

# Tamar

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A main movement in the Bible is that what was perceived by elites as peripheral becomes central. What was at the margins of the Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian empires, was claimed to be significant. This is true of Tamar, after Eve.<sup>1</sup> The time factor is important in this story: “In these days...” that is to say, in the days of Jacob and Joseph, both ancestors of historical Israel, a period thick with events. Part of a long life runs by, as soon as Judah has children, whom he has in rapid succession, one thinks, since his unnamed wife is a Canaanite, and no barrenness can be expected. The ancient audience would understand that Tamar waited about ten years in her house after she had to deal with Er and Onan. The event happens then within a seasonal frame, sheep-shearing. Another tension is at work, which cannot be imagined without the “thickness” of time: the notion of “fall,” or dissipation, forgetfulness and loss of consciousness (Judah’s memory loss, pre- or rather other-figuring that of the Hebrews in Egypt), and of a return, or finding, rediscovery and redemption. In Joseph’s story, the theme of remembrance is paramount.

Why does this story about Judah appear here, after the beginning of the story of Joseph? Is there a trace or hint of a struggle between Judah and his brothers? Or is it an illustration of what Joseph’s brothers were doing when misbehaving around Schechem? More likely, Judah is opposed to Joseph, especially through their relationships with two foreign women, Putiphar’s wife (unnamed) and Tamar. Most importantly, Judah

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<sup>1</sup>The same movement exists in the choice of David in the small town of Bethlehem, hardly a capital. The legend of Jesus’ birth in the gospel of Luke reactivates the same movement of criticism of political centers: insignificant Nazareth is placed at the center of a story. The good news is announced in what is not the center anymore, Jerusalem.

and Canaanite Tamar are the ancestors of David, another “younger” son, whereas Joseph is the ancestor of the kings of northern Israel. The choice of reigning families (including messianic hopes in one after the collapse of independent kingdoms) doesn’t follow a biological straight line. The intertwined passages, however, make clear that the kings of Israel and Judah actually lost their claims to authority because of their behavior, especially the way they “prostituted” themselves.

One type of historical, literal explanation for the existence of this story is that the Yahwist author keeps memory of a mixed ancestry of Judah. But the elaborate construction of the Jacob and the Joseph stories and the systematic use of symmetry in them—everything comes in twos or twins, including dreams—argues against literalism.

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**38:1** וַיְהִי בַעַת הַהוּא וַיֵּרֶד יְהוּדָה מֵאֶת אֶחָיו וַיֵּט עַד־אִישׁ עַדְלָמִי וּשְׁמוֹ חִירָה׃ *And it happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and went towards a man of Adullam by the name of Hirah.* To go down and separate himself from his brothers is considered a problem, especially if it is to consort with Canaanite people who have other gods (Baal, Ashterah, etc.). Judah is also separating himself from his father Jacob who plays no role in the marital designs of his fourth son (from Leah). To go up, on the contrary, is to elevate oneself religiously and culturally. One goes up to Jerusalem and to the temple, built on the “mountain of the house”, whereas one goes down towards rich territories and luxury, together with polytheism. Rich territories are regions of mixing, impurity, prostitution, from the point of view of the book of Deuteronomy at least. Of course, Jerusalem and its temple are in the background of Genesis though not mentioned directly.

**38:2** וַיֵּרָא־שָׁם יְהוּדָה בַּת־אִישׁ כְּנַעֲנִי וּשְׁמָהּ שׁוּ׳א וַיִּקַּח וַיָּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ׃ *And there Judah saw the daughter of a Canaanite man by the name of Shu’a and he took her and came to her.* Everything is problematic in Judah’s actions: the seeing of the daughter (one is not to look around, compare Dinah in Gen 34 whose fault might also be to go out and look around); the fact that she is a Canaanite and therefore a worshipper of other gods and goddesses; the taking in marriage, of course, without involving his own parents or at least Jacob (compare the protocol followed by Schechem, son of Hamor). The fact that her name is not given means that she is a simple instrument of the writer’s design.

**38:3** וַתַּהַר וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן. *She conceived and bore a son.* Of course, given the social and religious prohibitions Judah is blithely breaking, no period of barrenness here. No waiting for a promise or salvation. No explanation is given for the names of the three sons. Note, however, that Tamar later will have to wait a long time before taking matters in her own hands.

**38:6** וַיִּקַּח יְהוּדָה אִשָּׁה לְעֶר בְּכוֹרָו וּשְׁמָהּ תָמָר. *Judah took a wife for Er his first-born, named Tamar.* The text makes clear that Judah goes by the rules of a male-dominated society: he does what he didn't let Jacob do.

**38:8** *perform the duty of a brother-in-law*, says Judah to Onan after his brother's death. This law or custom is spelled out in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and required that in the event of a husband's death and the absence of male child, the brother of the dead husband was to marry the widow and try to have a male child who would bear the name of the dead father and inherit from him.

**38:11** *Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, 'Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up'—for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house.* The situation of widows was usually dire, especially if she was without male descendants. Not only did she go back to her paternal household where she may not have been well accepted, especially if she had daughters needing to be fed, but furthermore, if still young, any contact with males, for whatever reason, could be interpreted as prostitution. In other words, she couldn't have any contact with males and marry again.

**38:12** Many days went by... that is, many years: at least ten or fifteen... Note how Judah consoles himself rapidly from the loss of his wife by going up with his old Adullamite friend to enjoy the shearing of his flock, the occasion of a spring festive period. As a rich, older landowner, he moves about as he pleases while Tamar is under strict supervision of her paternal family.

**38:13–16** Tamar learns that her father-in-law is coming by. She takes extreme measures to have a child by her husband's closest male kin. She drops the clothing that marked and protected her as a widow and dresses like a prostitute (the story says that Judah took her for a prostitute because of her veil). The mention of Enaim, which means the two springs, tells the audience that this is another well-based type scene, with marriage and children in the background, but in a way that crosses many boundaries. Prostitution is code for the prohibited mixing that late authors condemned in the practices of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The moral condem-

nation did not simply concern the sexual behavior but more importantly the economic expectations and benefits that marrying across ethnic borders could bring to paternal-based families.

**38:16–18** *She said, ‘What will you give me, that you may come in to me?’ 17He answered, ‘I will send you a kid from the flock.’ And she said, ‘Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it.’ 18He said, ‘What pledge shall I give you?’ She replied, ‘Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand.’ So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him.* As a pledge (a guarantee, a lien), she asks for the most fundamental signs of ownership and even lordship (kingship that Judah’s descendants, via David, would hold): seal, cord (also a sign of authority), and staff (signifying the authority of leaders in the kinship system). He doesn’t argue, doesn’t worry about recovering these most important markers from a Canaanite prostitute!

**38:19** Four verbs of decisive action in this verse: she got up, went her way, removed her veil, and dressed as a widow again. The succession of verbs denote decisiveness and speed.

**38:20–23** Judah is trying to get his marks of authority back without losing his reputation. He does it via his friend because he himself is a “resident.” He and Adullam speak of a “sacred prostitute,” which is a high-handed way to cover what has happened. Judah is content to lose all his claims to authority and status.

**38:24** When Tamar is accused of having prostituted herself, the accusers use a plural, “whoring acts,” when there was only one act that was demanded by the Torah. The story makes clear to the audience that it is Judah who has been prostituting himself, that is, mixing it with the wrong people (*zonah*, prostitute, comes from the root verb for “mixing,” like in cooking a dish). Judah is brief in his condemnation: two words express the “taking out,” and the “let her be burned.” Judah recognizes his lesson in Torah law, at the hands of a Canaanite daughter-in-law. The older son from this union, Perez, is a clan ancestor of David.