

# The God of Widows: Tamar's Story

*John Pople*

*She is more righteous than I (Gen 38:26)*

God is the God of widows. So much so, in fact, that if you are not a widow, He is not your God. That statement requires some explanation, clearly, but it highlights the pinnacle of importance which widowhood holds.

## Enforced Widowhood

Biblically, we first learn a widow's Story from Tamar. Her Story is a brutal one (Gen 38). Tamar was married to Judah's firstborn Er, who was a wicked man. Tamar would have had little to no say in this marriage arrangement, so this does not imply that Tamar is wicked, or a poor judge of character; although it may gently imply that Judah is not a great father. Judah has married a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and God later forbids intermarriage with Canaanites (Deut 7:1-3), so it may be the Canaanite culture which influences the moral devolvement of the family. We're not told the explicit nature of Er's wickedness, merely that God releases Tamar from it by explicitly killing him.

Responsibility now falls on Er's brother Onan to marry Tamar, take care of her, and provide a son to keep his dead brother's lineage alive (Deut 25:5-10). In the secular world this is termed 'Levirate marriage,' from the Latin 'levir': a husband's brother. God's purpose of the law is spiritually deep: it enables the surviving brother to perform a type of resurrection. Onan and Tamar's son would be named after the deceased brother Er, and inherit his lineage and fortune. This 'resurrects' the dead brother, albeit at the financial expense of the surviving brother, because he foregoes the dead brother's inheritance that would otherwise have been his. The law acts as a

perfect filter between the godly and the materialistic, because the desire to see one's dead brother raised back to life – at any cost to oneself – is a good definition of the Christ-like heart.

Sadly for Tamar, Onan isn't a godly man. He refuses to sire a son with Tamar, most likely so he can keep all of Er's money, preventing her from conceiving by always withdrawing himself during intercourse. For this, God kills him. Historically, Onan's crime has been misinterpreted as purely sexual, i.e. the selfishness of non-procreative sex, but there is a far deeper and more gravitous crime at hand. His deeper crime is spiritual. Onan had the opportunity to perform the first resurrection – albeit a symbolic one – but squandered the chance. Refusing to grant life to a dead brother is the absolute opposite of what Christ would do, and therefore a spiritual crime of considerable magnitude. This is why God kills him – not because God has an obscure peccadillo for enforced conception during intercourse. We shouldn't assume God kills in furious anger, either. Christ is life; anti-Christ is death. Onan chooses the role of anti-Christ, and God permits Onan's free will to claim the death he has selected.

One brother remains: Shelah. But Judah tells Tamar that any wedding to his youngest son needs to wait until he is older. Judah is lying. In truth he's foolishly fearful that either Tamar has killed his sons, or God has killed them because of Tamar. The root problem is Judah simply can't tell right from wrong. He's raised two sons so wicked that God directly intervenes to kill them and, once they are dead, he suspects the cause of death lies with innocent Tamar! Judah has no intention of permitting the marriage with Shelah; Tamar is removed from Judah's household entirely and forced to live as a widow under the care of her own father. This is a perilous situation, because she is highly likely to outlive her father, and outlive Judah, at which point she will be destitute and at risk of literally starving to death. This doesn't seem to concern Judah.

## Deceiving the Deceiver

Tamar, isolated and alone, plots a course for her own survival. It utilizes deception and prostitution, which we might not otherwise laud, but, as we have argued, she is in desperate straits imposed by the injustice of others, as Esther Fuchs also notes.<sup>1</sup> Tamar disguises herself with a veil and poses as a prostitute, waiting for Judah to pass by at Enaim. Enaim means “Twin

---

<sup>1</sup> Esther Fuchs, “Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism,” in “Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship,” Ed. Adela Y. Collins, 1985, p137

Wells,”<sup>2</sup> and the choice of location may be deliberate poignance – even pointed riposte – from Tamar. Israel’s patriarchs historically met their spouses at a well (e.g. Isaac: Gen 24:42-44 and Jacob: Gen 29:1-12),<sup>3</sup> yet Tamar has been unjustly prevented marriage by Judah. Is the “twin wells” location a jab from Tamar to Judah about the two disastrous marriages he has supplied her with his two wicked sons?

Judah, now bereaved of his own wife, is drawn to Tamar’s lure. He can’t recognize her behind the veil, and they negotiate a kid goat as payment for sex. The tools of Tamar’s deception are a goat and a garment and, if we’re observant, we see deep irony. The Biblical account immediately preceding Tamar’s Story shows Judah deceiving his father Jacob into believing his son Joseph was dead, using a garment and a goat. Judah ripped Joseph’s garment and dipped it in the kid goat’s blood to fake Joseph’s death (Gen 37:26-30). So Tamar is using the same tools to deceive Judah that Judah used to deceive his father Jacob. And there’s more! A generation earlier, Judah’s father Jacob deceived *his* father Isaac (who was blind) with a goat and a garment too. Jacob made a ‘garment’ out of the goatskin to impersonate his brother Esau, who was hairier, and thus steal the family blessing (Gen 27:1-17). Deception begets deception begets deception. And now the deceiver Judah, son of the deceiver Jacob, is deceived by his daughter-in-law, and with the very same tools: a goat and a garment.

Tamar has thought this through.

To secure down-payment for the prostitution (as Judah, understandably, isn’t carrying a goat with him), Tamar takes Judah’s seal and staff. These are no small items. Judah’s seal is his legal identity with which he signs parchments, and his staff is his symbol of authority in Israel (c.f. Gen 49:10, Ex 4:17). Again, this is no coincidence. Judah has deprived Tamar of her legal identity and authority by forcing her to live as a widow in her father’s house, waiting for a marriage he plans never to allow. Tamar responds symmetrically, stripping Judah of the same authorities. These are highly specific moves from our Leading Lady, laced with irony, by which

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, “Genesis,” 1996, p220

<sup>3</sup> This gives a potentially beautiful new take on the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (John 4). “Five husbands you have had already and your current man is not your husband,” says Jesus, not judgmentally, but provoking her to assess her life’s achievement. “Isn’t it time for a new Groom altogether?” he is asking. And he does so at the well’s edge where she draws water for him – Jacob’s well no less! (John 4:6) – in the same style of courtship, this time spiritually, as happened for Isaac and Jacob so many years before.

she finally gains a hold over Judah, to secure a survivable future. Tamar then slips away from the area, meaning Judah cannot find her to pay with the promised kid.

Tamar conceives from the prostitution and Judah, and unaware his own immorality is responsible, he self-righteously condemns her to death. His sentence is immediate (and illegal!) He sees no need for the encumbrance of witnesses, trial or evidence. The hypocrisy of abusive patriarchal privilege positively reeks from the text. But Tamar is cunning: she produces Judah's seal and staff to name and shame him as the fathering culprit, and with it, a final symmetry. The language she uses to ask Judah to identify the *true* evidence of his immorality is identical to that used by Judah to ask Jacob to identify the *fake* evidence he presented of Joseph's death.

Judah to Jacob: "We have found this [bloodied coat]. *Examine it* (hāker-nā') to see whether it is your son's robe." (Gen 37:32)

Tamar to Judah: "Please *determine* (hāker-nā') whose these are – the signet and cord, and staff." (Gen 38:25)

Whether this match is Tamar's intelligent construction drawn from her knowledge of Judah's family history, or whether it's added by the Bible's Author, we are not told, but either way the comparison brings a final, chilling indictment on the patriarch's head.

Judah, finally displaying some long-overdue godliness, openly confesses he is the one at fault.

*"She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah."* (Gen 38:26)

It seems likely Judah made amends to Tamar by thereafter allowing her to marry Shelah, since Shelah is later known to name his first son Er (1Chr 4:21) after his deceased brother, implying that the Levirate law of compassionate redemption was ultimately followed.

But in the immediate context, Tamar has prevailed and, with no-one on Earth willing to defend her, has saved her own life.

## The Scarlet Cord

Tamar's story is not quite complete. Even though she has survived Judah's maltreatment, severe damage is already done. By law, the desperate acts to which Judah's selfish fears have driven her bans her family from the Lord's assembly for ten generations (Deut 23:2). But Tamar

will have a lineage; indeed God rewards her with the lineage of Messiah! And this lineage starts with a very unusual birth:

*When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a scarlet thread, saying, "This one came out first." 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. Afterward his brother came out with the scarlet thread on his hand; and he was named Zerah. (Gen 38:27-30)*

The boy who reached out first had a scarlet cord tied around him by the midwife, and was named Scarlet (Zeh'-rakh). The other boy overtook his twin, in a way displacing his rightful firstborn position. This breakout offence against his brother landed him the name Breakout (Peh'-rets) yet it is he, Perez, whom God selects for Messiah's line. In other words, God sets up a special exception, signaled by the scarlet cord, that the offensive appropriation by the second son of what rightfully belonged to the firstborn earns His sanctioned approval. Of course in this instance the pattern is enacted by two infants: both parties being innocently oblivious of their own actions and fate. But the pattern is important, which is why it is encoded in scriptures for centuries to follow, to earn our careful attention.

I contend we're given these details because they form the spiritual pattern for how God's own nation Israel will be born. Many years after Tamar there will come another midwife, Rahab, and she will tie a scarlet cord around Canaanite Jericho, the indigenous people of the Promised Land. In human terms these Canaanites are the rightful (firstborn) owners of the land: the First Nation people, if you will. But another people will break out against them and displace them. And though it may not sit well with human concepts of justice, it will be the invaders committing that breach against their brothers whom God will identify as His people, having sanctioned this action via the symbol of the scarlet cord. Tamar's birth of twins prefigures Israel's birth into the Promised Land.

Ultimately, what do we learn from Tamar's Story? At the simplest level, we see that a selfish man does not take care of widows. What's particularly shocking is that, of Jacob's twelve sons, Judah is probably the godliest – he is certainly the one blessed to host the lineage of Messiah – yet

even he treats the widow with suspicion and contempt. The widow's situation, with only human men to defend them, is desperate indeed.

## The God of Widows

God sees this, as He sees all. King David perceives the Father's care for widows and preaches this truth in his psalms.

*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. (Ps 68:5)*

God proscribes that the immigrant, the orphan and the widow must be protected and cared for by anyone who wishes to be considered His people.

*"When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow." (Deut 24:19)*

In fact, God's opinion on this topic is uncompromisingly stern. He rules that care of the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow is rewarded with remaining in His Promised Land forever, indeed it is a condition of ever seeing it.

*"If you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow... then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever." (Jer 7:6-7)*

The obverse implication is ominous. Anyone who *refuses* to provide for the immigrant, the orphan, or the widow, will be rejected from God's Promised Land, i.e. His Kingdom. This forms a salutary message for the modern Christian, especially those ensconced in societies of uncapped and uncontrolled capitalist materialism, where poverty is necessarily sharply enhanced, biting ever deeper into the socially disadvantaged.

God is the God of widows.

## The Spiritual Widow

Paul expounds the widow motif in a fascinating way.

*By law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. (Rom 7:2-3)*

It's strange that Paul walks through this seemingly obvious argument. It's also highly unusual that he stages a hypothetical argument from the female perspective. But the female perspective is essential, given what he's saying.

His spiritual point is elegant, saying, everyone is born married, spiritually speaking. And everyone is born as a married *wife*, not a husband, because the Husband is the head of house (per Paul's contextual culture), and everyone is born subservient to this Husband. This Husband is Materialistic Self-Service (in old English: "Mammon") and he rules every human. If you want to marry another Spiritual Head and lead a different life, you can't, because you're already married. Another marriage *while your husband is still alive* is adultery.

But there is hope. Your husband, your own Materialism, must die, which will make you a widow. Only then are you released from the bond of marriage ("till death do us part") and free to marry again. Then can you be engaged to Messiah, take on a new life, and become part of the Heavenly Bride (Rom 7:1-6, my paraphrase)

This explains the aspect of death in baptism. We implore God to kill the former husband, to whom we were born married, and become widows. If we are not widows, then God, who is the God of Widows, is not our God. Thus, from Tamar's tragic tale grows our introduction to the gospel hope. Once widowed, God becomes our God, and we experience the freedom to seek a new and better Groom.