



## Women in the Bible

### Hebrew Bible: Tamar

Genesis 38, 2 Samuel 13

There are two characters named Tamar that appear in the Hebrew Bible. Is it simply a coincidence, or is there some connection between the two characters? The two stories share similar themes, though these may not be obvious at first glance, and they raise interesting questions about women's agency in the Hebrew Bible.

Tamar in Genesis 38

The Tamar in Genesis is Judah's daughter-in-law, who marries his eldest son Er. Her story is a brief and somewhat sudden digression the Joseph story, which leaves off at the end of chapter 37 and begins abruptly again in chapter 39.

Unfortunately, Tamar's husband Er is "wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death," which Dr. Vayntrub says usually means that he died young (Gen 38:7). Since Er has two younger brothers, though, his genealogical line can still continue. In a tradition called levirate marriage (read more about it below), Tamar finds herself coupled with Er's younger brother Onan. But since any children they might have would be considered Er's, and not his own, Onan "spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother" (Gen 38:9). God is not pleased with this, so Onan dies, too.

It seems that Tamar has done nothing wrong, but Judah is understandably hesitant to give her his third son Shelah. Is she cursed, or perhaps some sort of "black widow" figure, secretly killing her husbands before they can give her any sons? Judah sends Tamar back to her father's house to be a widow for a little while, under the pretense that Shelah is too young.

Later, when Tamar finds out that Judah is going to visit his sheepshearers, she takes the opportunity to lay eyes on him. She finds, from afar, that Shelah is easily old enough to be married. Clearly, Judah is not intending to marry them or to perpetuate Er's line.

Here, Tamar takes matters into her own hands. She covers her face, so Judah believes she is a prostitute. She becomes pregnant from their single sexual encounter. The double standards here are notable, though not surprising. Judah openly discusses his consorting with a sex worker, and no one

condemns him for this action. When Judah finds out that Tamar has been a sex worker, though, he demands that she be burned. He does not yet recognize that he is the one who got her pregnant.

Luckily, Tamar is able to prove to Judah that her pregnancy was caused by him. He immediately forgives her and, indeed, praises her for her unorthodox actions. He never sleeps with her again and declares, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah" (Gen 38:26).

By modern standards, Tamar has done something shocking and distasteful. She disguises herself so that she can have sex with her father-in-law! But Judah is pleased with her at the end of Genesis 38 because she has, in fact, saved his family line. The twins she bears, Perez and Zerah, will perpetuate Judah's name. Tamar has selflessly and cleverly fulfilled her duty to continue his line of descent.

### Levirate Marriage

After Tamar's first husband Er dies, Judah refers to "the duty of a brother-in-law" (Gen 38:8). Here, he is referring to a custom called levirate marriage. The practice is described in Deuteronomy, as well as many other religious traditions around the world. When a man dies without a son:

the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel (Deut 25:5-6).

Understandably, the younger brothers may not want to follow this practice because if a son were born, he would not be considered their own. This may explain Onan spilling his seed on the ground. God's punishment of that deed perhaps shows the importance of the practice.

The mention of the practice in Tamar's story should not necessarily be an indication of how often this custom was observed. Still, the fact that the author takes no pains to explain it shows that the audience would have been familiar with the concept.

### Tamar in 2 Samuel 13

The Tamar in 2 Samuel is an entirely different character, who appears many hundreds of years later. She is David's daughter and seems to be faithful and moral. She follows her father's instructions when he sends her to her brother Amnon's house to cook for him when he is apparently sick. And she resists him when he demands that she lie with him. "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!" (2 Sam 13:12).

When he rapes her anyway, she escapes to their brother Absalom and, rather than publicly shaming Amnon, she stays quiet in Absalom's house. When their father David finds out about the rape, he chooses to do nothing because Amnon is his firstborn. Finally, after two years, Absalom seeks revenge on Amnon and kills him. Tamar finds the protection her father should have given in the form of her brother Absalom.

In the prior chapter, David has sent Bathsheba's husband Uriah to the front lines of a battle to be killed so he could take her as his own wife. The prophet Nathan communicates to David something like a curse. He says, "Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house" (2 Sam 12:11). David should expect to suffer punishment for his sins. He destroyed Uriah's family, so now his own family will be destroyed. Tamar's rape and his firstborn son's death are part of this punishment. Unlike the Tamar in Genesis, the Tamar in 2 Samuel has no agency at all. Her entire plot is determined by the actions of the men around her. Even though she is consistent and upright, she is repeatedly abused, ultimately suffering for the sins of her father.

## The Two Tamars

Often when characters share names in the Bible, there is a deeper literary meaning or connection. But what do the two Tamars have in common? The name Tamar means "date palm" in Hebrew. The date palm is a tree that has very shallow and expansive roots that can be invasive to plants around it. Dr. Vayntrub suggests that the one Tamar (Genesis) reaches out with her roots to perpetuate Judah's family tree, while the other Tamar (2 Samuel) is an invasive, disrupting force for her family tree. Their stories share themes of women's agency, family strife, and anxiety about perpetuating a family line.

The stories have other literary parallels:

- Names: In Genesis, Judah's wife is the daughter of Shua – Bat Shua in Hebrew – and in 2 Samuel, David's wife is Bathsheba.
- Sheepshearers: In both stories, a turning point comes at the time of sheepshearers, which is usually a time of festival.
- Locations: Genesis 38 references Adullam (verse 12), which is a town in which David builds up an army in 2 Samuel.

In a way, then, the Tamar stories are mirror images of one another. Both are engaged in what we would today call incestuous acts. In Genesis, Tamar saves her husband's family with her trickery. She begins the story in a somewhat powerless position with her pair of dying husbands, but when she takes command of her own story, she is ultimately rewarded. In 2 Samuel, by contrast, Tamar's body is the site of the destruction of her family. She tries to speak up for herself, but to no avail. Rather than *providing* a son to continue the family line, she (indirectly, and through no fault of her own) destroys the firstborn son who would have continued David's line.

## Biblical Genealogies

Today, some people spend time researching their ancestry or having their DNA tested, all to find out more about their family trees. Ancient people were not the only ones consumed by concerns about their genealogies!

The name Tamar appears one more time in the Bible, this time in the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew begins with an account of Jesus' genealogy, naming Jesus as "the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt 1:1). The gospel begins with Abraham and traces Jesus' lineage through David and finally to Joseph, Mary's husband. (Note: the genealogy in Luke 3 does not match the one in Matthew. It begins with his adopted father Joseph and traces his lineage all the way back to Adam, finally naming him "son of God" in verse 38.)

One thing that makes Matthew's genealogy remarkable is its inclusion of four women: Tamar (the one in Genesis), Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of Uriah," who is Bathsheba. In order to understand why these women were included in such a long list of men and seemingly unnecessarily, we might ask what they have in common. All four are thought to be non-Israelites, though Tamar's background is not explicit in Genesis. She may be Aramean or Canaanite, Rahab is a Canaanite, Ruth is a Moabite, and Bathsheba is originally married to a Hittite. In this case, the women's inclusion in the list may highlight the unity of Israelites with Gentiles.

The other, perhaps more interesting, thing that the women have in common is that their somewhat unconventional sexual activities are praised rather than condemned. Tamar, as we have seen, saves Judah's family line (and therefore Jesus', too!) when she tricks him into impregnating her. Rahab may have been a sex worker, but she helps the Israelites capture Jericho. Ruth, as a Moabite, is an unconventional partner for the Israelite Boaz to choose. And Bathsheba commits adultery with David (or, perhaps, is raped by him) but faces no consequences. Their irregular paths to motherhood may be a way for the Gospel of Matthew to show precedence for Jesus being begotten of a virgin.

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