

# Damned If You Do and Damned If You Don't

## TAMAR— A FEMINIST FOREMOTHER

GENESIS 38: 6-26

by Randy L. Maddox

Christian feminists face a complex dilemma. On the one hand, we have been nurtured in a faith which entails a solid commitment to Scripture. This heritage is central to our self-understanding. It has been the source of frequent comfort, motivation, and direction for our lives. At the same time, we have become painfully aware of how often Scripture is used to justify, indeed recommend, our male-normative society with its many oppressive features. So what are we to do? Are we faced with an option of being *either biblical or feminist*? Or is it possible to see our concern for overcoming the oppression of patriarchy as consistent with our commitment to Scripture? Indeed, could we argue the stronger point that an egalitarian reading of Scripture is more faithful to the biblical message than the patriarchal readings that have dominated Christian tradition?

This latter claim is clearly the implication of the scriptural interpretations of feminist scholars like Phyllis Trible (see especially *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*). She repeatedly argues that the traditional patriarchal readings of Scripture are more the result of imposing



cultural presuppositions on Scripture than of carefully exposing it. By contrast, she presents detailed expositions of passages like Genesis 1-3 to show the appropriateness of an egalitarian reading of such passages.

Demonstrating adequate egalitarian readings of other parts of Scripture, including "problem passages," helps resolve the dilemma of Christian feminists. This study is devoted to one such problem passage.

The Judah/Tamar story in Genesis 38 has long been recognized as a problematic passage by biblical exegetes. In the first place, it is problematic because it seems to interrupt the otherwise smooth flow of the Joseph narrative, which begins in Genesis 37 and runs through the rest of the book. At most, it is seen as satisfying a genealogical function. Even a sensitive interpreter like Walter Brueggemann concludes in his commentary on Genesis that "it is difficult to know in what context it may be of value for theological exposition" (p. 308).

The Judah/Tamar story would appear to be even more problematic for Christian feminists because it is permeated with examples of the oppressive patriarchy of early Hebrew culture. Consider the following elements of the story.



We first meet Tamar when she is acquired (*sic*, v. 6) as a wife for Er, Judah's eldest son. As a result of some apparent wickedness, Er dies before any sons result from this union. It is not mentioned whether there are any daughters, but even if there were, they would be irrelevant. The point of the "levirate law" (cf. Deut. 25:5-10), which is at issue in this situation, is that every Jewish husband should be guaranteed a *son* to carry on his family name. If he dies before siring a son, then his brother is required to function in his place until such a son is obtained. Thus Judah commands his second son to have intercourse with Tamar and produce a male heir for Er.

Note how it is simply assumed that Tamar will participate in this union because her former husband's memory is at stake. Her own feelings or desires are given no consideration. Indeed, the only legal recourse given her as a wife is the right to dishonor her brother-in-law if he is unwilling to perform the duties of surrogate sire. There is no provision that would allow her to decline the "honor" of submitting to sexual intercourse with him solely for the purpose of producing a

male child. To be sure, it is assumed that she will benefit from this action as well, but only because her legal and social status are dependent upon a required relationship to a male—either father, husband, or son.

Clearly the levirate system itself was an oppressive (because involuntary) expression of a patriarchal society. However, in Tamar's case this oppressiveness is compounded. Onan, Judah's second son proved unwilling to sire an heir for his brother, perhaps because he hoped to inherit a portion of Er's property himself. That does not mean he turned down the opportunity of sexual involvement with Tamar. Rather, he simply practiced premature withdrawal to prevent impregnation. As a result of this failure to fulfill his obligation and this abuse of Tamar, God puts Onan to death as well.

Legally, Judah is now obligated to order his third son to fulfill the responsibilities of brother-in-law to Tamar. However, he refuses to do so; undoubtedly because he feared he would also lose this last son and thus *his own* memory and honor. So, out of concern for himself, Judah deprives Tamar of the little protection which the levirate system provides for her legal and social status. There is no record that Tamar either felt competent to or was allowed to exercise her legal recourse to force Judah's last son to fulfill his duty. Rather, she is returned to her father's house as a childless widow (cf. Lev. 22:13) because, of course, she must be in relation to some male.

At this point Tamar takes matters into her own hands—something that neither law nor custom would approve of. Seeing that Judah is determined not to follow levirate law, she decides to obtain her needed male child by other means. Disguising herself as a cultic prostitute, she tricks Judah into sleeping with her himself—all the time unaware of her identity—and impregnating her. By this means she succeeds in obtaining *two* sons. Surely this is a double blessing!



Unfortunately, the story does not end that neatly. When Judah is informed that his widowed daughter-in-law is pregnant out of wedlock, he commands that she be burned alive in public!

There are several aspects of this sentence that are notable and once again demonstrate the oppressiveness of early Hebrew patriarchal society. In the first place, there is no trial. Tamar is never given a chance to present her side of the story. Rather, the decision of the male family head is taken without question.

In the second place, it is ironic that Judah claims the right to exercise judgment in this matter since he has sent Tamar back to her father's house. Even though he felt little compunction about dishonoring her by denying her his third son, he is outraged that she would dishonor the memory of his other sons by playing the prostitute.

It is also significant that there is no attempt to locate the *man* who was involved in this illegal act, even though both parties should have been held responsible, as is made clear in the later Levitical law codes (Lev. 20:10).

Finally, the form of punishment called for is somewhat surprising. In the later formalized law codes the penalty for adultery is stoning (Lev. 20:10). The only case where public burning is prescribed is that of a priest's daughter who commits adultery, because of the special sacredness attached to the priesthood (Lev. 21:9). It is interesting that Judah here places himself and his sons in a category of sacredness which would later be reserved for the priestly class. Tamar must be burned!

To be sure, this public conflagration never took place. The master stroke of Tamar's plan prevented it. She informed Judah that *he* was the man with whom she had intercourse and that she could prove it. Therefore, if Judah pursued the case against her, he would simultaneously be indicting himself. Given this impasse, Judah relented. Indeed, he proclaimed that, in this matter, Tamar had acted more righteously than he!

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What is the Christian feminist to make of this story? Not only is the incident itself disturbing in its oppressiveness, it also demonstrates that the Old Testament laws it reflects are thoroughly patriarchal in both intent and result. If these laws are normative for Christian life and practice, in either their original form or in terms of their contemporary equivalent, then the possibility of a biblical feminism is ruled out. The feminist concern for egalitarian human relationships would be contrary to Scripture.

However, there is an alternative which can be argued to be more in keeping with both the teaching and the phenomena of Scripture. It is a standard principle of interpretation that one should be careful to distinguish between that which is descriptive and that which is prescriptive in Scripture. Since the goal of the Bible is to present *both* the situation of human sinfulness and the solution to that situation, there are many sections of Scripture that are devoted to describing sinful human actions and institutions—such as David's act of adultery and murder, or the corrupt practices of the animal dealers in the temple. These sections or aspects of Scripture are Word of God in that they faithfully and penetratingly reveal the subtleness of human sinfulness. However, they should not be taken as normative for Christian life and thought. Rather, they describe that which Christianity is intended to unveil as sinful and to bring deliverance from.

In this light, the crucial question is

whether the patriarchalism present in the Judah/Tamar story and the Old Testament laws it involves is *descriptive* of a form of human sinfulness or *prescriptive* of God's will for human relationships. I believe that a careful reading of Genesis 1-3 has shown that such patriarchalism is indeed *descriptive*. Such oppressiveness is one of the results of human sinfulness which is pervasive in both the biblical world and our own, but which Scripture ultimately condemns and calls to be transformed. As such, the Judah/Tamar story must be seen as a particularly poignant description of the oppressive results of the sinful institutions of patriarchalism. As Word of God, the story's function is to be a consciousness-raiser.

But is that all? Is there no positive Word of God in this account? Indeed there is! On reflection it becomes clear that if there is a hero in the Judah/Tamar story—i.e., one who represents God's concern for justice and Shalom—it is Tamar. It is she who takes the initiative in obtaining the justice which Judah had denied her, even though she knows that it could mean her death.

It would be easy to miss the significance of this action by getting into a debate about the morality of the particular means of response Tamar chose. In reality, it was probably the only alternative left her. Rather, the truly significant point about Tamar's action against Judah is that it involved an implicit claim to the self-worth and self-determination that society had denied her. No wonder they wanted to burn her!

Seen in this light, Judah's confession that Tamar had acted in a manner more righteous than himself takes on a very specific significance. Tamar's desperate act of protest against the oppressiveness of patriarchal Hebrew culture had brought Judah, who exemplified that culture, to a piercing—though no doubt temporary—awareness of the sinfulness of such a society. Judah speaks to us the Word of God when he recognizes the righteousness of God in Tamar's "proto-

feminist" claim to worth and dignity. Moreover, God would later add a self-validation to Tamar's act by weaving it into the tapestry of divine grace and human response which prepared the way for the Messiah, who was to come in order that all such sinful oppression might be overcome (cf. Matt. 1:3).

Does Tamar thereby become a model for Christian feminists? Clearly not in any detailed sense. In keeping with the provisional character of the Old Covenant, Tamar at best calls for justice within the patriarchal system, not the total overthrow of the patriarchal system. Those who are sensitive to the more radical call of the New Covenant for a people who embody a truly new life which is free from the oppressive hierarchies of sinful human existence must go much further than Tamar. However, her courage to stand for herself in the midst of a society that neither wanted nor could understand such a stand surely qualifies Tamar as a Feminist Foremother. May there be many more of her kind in our day!

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## Resources

Alter, Robert, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 3-12. Alter analyzes the Judah/Tamar story from the perspective of Hebrew literature and makes clear connections between it and the Joseph narrative.

Bilizekian, Gilbert, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984). This book, along with Mary Ann Evans's, attempts to provide an egalitarian reading of Scripture as a whole.

Brueggeman, Walter, *Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982).

Evans, Mary Ann, *Woman in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983).

Trible, Phyllis, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984).

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