

She is righteous, Not I

Genesis 38; Deuteronomy 25:7-10

The story of Tamar and Judah is inserted into the middle of the Joseph narrative in Genesis. As you might remember, Joseph has incited the jealousy of his brothers due to being his father's pet, for bragging about his grandiose dreams and for showing off his colourful coat. His brothers first plot to feed him to wild animals, then their hearts soften and they throw him into an empty cistern instead and lead their parents, Jacob and Leah, to believe that he is dead. Then their hearts soften even more and they sell him into slavery, because, as Joseph's brother Judah says in Genesis 37:27: "Come, let's sell [Joseph] to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." With brothers like these, who needs enemies?

After this, the story temporarily shifts its focus to Judah, who leaves his home and marries an unnamed Canaanite woman who bears him three sons – Er, Onan, and Shelah. When Er, the eldest, comes of age, Judah finds him a wife named Tamar, but Er's story ends rather abruptly when God puts him to death for his "wickedness", the nature of which is not revealed. Some Jewish scholars are of the opinion that Er intentionally avoided consummating his marriage so that Tamar would not become pregnant and ruin her beauty.

Judah's family was subject to an early form of levirate marriage law. The word levirate comes from the root *levir*, which means "brother-in-law". After Er dies, Tamar, his widow, must marry the next eldest brother, in this case, Onan. But any son born to Onan and Tamar, would actually be considered the heir of Er, the deceased eldest brother. Practically speaking, this son would receive Er's portion of the inheritance, which would leave Onan, the second eldest, with significantly less inheritance. Complicated stuff.

Onan is overcome with greed and doesn't want to share his inheritance with his dead brother's offspring, but he still wants to sleep with Tamar for his own pleasure, so he deliberately sabotages any chance to impregnate Tamar during the marital act. I'll leave the details of this to your imagination. For this, God kills Onan too.

This leaves Shelah, Judah's youngest, and only remaining son, to fulfill the levirate law and marry Tamar. Out of fear that Shelah will meet the same end as his older brothers, Judah postpones the marriage and tells Tamar to move home to her

father's house, providing her with the excuse that Shelah isn't old enough to get married. It is unclear if Judah ever intends to let Shelah marry Tamar at all.

Let's talk about Judah's motives here. Judah does not blame his eldest sons for their own wicked actions that resulted in their deaths. In fact, he doesn't seem to know what his sons have done to warrant death. In a play, this would be known as a case of "dramatic irony" in which the spectators have more information about what's really going on than the actors. In other words, we, the readers, know that Er and Onan have angered God because of their sins, but Judah does not. Or maybe Judah just doesn't want to face facts.

Without this crucial information concerning the cause of his sons' death, Judah chooses to assume that Tamar is to blame. Why does he think this? There was a belief amongst neighbouring pagan cultures that some women were inflicted with a kind of curse whereby sexual contact with them caused men to die. Medieval Talmudic scholars named these women *qatlanit*, Hebrew for "killer woman".¹

Could this foreign belief have influenced Judah in thinking that Tamar magically caused the death of his sons? It's not beyond the realm of possibility. Intermarriage was a common experience at the time.

And does this theme of the "killer woman" appear anywhere else in the Bible? The Catholic and Orthodox Bibles include the Old Testament Book of Tobit, whereas the Protestant Bible does not. In this book, Tobit is a righteous Israelite living in a hostile Assyrian-ruled land. One of the righteous things he does is to make sure that slain Israelites are given a proper burial. One night, after burying a murdered man, Tobit ends up sleeping outside and bird droppings fall into his eyes which causes him to become blind then descend into poverty. (Don't worry, because God considers him to be righteous, he recovers his sight eventually.)

Tobit has a son named Tobias who is also unlucky in that he falls in love with a beautiful Median woman named Sara. Her previous 7 husbands had been killed on their wedding nights by the demon Asmodeus who is in love with her. Sara develops a reputation as a "killer woman" and fears that no one else will ever want to marry her, leaving her to the tragic fate of being a disadvantaged widow with no patriarch to protect her. The text says that in her despair, Sara prays for death.

¹ Mordechai A. Friedman, "Tamar, a Symbol of Life: The "Killer Wife" Superstition in the Bible and Jewish Tradition" in *AJS Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), p. 28.

However, the angel Raphael steps in and instructs Tobias to go ahead and marry Sara and that on their wedding night, he is to remove the heart, liver and gall bladder of a fish and burn them in their bedroom. (Mmmmmm, romantic.) Tobias follows the angel's instructions and the fumes of the burning fish organs drive the demon far away to Egypt and Tobias and Sara live happily ever after.

Sara, like Tamar, is stained by the suspicion that she is a "killer woman" whose sexuality causes men to fall to their deaths. How often are women historically treated as scapegoats for things that go wrong for men or for society in general? And how often is this linked to their sexuality?

In the case of Tamar, the biblical text eventually corrects Judah's false belief that Tamar is to blame for the deaths of his sons. By the end of the story, it becomes clear that Er and Onan were punished by God for their own sins. And not only is Tamar publicly exonerated of any wrongdoing; she is declared more righteous than the sorry lot of them, as we will soon see.

There is an irony to Judah's actions. He wants to protect his youngest son Shelah from Tamar, the killer woman, but in doing so, he actually puts Shelah directly in harm's way. Consider these words from Deuteronomy on the terms of levirate law:

If a man does not want to marry his [dead] brother's wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, "My husband's brother refuses to carry on his brother's name in Israel. He will not fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to me." Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, "I do not want to marry her," his brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, "this is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line." That man's line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandaled (25:7-10).

While Tamar hasn't yet resorted to unsandaling anyone, she also doesn't sit around passively waiting to be rescued. She knows that she has a purpose to fulfill and that is to perpetuate the line of Judah and to receive justice for what she is due as a member of that family. If Judah and Shelah don't hold up their end of the bargain, she has no economic or domestic protection. So, she gets out her veil, disguises herself and sits by the roadside to Timnah, waiting for Judah and his buddy Hirah to come by on their way to shear sheep.

Sure enough, they see the veiled Tamar and assume that she is a prostitute. Judah asks to “lie with” her, not knowing that she is his daughter-in-law, and promises to send her a goat as payment. Understandably, Tamar has trust issues when it comes to Judah and his promises, so she demands that Judah leave his staff, cord and seal, which are like his official signature, until he is able to repay her with the goat. Judah agrees. He later sends his friend to collect his valuables, but the prostitute is nowhere to be found.

A few months later, Judah finds out that his daughter-in-law, Tamar, is pregnant. In another moment of dramatic irony in which we, the readers, know more than Judah does, he falsely assumes that Tamar has committed adultery against her dead husbands and in a fit of moral outrage demands that she and her unborn twins be burned to death.

As Tamar is being dragged out to her gruesome death, she performs the ultimate mic drop. She pulls out Judah’s staff and cord and seal and says: “whoever owns these items is the father of my babies”. Judah recognizes the items, Tamar is spared, and Judah finally acknowledges that Tamar had nothing to do with the deaths of his sons and that she is not an adulteress.

Tamar is at the mercy of a thoroughly patriarchal system. This is further compounded by the fact that the patriarch who is charged with protecting the vulnerable widow in his care, refuses to honour that system. Tamar’s only tools at her disposal are her sexuality and her cunning. But sexuality and cunning are sources of both power and danger. On the one hand, she can put them to use to get what she needs and deserves, but, on the other hand, she can lose her life and the lives of her children if things don’t go her way.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “Tamar has committed the kind of sin...[that] ‘good people’ prefer to condemn – engaging in deception and illicit sex and bringing damage to a good family”.² This is an astute comment on a timeless tendency of so-called ‘good people’ in ‘good communities’. What are the things *we* tend to condemn as the most egregious sins of our community members while turning a blind eye, like Judah, to more serious injustices?

Tamar does not ultimately fall prey to this kind of puritanical boobery. At the 11th hour, Judah realizes the truth and publicly admits to his own grave moral failings. And Judah doesn’t claim that his sins are more severe than Tamar’s in any relative

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 311.

sort of way. He vindicates her completely of any wrongdoing by saying, “she is more righteous than I”. A more exact translation of this phrase is, “She is righteous, not I.” The word *tsadqah* is used here. It is the feminine form of the word “righteous” and it is the only time it is used in the whole of the Bible, “which means that Tamar is the only [biblical] woman who [is] declared righteous.”³

Our church theme these days is Bearing Light: Women in the Bible. In keeping with this theme, Tamar is a bearer of light in two fundamental ways. First, she is a bearer of light in the form of truth-telling. Her righteous deception ironically unveils the truth when everyone else is being either willfully dishonest or shielding themselves from reality. Second, she is the bearer of light in the form of bearing the seed of future generations. She ensures the continuation of Judah’s lineage according to God’s divine plan. This lineage includes the future King David; and the Gospel of Matthew names Tamar as the first of four women listed in the genealogy of Jesus.

In conclusion, I am left feeling both relieved and unsettled by this ending to Tamar’s story. I am relieved that Tamar and her unborn children’s lives are spared and that she is cleared of the crime of adultery and of embodying a man-killing curse. And I am unsettled that she is recognized as righteous according to the terms of an oppressive levirate system reminiscent of *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Furthermore, Luke 12:48 says that “to whom much has been given, much will be required.” Judah has been given much, but he has not even met the minimum requirements that accompany this gift of power and authority. And still, the entire nation of Judah-ism becomes his namesake.

Not much has been given to Tamar, yet she is the one who goes above and beyond her lowly station in life to uphold the law, relying on the better nature of a weak-willed, deceptive patriarch to hopefully give her his stamp of approval. I admire Tamar’s courage and her ingenuity, but I also tremble at the thought that God’s plan rests precariously on the lone shoulders of a widow without social power.

I am inspired by this righteous woman, but the story cannot end with the deeds of an individual hero who survives the system against the odds. Tamar exposes something ugly about patriarchal authority and triggers a moment of awareness in Judah and those who witness his realization. And while this awareness leads Judah

³Morimura Nobuko, “The Story of Tamar: A Feminist Interpretation of Genesis 38”, *Japan Christian Review*, Vol. 59, p. 62.

to uphold rather than change the law, it also leads to an exposure of hypocrisy and shines a light on the righteousness of one who has no power.

Finally, while Tamar's story is exceptional in and of itself, it can be understood as an integral part of a much bigger divine plan. It is significant that Tamar is an ancestress of Jesus. She is one of the holy mothers bearing the light of Christ on a long journey towards social liberation and systemic transformation.