

# EVERY WOMAN IN THE BIBLE

## TAMAR & POTIPHAR'S WIFE.

(Genesis 38:6, 11, 13, &24)

(Genesis 39:7-9, 12, & 19).

**Date:** About 1850 B.C.

**Name :** Tamar (TAY-mur: "palm tree")

**Greatest**

**Accomplishment:** She became the mother of Perez, through whose line

David and Jesus Christ came.

### 'S ROLE IN SCRIPTURE:

Tamar's life story: The events centering on Tamar's life are quite confusing and intolerable according to today's moral standards, her actions were consistent with the standards of morality prevailing in the primitive era in which she lived.

She was one of the Bible's best examples of the levirate marriage law. This type of practice is authorized in the Old Testament law, but clearly was a custom long-practiced in the ancient Middle East. To protect the line of a married man who died childless, his closest relative would impregnate his wife. Any son born of this union would be considered the son of the childless husband and would inherit not only any property but also his name and identity. The Old Testament here gives us a most graphic picture of how a quick-witted widow of early Israel protected herself and her family rights.

Onan (Er's brother) was unwilling to fulfill the duty assigned him by his father. Whenever he had sex with Tamar, he "spilled his seed" on the ground. No chance of an heir there. This displeased God, and before long Onan died too.

After Onan's death Judah told Tamar to return home but to live there as a widow until Judah's youngest son, Shelah, was grown. But when Shelah reached maturity, and no arrangements had been made for him to wed Tamar, as Judah promised, Tamar took action. She had lost two husbands, both of whom were brothers, and was refused the youngest brother; she still had the courage to demand her rights to motherhood by law. After her mother-in-law's death, she turned to the father of her husband.

Tamar was not a wicked woman at all, but she plays a meaningful role in Old Testament history as the mother of twin boys (Perez and Zerah) by Judah. The legitimacy and courage of her action are implied in every move she makes.

Scripture does not mention Tamar's parentage or place of birth, but proceeds to introduce her by saying that her first husband Er "was wicked in the sight of the Lord" and the Lord slew him." (Gen. 38:7). Next she became the wife of his brother Onan, who "displeased the Lord: wherefore He slew him too. (Gen 38:10).

The union of Tamar and Onan show the perfect working of the levirate law, devised to retain ownership of property within the family as well as to prevent the extinction of the family line. After her second husband's death, Judah advised his daughter-in-law Tamar to remain a widow at her father's house until his third son Shelah came of age. But fearing that Tamar possessed a sinister power, and that Shelah might die too, Judah delayed his third son's marriage to Tamar.

considerable time elapsed and then Judah's wife died. The love of offspring, still deep in the heart of Tamar, caused her to plan how she might seek her rights in motherhood from her father-in-law Judah. Since he had denied her his third son Shelah, she sought a way to force him to accept his responsibility as guaranteed to her by the levirate law.

When Tamar heard that Judah was soon to be in the hills of Timnath with his friend Hirah, the Adullamite, at great personal risk, she set upon a plan of her own. It was sheep-shearing season, and many guests would come from surrounding country. Tamar planned to be there, too, but under a disguise, so that Judah would not recognize her as the widow of his sons.

She removed her garments of widowhood, put on a veil to hide her face, and “wrapped herself”, probably in a colorful and becoming festival robe.

Since Tamar’s name was the same as that of the stately tropical tree of Bible lands, we can assume she was a tall, study woman with a graceful walk, one who would command attention wherever she went. This time she chose to stand by the side of the road where Judah would pass by.

Not recognizing this woman with the veil-covered face as the widow of his two sons and thinking she was a harlot, Judah made advance to her. (Gen 38:16).

Clever woman that she was, she was she said, “What will you give me, that you can come in unto me?”

Judah said, “I will send you a kid from the flock.” Tamar said, “Will you give me a pledge, until you send it?” Judah replied, “What pledge shall I give thee?” She replied,

“Your signet, and bracelets, and staff that is in your hand.” he gave it to her, and she conceived by him.

Tamar now turned homeward, carrying with her the signet, bracelet and staff that had belonged to Judah. The she removed the veil and put on again the garment of widowhood. A short time afterward Judah sent the kid by his friend Hirah, who had been with him at Timnath for the sheep-shearing. And Judah requested that his more personal possessions be returned when the kid was delivered.

When Hirah entered the town where Tamar lived, carrying with him the kid, he asked for the harlot who had been by the side of the road, but the men told him there was no harlot in the place. This is the best evidence we have that Tamar was not a prostitute but a self-respecting woman, determined to outwit a man and demand her right to children, according to the laws of the time

About three months later, Judah received word that his daughter-in-law Tamar was “with child by whoredom.” This phrase suggests the malicious gossip who had carried tales to Judah. Angered at this report, he ordered that his daughter-in-law be brought forth and burned, for that would have been the penalty if the report were true. But Tamar came before Judah, holding his signet, bracelets, and staff, and she asked, “Discern I pray thee, whose are these?” (Gen. 38:25)

Judah could not deny their ownership and admitted, “she has been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son. And he knew her again no more”. The last phrase is evidence enough that Tamar was not a promiscuous woman. She had merely acted according to the laws and rather heroically at that; and we can be confident she had exonerated herself, and that Judah had absolved her of all guilt.

Thrice denied a child by a rightful husband, Tamar now gave birth to twins by Judah. Like the twins of Rebekah, there is a detailed account of the appearance of the elder, Perez, who became the inheritor of the family birthright. Afterward his brother Zarah was born with the “scarlet thread upon his hand” that the midwife had tied there. The story of the birth of Tamar’s sons depicts clearly a woman in travail and the birth of twins.

In the story of Ruth, another widow who also came to motherhood through the levirate law, we find worthy mention made of Tamar, who bore a child to Judah. Other Tamars follow her, one the “fair sister” (2 Sam. 13:1) of Absalom, and the woman of “fair countenance” (2 Sam 14:27) who was the daughter of Absalom.

unscrupulous actions of Judah, with whom Tamar was here involved, and the noble actions of Joseph, whom Potiphar’s wife tried to involve, present a striking contrast. Some commentator’s feel; that this is why the story of Potiphar’s wife immediately follows that of Tamar.

**Why is this story included?** It seems strange that the inspired Scriptures drop the story of Tamar and Judah into the middle of chapters dealing with Joseph’s adventures. Why include this story here? Why include the story at all?

One reason is clear. In a few chapters a list of those who went to Egypt with Jacob will be recorded. It is important to the Jewish people to maintain accurate genealogies, for they were God's chosen people. The purity of their line was important and the births of Perez and Zerah, included in Judah's line must be accounted for.

There may be another reason as well. In later Judaism the notion developed that salvation depended to a large extent not on the individual, but on the merits of the forefathers. Abraham and the men of the patriarchal age were deemed so good that the merit they accrued could be applied to cancel out the sins of thousands of individuals multiplied generations later.

We can see how a person might imagine that the Joseph portrayed in Genesis might possess such merits. Placed beside the account of Joseph's life, the story of Tamar and Judah seem tawdry and out of place; but, if we look more closely, we make an important discovery. Jesus the Messiah did not come from Joseph's line, but from Judah's. And specifically from Perez, Tamar's son! And Tamar herself is one of the four women named by Matthew in his genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:3)!

It is not in the merits of the ancient that we find hope. It is in the sinless descendant of sinners, who came to bring forgiveness and to break the hold sin has on us.

### **Tamar's relationships with Judah:**

Legally Tamar was a member of Judah's household and under his authority. But, Judah ignored his obligations to Tamar. So Tamar took matters into her own hands and by deceit became pregnant with Judah's child

Judah's reaction when the parentage was finally revealed is significant. He "did the right thing", and not only acknowledged that she had been more righteous than he (Gen 38:26). But he also acknowledged her twins as his own sons.

In this situation each of the two central figures Tamar and Judah, displayed strength and weaknesses. Each acted on what seemed to be "right" in the situation – as wrong as each may have been. Yet the years Judah had disregarded Tamar's needs, and her understandably hostile feelings for him, made it impossible for a personal relationship to develop between them.

We need not agree with what Tamar did to acknowledge that she was one of the exceptional women of patriarchal times.

### **Tamar: An Example for Today**

Ultimately, we all are responsible for our own life and responsibility to God. We must understand God's will and be about that business. If we count on others to do what they should, we may be accomplices in our own victimization. Yet in making choices, we must be sure that we avoid acting as if the end justifies the means.

### **Potiphar's Wife**

She was a woman who was remembered only by her wickedness. When she attempted infidelity with young Joseph during her husband's absence from home, she disgraced the distinction she might have borne, that of respected wife of the chief of the Egyptian king's bodyguard.

Egyptian sculptures and paintings on the walls of ancient tombs help us to picture her as a woman wearing a dress of exceedingly fine linen, pleated into a chevron pattern in the back. Around her high waistline she wore an ornamental girdle and on her head a gold band set with jewels. Her sensual lips were heavily painted with a purplish pigment, and her slanting eyebrows were made darker with heavy black dye. Around her ankles were gold bands, and she wore other heavy jewelry in her ears and around her neck, and on her long tapering fingers were rings with large jewels.

We know she was a spoiled, selfish woman, probably older than Joseph and certainly worldlier. She knew nothing of Joseph's God and the high standards upheld by those who believed in Him. Her gods were the physical pleasures, and she spent her days trying to satisfy them. The setting in which she moved was one of elegance and splendor. Her house, similar to Egyptian royal houses of that period of about 1700 B.C., had a block of high rooms surrounding the main room and inner garden court.

This Egyptian house kept Joseph, the young overseer, busy, for it had stables and harness rooms, shelter for small wooden chariots, servants' quarters, granary courtyards, and conical grain bins, as well as an agricultural center. Even the trees, set in brick tubs contained Nile mud, had to be watered daily. There were slaves to direct, purchases to be made in the market, and distinguished guests who demanded personal attentions.

As supervisor of all this Joseph who had been purchased from the Ishmaelites in the slave market, had risen to a place of high trust, for the young Hebrew was faithful, honest, upright and conscientious. We can be sure too, that he was handsome like his mother Rachel and humble and consecrated like his father Jacob.

It was with dignity that he moved about his master's house, wearing a skirt of fine linen tucked under a colorful belt from which hung a leather tab. In his feet were simple sandals with pointed upturned toes, and his abundant black hair probably hung to his shoulders. One would be less likely to observe the details of his dress than his quite demeanor and the noble qualities in his smooth shaven face.

Potiphar was one of King Pharaoh's important officials, it is quite natural to suppose he had to be away from home a great deal, and he had entrusted to Joseph not only the safekeeping of his most valuable possessions but all the protection of his family.

Potiphar's wife, however, had no appreciation of good character. After her husband departed, she sought to become familiar with Joseph. One day when no one else was around she said "lie with me" (Gen. 39:7). Joseph resisted.

He must have startled this evil woman when he declined her invitation by saying, "There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because you are his wife: how can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Potiphar's wife had not dealt with such an honorable man before. She was angry, but she did not give up. She invited him into her bedroom, but he always retreated from her, because he knew God had great plans for him to serve, and had to be strong and uphold his purpose of right and wrong.

Finally when Potiphar's wife could not entice Joseph, she caught his garment and held it; but he fled, leaving it with her. This woman who had not received what she asked for determined to hurt Joseph, in order to save face herself. She screamed loudly to the other men in the household, saying "See, he has brought in a Hebrew unto us to mock us he came in to me to lie with me and I cried with a loud voice."

She now kept Joseph's garment and showed it to her husband on his return. Potiphar saw it, he immediately cast Joseph into prison, for his wife had lied, saying "The Hebrew servant which you have brought unto us, came in to me to mock me; and it came to pass, as I lifted my voice and cried, that he left his garment with me and fled out.

There are the last words of this despicable woman, who had become a symbol of the faithless wife. Her obscurity, except for her wickedness, is final, but the young Joseph rose to noble stature, even within prison wall. Her own silence, in face of the youth's term in prison, is even greater admission to the black character of Potiphar's wife, who was not only a sensualist but also a coward who could not admit her own guilt.

Even though Joseph suffered through many years of unjust treatment, each experience shaped him for the role God intended him to fulfill. His years managing Potiphar's house, and later managing the prison where he was incarcerated, taught him skills that he used to manage the affairs of the nation Egypt. And the position he gained through imprisonment enabled him to save not only much of the population of Egypt but also his aged father and brothers.

Later Joseph told his brothers that "it was not you who sent me here, but God". Perhaps the same could be said of Potiphar's wife and all those who mistreat us. Even the evil persons we come in contact with have a role to play in God's plan.

This is important to remember when we encounter persons like Potiphar's wife who cause us to suffer unjustly. We can still trust God, knowing that He is with us. We can still expect God to use our every experience to shape us for something that lies ahead. And we can pity our persecutors, who mean to do us evil but are unaware that God is shaping us through every experience, intent to do us good.