

## TAMAR TIMES THREE

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Women named Tamar appear three times in the Bible. The first two are primary characters in important stories. The third appears as a mere mention in biblical history – or is she something more? Is she a poignant reminder of the second Tamar? Is she a reference to past events that would have been immediately recognized by all who had heard and remembered the oral history that must have been repeated for generations by the bards and sages who preceded the times of final codification and writing of the Israelite saga?

If so, then the third Tamar was and is a reminder that female sexuality is an important actor on the biblical stage. This actor has two faces: the face of woman as heroine and the face of woman as victim. The first Tamar is surely heroine. In fact, without that Tamar biblical history might have come to a grinding halt.

The tale of the first Tamar is told in Genesis 38. She was a childless widow, whose husband and his two brothers were the sons of Judah. Judah was a son of Leah and the patriarch Jacob, a half-brother of Joseph and the eponym of one of the 12 tribes of Israel. According to ancient Israelite law, a surviving son of Judah must take Tamar, his brother's widow, as his bride. The probable reasons for this law of Levirate Marriage (Deut. 25:5-6) were to assure that property remained within the family of the dead husband and to offer the widow the continued protection of a husband and of the family into which she had first married. Moreover, the intent was that the new marriage would result in children. However, Tamar's second husband, Onan, *spilt his seed upon the ground* and died, perhaps as punishment for refusing his duty to propagate the family line. Judah, perhaps fearing that Tamar was a bringer of death, the ultimate bad luck, to his children, failed in his promise to present his one remaining son to Tamar as a new husband.

This first Tamar is desperate for a family. Judah himself is a widower, and hence an available man within the family of Jacob. So, Tamar devises a plan

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whereby she will seduce her father-in-law. She masquerades as a veiled prostitute, and appears before him on the roadside. The description of this prostitute is of great interest. In the biblical text, two different words for prostitute are used in the narrative. The second of these words (Gen. 38:21) contains within it the Hebrew root for "holy." Many translations now accept the implication of this word and describe Tamar's guise as that of a "holy prostitute," or a temple or cult prostitute. In other words, Tamar is masquerading not merely as a woman of the street but as a figure well known in the pagan world; a prostitute with whom intercourse becomes part of pagan worship. Thus, for Judah to lie with her is much more than a sin of lust. It is representative of the greatest sin an Israelite could perform; consorting not merely with a pagan but in a way that implies worship of pagan gods. No wonder many earlier translators failed to describe Tamar as other than "prostitute." Even the Talmud, which recognizes<sup>1</sup> the disturbing nature of this tale of seduction, fails to acknowledge the implication of the special word used to describe Tamar's disguise.

Judah promises Tamar a kid for her services. But the kid must be sent to her afterwards, so Tamar demands that Judah leave with her, as a guarantee of his pledge, his personal seal and his staff. In accordance with her plan, Tamar becomes pregnant as a result of this encounter. Judah's emissary tries to bring her the promised kid and regain the tokens of his pledge, but the prostitute has disappeared from the neighborhood. Tamar, undisguised, is still present and found to be pregnant. Her swelling belly brings the charge of unlawful intercourse and she is brought to a trial whose verdict may be death. At the trial, Judah demands her death, for he does not recognize her as the veiled prostitute and sees her only as a defiled daughter-in-law. Tamar now puts the rest of her plan into action. She presents Judah's seal and staff and challenges him to remember their assignation. He recognizes his own guilt, and absolves her of all culpability. He acknowledges his failure to provide her with the husband to which she was entitled. She retires to wait the birth of her child.

Tamar's brother-in-law and father-in-law had disobeyed the law that offered her the chance to secure a family and the protections which that implied. Tamar outwitted them. She used her sexual attractions to obtain that family. The rabbis of the Talmud, perhaps by avoiding acknowledgment of the pagan

aspect of Judah's seduction, provide her with an excuse for her behavior. They tell us that one may excuse a bad act performed for a good cause.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in this talmudic passage, they also tell us that such an act is preferable to performing a required good act – a *mitzvah* – if while doing the latter one has a bad intention in mind; for example, the intention of garnering the admiration of others rather than of performing the act for its own sake.

All this notwithstanding, what makes the clever Tamar a heroine of Judaism? She is a heroine because from her union with Judah comes her son Perez, and from the line of Perez comes King David (I Chron. 2:4-16; Ruth 4:17-21) and the founding of the Kingdom of Israel that for a brief while was to encompass all 12 tribes. It is David who establishes Jerusalem as the capital of the new nation and it is David's son Solomon who builds the first Temple within Jerusalem's walls. The importance of Tamar is thereby established without question.

Unlike the first Tamar, the second Tamar is not a heroine. She is a victim. But curiously, and perhaps to create a deliberate resonance with her namesake and the resultant Davidic line, this second Tamar appears in the middle of the story of David, in II Samuel 13. She is a daughter of King David and, among his many other children, Absalom is her full brother and Amnon is her half-brother. Amnon finds his beautiful sister irresistible. She, like the first Tamar, is the object of male lust, but in this instance it is not a lust that she encourages. When Amnon approaches her, she does not refuse him outright but she does refuse him the immediate gratification that he demands. She tells him to wait and to approach their father David instead. Surely, she says, he will give me to you. This peculiar description of sexual mores – brother-and-sister marriage in the Davidic court – led the rabbis of the Talmud to discuss the case of the second Tamar, just as irregular sexual behavior led them to discuss the case of the first Tamar. The rabbis tell us that the second Tamar was not the child of a legitimate marriage, but rather the child of one of David's concubines.<sup>3</sup> For some of the rabbis, marriage between children of the same father appears to be excusable if there were different mothers, one of whom was not a legitimate wife.

In any case, Amnon refuses Tamar's request. He cannot wait. He cannot contain himself. He rapes her. In the story, Tamar then assumes a sort of state of mourning and disappears from the biblical stage.

But Amnon's half-brother Absalom, the most beloved of David's sons, was also filled with love for Tamar. Absalom's love was a pure one, unsullied by lust; the love of a brother for a favorite sister. He cannot bear the thought of the crime which his brother Amnon has committed. So Absalom seeks revenge and has his brother murdered. Absalom himself is ultimately killed as the result of a power struggle with his father; killed against David's wishes by those whose job it is to protect the King even from his own progeny. Some commentators consider the loss of his beloved son Absalom as a punishment for David's past sin of causing the death of Bathsheba's husband in order to have her for himself.<sup>4</sup> But was not Absalom also deserving of punishment for causing his brother's death? Clearly, the murder of his brother is part of the moral and physical unraveling of the Davidic line, and clearly this was catalyzed by the victimization of the second Tamar.

But what of the third Tamar? She is so inconsequential that the Talmud makes no mention of her. Have the rabbis missed the point of her inclusion in the Bible? I think so, because she is none other than a child of that very Absalom who so violently avenged the rape of her namesake (II Sam. 14:27). Is this repetition of the name merely a coincidence? We will never know. But for me her name represents the attempt of Absalom to preserve the memory of his ruined sister and to remember her as a pure child. As such, the last Tamar may have served as a reminder, to those who knew their oral history so well, of the Tamar stories that preceded her. For them, the last Tamar must have rekindled all the memories associated with the stories of both her namesakes. For us, the last Tamar, through her name, serves as a reminder of the two faces of woman, represented in the Tanakh by her two predecessors; woman as heroine and woman as victim.

#### NOTES

1. Talmud Bavli Nazir 23b.
2. Talmud Bavli Nazir 23b; saying of R. Nahman b. Isaac.
3. Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 21a, comments of R. Judah.
4. Talmud Bavli Yoma 22b.