation to support her.”<sup>9</sup> One measure of the seriousness of Judah’s offense is God’s later approval of Tamar’s extreme remedy.”<sup>10</sup> Scripture reveals Judah was afraid his son Shelah would die so did not intend to marry him to Tamar. It is puzzling that Judah fails to connect the wickedness of his sons and their subsequent deaths with God’s displeasure. After “considerable time” Judah’s wife dies and following a mourning period, Judah goes up to Timnah to his sheep shearers (Gen 38:12). As disclosed by Walton and Keener, “Sheep shearing time was payday, and the income

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton, eds., *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 405.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Walton, Genesis, 668.

<sup>9</sup> Walton and Keener, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Clifford, 526.

windfall, the celebratory atmosphere, and the isolation of the men from the family compound were conducive to the activity of prostitutes”.<sup>11</sup> Implied is Judah’s intent to seek a prostitute while on this excursion, a choice forbidden to followers of God and more evidence of Judah’s faithlessness, this time to God.

### **Forced to Action**

When Tamar is told of Judah’s plans, she is forced to take action. James cautions, “Family duty to produce an heir to preserve the family name is essential to understanding Tamar’s motives”.<sup>12</sup> Tamar has few options remaining if she is to provide a heir to continue her husband’s name and inheritance. Tamar understands Judah’s intent to go up to Timnah at the time of sheep shearing. The reader can imagine Tamar compiling the evidence and realizing she will never produce an heir if she continues in a passive role. “She saw Shelah had grown up and she had not been given to him for a wife” (Gen 38:14). Tamar takes immediate action and with considerable risk. She removes her widow’s garments, covers herself with a veil, wraps herself, and sits in the Gateway of Enaim. Many sources refer to Tamar’s “plot to trick Judah.”. However, in previous chapters of Genesis where there is trickery that is contradictory to God’s plan, the plot and trickery are revealed to the reader. (Gen 16, 25, 27,29, 30) In the instance of Tamar, her plans are not revealed, no comments are made regarding her actions, supporting the conclusion they are not contradictory to God’s plans. While sleeping with her father-in-law is shocking to modern sensibilities, it was not viewed the same way in ancient cultures. Walton instructs, “Hittite law regarding levirate marriage stipulates that when a widow marries her late husband’s brother, if he dies, she is then to marry his father (i.e., her father-in-law) (Hittite Law #193).”<sup>13</sup> While Tamar is willing to marry Shelah, Judah withholds his remaining son. According

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<sup>11</sup> John H. Walton and Craig S. Keener, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Carolyn Custis James, 108.

<sup>13</sup> John H. Walton, Genesis,668.

to levirate marriage custom, if the remaining son is not an option as a husband, Judah is the next in line with the responsibility to protect the continuity of the family through fathering offspring. Judah has insured his remaining son is not an option. Also crucial to a fair reading of this story is to acknowledge Judah's actions are not those of a Godly man. He saw a woman he believed to be a prostitute and immediately approached her to begin negotiations in order to lie with her. Tamar seized the opportunity presented by Judah's actions to fulfill her duty to continue her husband's line by stretching but not breaking the limits of the levirate marriage customs.

### **Found to be Righteous**

In the final verses of Genesis 38, Tamar is recognized as righteous through Judah's words and by God's blessing in giving Tamar twin sons. When Judah propositioned her, Tamar asked him for a pledge of payment prior to having relations with him (Gen.38:17). She wisely guaranteed she would be able to prove Judah as the father if she became pregnant. She knows firsthand that Judah is not a man of his word. Judah's seal, cord, and staff provide unmistakable identification. With a foolish recklessness reminiscent of his Uncle Esau, Judah hands over these important items to someone he believes to be a nameless prostitute. Three months after their encounter, Judah is told Tamar has prostituted herself and is pregnant. Judah's response is immediate: "Bring her out, and let her be burned!" (Gen 38:24) Walton and Keener reveal, "The punishment of burning is rare and reserved for the most serious of sexual crimes."<sup>14</sup> The Jewish

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<sup>14</sup> John H. Walton and Craig S. Keener, 85.

Study Bible adds, “Tamar’s supposed capital offense is adultery, not prostitution, since she is still in a state akin to betrothal to Judah’s family”.<sup>15</sup> Given his harsh response, one can not help but wonder if Judah is eagerly seizing an opportunity to rid himself of a problem. Tamar is prepared and counters Judah’s rash judgment. Producing Judah’s signet and cord and staff, Tamar reveals Judah as the man who impregnated her. Judah admits, “She is more righteous than I since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” (Gen 38:26). His declaration is significant. For Judah to proclaim Tamar more righteous is acknowledging he has not fulfilled his word or met his responsibilities. Clifford notes, “Judah sinned by failing to ensure that the levirate law was observed to benefit his daughter-in-law, Tamar and he is acknowledging this wrong.”<sup>16</sup> In a culture where children were considered a blessing and sign of favor, Tamar is given a double portion. As Matthews clarifies, “While the birth of their twin sons satisfies the needs of the family, it also demonstrates that some social customs can or must be violated, at least temporarily, to bring about the necessary outcome.”<sup>17</sup> Clearly, God does not punish Tamar but blesses her. Her motives and actions stand in stark contrast to those of Judah and his wicked sons. Judah’s line is preserved through Tamar’s twin boys. Perez becomes the heir of the eldest son and the head of the house of Judah.

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<sup>15</sup> Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible, 2nd ed* (New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2014). 72.

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. Clifford, 525.

<sup>17</sup> Matthews, 407.

## Conclusion

After revisiting Tamar's story and examining it through the lens of her culture, we find Tamar cast in a very different light. Tamar endures two marriages to wicked men, the shame of barrenness, as well as unjust treatment by her father-in-law yet she acts decisively and courageously. By using levirate marriage customs, Tamar fulfills her duty and provides an heir, guaranteeing the continuity of the line of Judah and playing an important role in God's salvation plan for humanity as one of the women in the lineage of Jesus. Far from being condemned in scripture, Tamar and her son Perez are favorably recalled in a blessing in the book of Ruth. "Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the descendants whom the Lord will give you by this young woman." (Ruth 4:12) While some may perceive her in a negative light, Tamar is highly honored to be one of the five women listed in the Bible in the lineage of women.

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Dr. A's suggestions

Two things:

- One way to "tighten" up your discussion would be to cut areas where you are recounting the story. If you assume your reader knows the story (me) or can read it in a Bible alongside your paper (anyone), then how can you cut back on summary and retelling and leave room for the analysis?
- Might the content from this week's lessons on death and preservation of name by children fit in to your discussion? I can see you hinting at this in some places, but might be good to bring it out a bit more. Perhaps it also has some bearing on why Tamar is declared more righteous than Judah.