

## Tamar, Daughter-in-law of Judah: The Woman with a Pathetic History

<b>Her names</b>	“Tamar” means “a palm tree”. As the palm tree is the most valuable of Eastern trees, the ideas of beauty and wealth are combined in such names. It is very rare, however, to come across a modern female with the name of Tamar, in spite of its rich significance. (2)
<b>Key Scriptures</b>	Genesis 38:6-30, Ruth 4:12, I Chronicles 2:4, Matthew 1:3 <b>NOTE:</b> There are three Tamars mentioned in the Bible, Tamar #2 “The Woman Who Was Seduced by Her Own Brother” II Samuel 13, I Chronicles 3:9, and Tamar #3, II Samuel 14:27
<b>Promises In Scripture</b>	Joshua 23:14, Romans 8:28, Psalm 77:13

### Her Background, Life and Times

**The Story So Far:** First of all, Tamar married Er, the oldest son of Judah and Shuah - who, like Tamar, was also a Canaanite. What Er did to displease God we are not told. Whatever it was, it was sinful enough for God to slay him. The wickedness of Er is declared but not described. But Tamar did not remain a widow long, for in accordance with Hebrew law, she married the next son in the family so that he could raise up seed for his deceased brother. (2)

Onan was Tamar’s second husband, but he failed to fulfill his responsibility to his dead brother’s memory and posterity. Unwilling to do his duty according to the law of the Levirate marriage, and knowing that any offspring would not be his, Onan spilled his semen on the ground, and for this act of faithlessness to the dead, God slew him also. (2)

Widowed again, in the ordinary course of events, the next son of Judah, Shelah, should have become the third husband of Tamar as the tribe-law required (Deuteronomy 25:5, Matthew 22:24). Judah promised to give his third son to the childless widow, but when Shelah became of age, his father broke his promise. Perhaps Judah feared that the fate that had overtaken his other two sons might also be the fate of Shelah, and the refusal of Judah to give Tamar his son Shelah in marriage led to far-reaching results. (2)

**Her Genealogy:** The Bible is silent as to her genealogy. All we know is that she was a Canaanite as her heathen name suggest, and that when widowed the second time, she returned to her father’s home, but who he was and where he lived we are not told. What we do know is that when she married into the family of Judah, heartache and tragedy were her lot. (2)

**Prostitution:** As abhorrent as it seems to us, prostitution was actually an expression of worship in the ancient Near East. Pagan peoples often believed that fertility gods granted blessings to those who practiced cultic prostitution. The sacrifices and the payments for the use of a cultic prostitute brought huge amounts of money into the coffers of the god or goddess being worshipped. The sexual intercourse itself symbolized the hoped-for fertility and abundance of the harvest. Judah, a widower who had only recently “recovered from his grief” (Gen. 38:12), traveled to Timnah during sheep shearing time to watch his own sheep being sheared of their wool. It may be that when he saw Tamar he took her for a shrine prostitute and had intercourse with her to ensure a good crop of wool. That, of course, in no way justifies Judah’s act, but it does shed some light on his possible motives. Shrine prostitutes usually kept themselves heavily veiled before and during the act of intercourse, an attempt to create the illusion that the participant was actually engaging in the sexual act with the goddess herself. (1)

Two kinds of prostitution are mentioned in the O.T.: professional prostitution for money, and cult prostitution performed as an element in pagan worship. Both are wrong, but Scripture takes a more serious view of cult prostitution. The incident here describes professional prostitution and suggests prostitutes wore distinctive dress and were easily recognized. (8)

**Levirate marriage:** Ancient custom called for a man to marry the childless widow of his brother. The first son of such a union was considered the child of the dead brother, to carry on the dead man’s line and inherit his property. This custom underlies the story of Judah’s relationship with Tamar, the childless widow of his firstborn. (8)

**Birth Control:** Some have erroneously taught that the judgment of Onan for “spilling his seed on the ground” suggests divine displeasure of birth control methods. In the context of the story it’s clear that Onan’s sin lay in his unwillingness to father a child for his dead brother, not for using this early birth control method. (8)

<b>The Good</b>	<p><b>Her Faith:</b> Although we have no evidence of Tamar’s faith in Jehovah, she must have had some conception of the important Messianic significance of the line of Judah, for denied Shelah, she was determined, though in an incestuous way, to save from extinction the family and tribe from which the Messiah was to spring (2)</p> <p><b>Her Determination:</b> Tamar may have thought that if she could not marry Shelah, then according to the law of the country his father should marry her. So she resorted to a method we cannot condone for the purpose of securing her desired end. Thus it came about that she laid a trap for Judah, and consequently she and her sons found a place in the greatest of all genealogies. (2)</p> <p>Driven by one overwhelming need, she sacrificed her reputation and nearly her life to achieve her goals. (1)</p> <p><b>Her Children:</b> That her daring behavior resulted, not in ruin, but in the fulfillment of her hopes to bear children. (1)</p> <p>Twin sons were born of that incestuous union [with Judah], Pharez, or Perez, and Zerah. Through Pharez, Judah and Tamar became ancestors of Jesus (Matthew 1:3) (2)</p> <p><b>The Continuation of Judah’s Line:</b> Judah had shown little concern regarding the continuance of his line. Instead, God used a woman, shamed by her own barrenness and determined to overcome it, to ensure that the tribe of Judah would not only survive but that it would one day bear the world’s Messiah. (1)</p>
<b>The Bad and The Ugly</b>	<p><b>The Men In Her Life:</b> That the men in her life failed to fulfill their responsibility, leaving her a childless widow. (1)</p> <p><b>Her Plan:</b> After the death of his wife, Shuah, Judah was stricken with grief. Bereft of his two wicked sons, and now of his wife who, in spite of her idolatrous nationality, has nothing against her character, Judah went to his friend Hirah the Adullamite. Tamar, hearing of this, set her trap to reach the ideal which three times had been denied her. Disguising herself to look like a harlot, she sat in an open place where she could be approached. Not knowing Tamar’s true identity, Judah bargained for her favors and secured them. His desire for intercourse with a harlot is reported without any moral judgment, seeing “there was little or no prejudice against purely secular prostitution in Israel.”</p> <p>Learning that Tamar had been playing the harlot, he commanded, “Bring her forth and let her be burnt.” But when he learned that he was the cause of her guilt, Judah was compelled to vindicate Tamar and was forced to admit that she had been more righteous. Judah was motivated in his despicable conduct by sensual lust alone, but Tamar by nobler motives, namely, to be come the mother of Judah’s tribal representative. (2)</p>
<b>US: The Lessons To Learn</b>	<p><b>Jesus:</b> That women should be mentioned at all in his genealogy is surprising, let alone that four of the five got pregnant out of wedlock. In addition, four of the women were foreigners, not Israelites. (1)</p> <p><b>Prostitution:</b> Prostitution was the imagery used often by the biblical prophets to describe Israel’s waywardness, their proneness to follow false gods. They saw God as the husband of Israel, her keeper and her true love. Whenever the Israelites turned from the true God to false gods, they “prostituted” themselves. It is a strong picture, but an accurate one of turning away from the God who truly loved them and was willing to care for them and watch over them, if only they would remain true to him. Only the God of eternal surprises, who takes the unfit, the desperate, and the profane and uses them to his eternal and holy purposes. (1)</p> <p><b>God’s Power:</b> This is the beauty of this story: God’s power to bring positive things from the negative, even sinful, events of our lives is just as much at work now as in Tamar’s day. We may not see it today or tomorrow - or perhaps ever - but we can trust the God we love to do what he loves: bring blessing to us in spite of ourselves. (1)</p> <p>The story in Genesis 38 reveals nothing about Tamar’s knowledge of God’s hand in the events of her life. More than likely, she was totally unaware of the power of God at work. But he was at work nevertheless, bringing good out of tragedy and blessing out of less than honorable events. (1)</p> <p><b>The Perpetuation of Judah’s Line:</b> Shocked as we are by the incestuous way Tamar sought to aid the perpetuation of Judah’s line, a fruitful race followed, “God not sanctioning but over-riding evil to His own good purpose” (Ruth 4:12, 18, Romans 3:5-8). It shocks our inner, finer feelings to see Christ’s lineage interwoven with such abhorrent degradation as we have in this chapter (Genesis 38). We cannot but wonder how Judah and Tamar have the distinction of mention in that sacred genealogy of Jesus Christ, but as Bishop Hall expressed it, “God’s election is only by Grace, for otherwise Judah would never have been chosen.” Judah was a Jew; Tamar, a Gentile, and thus their parentage of Pharez (Matthew 1:3) can be looked upon as a foreshadowing of the fact that both Jews and Gentiles were to share in the blessings of the Gospel. (2)</p>

<b>Her Legacy of Prayer</b>	
<i>Women of the Bible</i>	
<b>Reflect On</b>	Genesis 38
<b>Praise God</b>	That he allowed his own Son to be intimately linked with fallen human beings from whom he was descended.
<b>Offer Thanks</b>	That God can use everyone and everything to bring about a good result.
<b>Confess</b>	Any tendency you may have to judge others with a double standard, as Judah did Tamar.
<b>Ask God</b>	To take any desperation you may be feeling and replace it with hope, calling to mind the verse in Jeremiah 29:11: 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans give hope and a future.'
<b>A Final Prayer</b>	Lord, you formed me in my mother's womb. You knew then what every single day of my life would be like. You saw the great things and the hard things, the joy and the sorrow. Right now I come before you with the situation (or the memory) with which I have not yet made peace. As I look back at painful circumstances, help me to realize that you were present even in the midst of them. And now, as I surrender them to you, help me to sense your healing presence in my life.

<b>Final Thoughts</b>	
<i>Women of the Bible</i>	
<b>Lift Your Heart</b>	If you've never sketched out your family tree, make an effort to trace your heritage, going back at least four or five generations - more if you have the time and energy. Pay special attention to the women in your family tree. You may discover some fascinating insights into your family background.

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