

# Tamar



**Abandoned widow, prostitute, matriarch. Tamar is remembered in the genealogy of Jesus, and yet her actions might seem to contemporary thinkers as underhanded and immoral. Can we see this woman for who she was in her context? What does this story teach us about women in the history of Israel?**

## **Genesis 38.1-11**

It happened at that time that Judah went down from his brothers and settled near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. <sup>2</sup> There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua; he married her and went in to her. <sup>3</sup> She conceived and bore a son; and he named him Er. <sup>4</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son whom she named Onan. <sup>5</sup> Yet again she bore a son, and she named him Shelah. She was in Chezib when she bore him. <sup>6</sup> Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. <sup>7</sup> But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. <sup>8</sup> Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother." <sup>9</sup> But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he 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. <sup>10</sup> What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. <sup>11</sup> 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.

What do you think about the language around marriage and sex in this chapter?

The 'sin of Onan' has lived on in contemporary culture – why does the writer of Genesis 38 depict Onan's death as being due to wickedness? **Possibly reflecting his selfishness, in not being willing to have children in his brother's name and therefore leaving Tamar potentially with no financial security.**

Judah is acting out of fear for his sons – but what do his actions mean for Tamar's fate? **Tamar, when she married Er, was no longer part of her father's household, but Judah's. She is essentially banished into a figurative wilderness as she was only protected under her father as a virgin. The levirate law means that she has a right to marry one of her dead husband's brothers or close relatives, not only to bring children to her dead husband (as this is the only way he receives**

any form of afterlife, in the children he begets through his brothers from beyond the grave), but also for her financial protection. It is possible that Judah is worried that Tamar is some form of witch and therefore responsible for the death of his sons or cursed by a demonic force (see Tobit, for an example of this in the Deuterocanon).

### **Genesis 38.12-26**

In course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died; when Judah's time of mourning was over he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite. <sup>13</sup> When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," <sup>14</sup> she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. <sup>15</sup> When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup> He went over to her at the roadside, and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" <sup>17</sup> He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it." <sup>18</sup> He 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. <sup>19</sup> Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

<sup>20</sup> When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. <sup>21</sup> He asked the townspeople, "Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?" But they said, "No prostitute has been here." <sup>22</sup> So he returned to Judah, and said, "I have not found her; moreover the townspeople said, 'No prostitute has been here.'" <sup>23</sup> Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her."

<sup>24</sup> About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." <sup>25</sup> As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." <sup>26</sup> Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.

Based on what we know about Tamar's position in society, following leaving Judah's household, why is she tricking him? Tamar is now in a similar societal position to that of a prostitute – she is neither a wife nor a virgin. She needs to become pregnant by a member of her husband's family or she will be destitute. Judah has not honoured the levirate law by withholding his youngest son from her.

Why do you think Tamar keeps Judah's staff, signet and cord? These things are markers of exactly with whom she had sex. There is no way for him to deny what occurred while she has these.

What do you think about Judah's decision when he thinks that Tamar has become pregnant by another man? It's possible that he is very keen to have her killed if he still thinks she is some kind of witch or under demonic influences following the deaths of his sons.

Why do you think he never slept with her again? Potentially to limit his breaking of the Levitical law forbidding sex with a daughter in law (Leviticus 18:15). He may also be scared of her, since she managed to trick him into the situation.

### **Genesis 38.27-30**

<sup>27</sup> When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. <sup>28</sup> While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, "This one came out first." <sup>29</sup> But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, "What a breach you have made for yourself!" Therefore he was named Perez. <sup>30</sup> Afterward his brother came out with the crimson thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah.

What is the significance of Tamar giving birth to twins? Much like Rebekah, this makes her a significant matriarch in the history of Israel. Boaz would come from this line.

What do you think this story underlines about the plight of women in Israel's history? Although women are supposed to be protected under the levirate law, we see here how easy it is for men to refuse to uphold their responsibilities. Tamar, like Ruth, is forced to take matters into her own hands in order to survive. While prostitution is seen as a dishonourable occupation, women often had no other choice, and the genealogy of Jesus includes both Tamar and potentially Rahab (although there is some uncertainty as to whether or not it is the same Rahab from Joshua). These women are both seen as being righteous women, Tamar because she was neglected by Judah and more righteous than him, and Rahab because she sheltered the spies.