

TAMAR:
FULFILLING
PURPOSE

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The Christian Bible, like many other religious books, has its own worldview. It presents to readers a world of its own within a culture where the role of women was reduced to a mere child bearing, pleasure providing being. It consists of historical narratives, myths, moral codes, prayers, visions, prophetic writings and revelatory discourses. To be able to understand what is

written in the Bible one must have a clear understanding of its historical context and be open to the occasionally shocking truths. The world within the Bible is not one which provides the kind of comfort critics seek and so many have misused and mishandled its contents to complement their own worldviews. How we interpret the Bible is dependent on many things. There is the world within the text and the world in front of the text. We are often led to believe that our interpretation of the Bible must only derive from the world within the text or the opinions of those in charge of our Wednesday night Bible study sessions. Anything contrary to their opinion is considered an abomination. Nevertheless, the usefulness of the Bible is second to none!

This paper seeks to provide an analysis and background of Genesis 38 and the social context in which Biblical and Theological Studies are necessary, as well as the relevance of the text to these disciplines. In helping to discuss and develop my points I will be citing work done by various writers as well as attempting to bring to life the story of Tamar based on the world in front of the text; my world.

Interruptions are often perturbing, but they are sometimes vital.

Some years ago a couple that my wife and I had come to know told us of one such occasion. The wife knew how upset it made her husband to be interrupted in the middle of a project. Consequently, she walked up to him and stood quietly as he worked happily on a project in the garage. In due time he finished what he was doing and looked up, signalling his wife that it was now permissible to engage him in conversation. Her words took him totally by surprise. Calmly she reported, ‘The house is on fire.’ And it really was!”¹

Genesis 38: 1-30 presents a narrative within a narrative. It interrupts the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in chapter 37 and 39 of the book of Genesis. I suppose the writer’s intention may have been to encourage readers to ignore Tamar’s story and the church’s lack of attention to that passage has proved such. However, the apparent intention of the writer is what has caused many biblical scholars to focus their attention on what had initially seemed like yet another historical account. Genesis 37 was focused on Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers. In chapter 39 we see Joseph again as the main character but this time he is being forced by Potiphar’s wife to have sexual relations with her. Genesis 38 is obviously quite an abrupt interruption of the Joseph cycle. Like some interruptions,

¹ Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Skeleton in Judah’s Closet: Genesis 38: 1-30,” <https://bible.org/book/export/html/116>.

Genesis 38 is, without a doubt, very important to the development of the argument in the book of Genesis. The word 'Genesis' means beginning or origin. The book of Genesis seeks to explain how things got to where they are 'in the beginning'.² Joseph's unfortunate sale into slavery juxtaposes the idea of how the Israelites ended up in Israel. Chapter 39 explains why the Egyptian sojourn was so important. Chapter 38 provides the setting against which the innocence of Joseph in chapter 39 stands out the more plainly. Genesis 39 and following describe the price which Joseph had to pay for the sins of his brothers. Chapter 38 suggests some of the consequences of the sin of Joseph's sale which Judah suffered.

The story in Genesis 38:1-30 highlights the plight of a widow whose determination, resilience and bravery is of no comparison to any other woman in the Bible. Tamar became a member of Judah's family when she was chosen by Judah as his first son Er's wife. For reasons unknown to the reader, Er was considered wicked in the Lord's sight and so the Lord put him to death. Tamar was then given to Onan, Er's younger brother, to produce offspring for him. However, Onan refused to have children with Tamar so he practiced *coitus interruptus*. Onan's action was seen as wicked in the Lord's sight and so he was killed. Judah's youngest and only living son Shelah was too young to marry Tamar and so Judah decided to send her back to her father's house to live as a widow until Shelah became a man. Oblivious to Judah's intentions, Tamar did as she was told believing all that Judah had said. Judah, it would appear, had no such intention!

Tamar's story as is told in Genesis 38: 1-30 cannot be left to mere opinion when attempting to interpret it. The actions of all the

²Heb, *berishith*.

characters and the roles they each play in the story would be misinterpreted if the historical context of the time is not put into play. The world in front of the text would suggest that Tamar was being passed from bed to bed while the world within the text suggests that this was quite normal. The culture of the society then made 'special' provisions for the widows. They were to be taken care of. In Genesis 38:8 Judah says to his son Onan, "Sleep with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother." According to the levirate law on marriage, a man is required to marry the childless widow of his brother to produce a child who will carry on his deceased brother's name so that the deceased brother's name will not be forgotten. Deuteronomy 25:7-10 states that if the brother of the deceased refuses to marry the widow, the widow must go to the city gate and inform the elders that her brother-in-law refuses to marry her. If the brother still refuses to marry the widow after the elders have spoken to him, the widow is required to loosen or remove the brother-in-law's shoes, spit in front of his face and say, "So shall be done to a man who refuses to build up his brother's house." In Tamar's case, none of this was done according to the law.

The story of Judah and Tamar is a uniquely complex narrative. It is laced with aspects of modern day drama that include issues such as morality, sex, justice and the like. On the first reading of the text, one may conclude Judah's treatment of Tamar as wise and Tamar's actions as unreasonably deceptive for the most part. From the world in front of the text I see nothing but selfless determination. In Genesis 38, Tamar is presented as a woman scorned. To have been the wife of two men who died while married to her is quite an unfortunate situation. It was so unfortunate that Judah was determined to rid his family of such a 'disease.' Judah was the law. He acted in accordance to his own rules rather than principle. The

levirate law on marriage demanded that Tamar be given to Judah's only remaining son. Like the society then, the law in many societies does nothing but provide comfort for victims. Tamar was tricked into resting safely in the comfort of the law. When the comfortable no longer provided comfort, she acted.

It may have been very easy for Tamar and any other woman in that society to muster up enough courage to take revenge but only Tamar could have played both victim and victor. Tamar's actions should not be reduced to the mere taking of revenge. She should not be placed in the category of mean spirited women whose lives provide entertainment for the devil. She was no devil's advocate. Her actions were not selfish but rather selfless. Selfish motives would have meant revenge. Selfish motives would have meant giving up. Selfish motives would have meant dishonouring her family by living the life of a prostitute. Selfish motives would have meant taking the easy way out. Nothing about Tamar's actions proved to be an easy way out. I see a selfless woman who was determined to fulfill her duty as a woman and as a wife in Judah's family. I can almost hear her thoughts as she waited for Judah to pass by. She calculated the cost and with sweating palms she affirmed, "If I perish, I perish!"

Vocation

I am a graduate of the Jamaica Theological Seminary programme, the BA in General Studies with an emphasis in Biblical and Theological Studies. Students pursuing a degree in General Studies would have already completed at least three (3) years of tertiary education. Among these persons would be teachers and nurses. At the end of the course, students with a BA General Studies would be equipped to play an active part in various ministries of the church as well as integrate previous studies to contribute to the development

of self, community and society. As the name suggests, General Studies does not focus on a specific area but also incorporates studies in Psychology, Philosophy and Ethical Thinking. These courses enable students to advance the kingdom of God in a more practical manner.

When enough is not enough

Biblical and Theological studies are disciplines that are very useful in the Jamaican society. They provide an avenue for understanding the nature of individuals and what is it that motivates them to behave as they do. Theology refers to the study of the nature of God and religious belief. An in-depth study of the Bible and of God will enable individuals the privilege of helping to be fruitful labourers in God's Kingdom. The kingdom of God is not a place above the clouds and it neither should be viewed as a home for the righteous. It is a place where the oppressed are favoured. It is a place wherein the poor are made to feel rich. It is here, among us. Below are some examples of the social contexts in which both disciplines are necessary.

Tamar's story highlights many of the social issues that currently plague the Jamaican society. The 'scales' of the justice system are apparently never balanced. The poor are almost always left to suffer as victims while the wealthy and their money continue to exert power over all. They are the law, just as Judah was the law. The law was only the law as Judah saw fit. Like Tamar, the oppressed in our society are continuously being told to roll over and die, especially when attempts are made toward changing the status quo. We must

never be content with what currently exists but rather strive to be the change. Tamar took the “If I perish, I perish” stance. We should too!

We may not live in a patriarchal society as Tamar did but the women of Jamaica do a fairly good job of marginalizing themselves. The very thing that Tamar and women like her stood against is the very thing Jamaican women, by virtue of how they treat themselves, beg to have. They subject themselves to all sorts of emotional abuse in the name of love. They adorn themselves as ‘temple prostitutes’ and position themselves at ‘city gates’ with no real sense of purpose but self gratification. They want to be treated fairly but live lives in total contradiction.

Identity and prominence is an issue that has been on the society’s agenda quite a lot in recent times. There is an ideological war raging among young people on who should wear crowns and who should be cleaning the crowns. Everybody wants to be top. Advertisements on the television and in print encourage the masking of worthlessness with fame and ‘bling’. No real emphasis is placed on hard work. Everybody wants to fit perfectly into lifestyles that continue to elude. We want to belong. We want to be different. We want to be trendsetters. Religious groups, television companies and celebrities are capitalizing on the opportunity. Our newspapers are flooded with discussions and debates on the usefulness or lack of usefulness of the church and/or Christianity. Programs such as Religious Hardtalk highlight the various religious groups in our society. People want answers. They want to belong. They want to rebel. What better way to assert my uniqueness than to go against the grain? The content of Biblical and Theological Studies will equip students to deal with such issues. It provides answers for the many questions for which Jamaica’s youth seek.

Pregnant with purpose

Whether we believe it or not, we were all given enough to sustain us and more than enough to fulfill our God-given purposes. All Tamar had was her femininity. The odds were against her. Her society was against her species. The law was against her. Genesis 38 provides the sort of encouragement ministry students need. While we may not be always aware of God's plans, we are still very much a part of the cast. God will use us to achieve His purpose by any means necessary. It is on us to fulfill our duty to our families and to society. Our determination to do that is confirmation that we are fit for even bigger feats. In David Runcorn's book *Choice, Desire and the Will of God: What More Do You Want*, we are compelled to view God not as a strict ruler but rather as a Creative Being who may very well require us to complete His will by unconventional means. We need more individuals who must take the stance Tamar took. If we perish, we perish. The responsibility was placed on Tamar to be the change and that she did! Simply assessing societal challenges is not enough. We must be the change. We too are pregnant with purpose. Whether the pregnancy came about as a result of an unfortunate situation or by choice, we are to use that for the betterment of our society.

Conclusion

Tamar's unfortunate situation brought about hope for all. She represents the oppressed, the disenfranchised and the hopeless. Her pregnancy gave birth to promise. Her bravery, determination and selflessness have earned her a place among the few women in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1). Tamar was left to 'disappear' but instead she fought to be heard. Like Tamar, we too

must fight. We are to use all that we have been given to advance the kingdom of God.

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