

# The Story of Tamar

## A Feminist Interpretation of Genesis 38

Morimura Nobuko, RSCJ

MANY OF THE BIBLICAL stories of women are neither included within the lectionary of the Catholic liturgy nor in the services of other Christian Churches. Might it be that these stories were judged inappropriate or unedifying to be included among the liturgical readings? If so, can one deny the overtone of sexism in this statement? The representation and interpretation of Tamar seem to be held in universally low esteem. Many audiences of the story look at her as a typical woman wanting a child to such an extent as to resort to the extreme measure of pretending to be a prostitute, thinking the end justifies the means. Nevertheless, at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel (1:3) her name is specially mentioned as the first of four women in the genealogy of Jesus. She is thus listed among the ancestors of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I shall analyze the given text of Genesis 38 and interpret the story from a woman's perspective, discerning the androcentric paradigm which has been taken for granted instead of being recognized as unjust. The implicit male chauvinism has thus remained subliminal and passed unnoticed for thousands of years by male authors, redactors, readers, interpreters and preachers continuously up to the present.

### THE MATRIMONIAL BACKGROUND OF TAMAR

Genesis 38 is an independent unit with a definite structure, framed by the first section (vv.1–10) and the last (vv.27–30). The former tells of the birth and death of the two

sons of Judah by his Canaanite wife, and the latter tells of the birth of twin sons by Tamar whom he impregnated without knowing that she was his daughter-in-law.

We meet seven characters in the first paragraph, but it is only Judah whose words are recorded. This fact indicates the authority of Judah as a patriarch. According to the Hebrew text, Judah took (married) the daughter of a Canaanite man called Shuah for his wife (v.2). The girl was taken as a material object.<sup>2</sup> His wife is nameless. Her father's name is mentioned but neither her mother's nor hers are made known. As with many anonymous women in the Bible, she is shown only in relation to her male masters: her father and her husband. Judah, as a paterfamilias, exercised authority also over his sons. He took (married) Tamar as a wife for his eldest son, Er.<sup>3</sup> This time, the wife's name is introduced, because she is to be one of the main characters in the story. The etymology of her name, Tamar, is palm tree, a symbol of fertility. In the book of Judges we read that the prophetess Deborah lived under this tree (Jgs.4:5). However, we cannot trace the etiological implications and the function of the palm tree in the prophetic tradition. Although scholars suspect a possible relation between Tamar and the goddess Ishtar, I shall refrain from discussing this matter in this short article for lack of space.<sup>4</sup> Onomasiology treats men's names far more frequently than women's. Moreover, many of the men's names are theophoric, but hardly any of the women's.

A great number of men's names appear in the Bible compared to the small number of women's.<sup>5</sup> We find more nameless women than those with names.

After the death of his eldest son, Er, Judah ordered his second son, Onan, "to go in to his brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her by raising up an offspring for his deceased brother" (v.8). Judah's eldest son as well as his second son, Onan, died young. The narrator explains the cause of their early death as God's punishment for their wickedness (vv.7,10). Yahweh was displeased with the act of Onan, "Since he knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went into his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother" (v.9). The passage underscores the institution of the levirate law which obligates a man to marry his late brother's childless young widow to provide continuity for the line of the deceased. In the Hebrew scriptures we find three references to this law. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 prescribes it in terms of endogamy. It is the duty of the widow's brother-in-law to "go into her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of the husband's brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel" (v.6). The widow, if deprived of this right, can appeal to the elders at the city gate, and the one who fails in this obligation would be put to shame. The son born can thus inherit his father's name and property. Another illustration of this law is in the book of Ruth but with emphasis on the inheritance of the property which includes the man's name, land and wife (vv.9ff). Genesis 38, on the other hand, seems to have no knowledge of such a law, and stresses the lineage without mentioning the inheritance. The examples cited do not limit the law either to marriage proper, or to endogamy. Judah tells Onan to "go in to (have sexual relations with) your brother's wife" without specifying that he should marry her.<sup>6</sup> The wickedness which

caused the death of the eldest son, Er, might also be his failure in the selfsame marriage obligation.

There is another point in this section. Onan's act was contraception by means of *coitus interruptus*. His act was not masturbation as understood by the derivative of his name, onanism. In human history, semen was regarded as the determinative factor for reproduction.<sup>7</sup> The narrator says that God was angry and killed Onan because he greatly offended God by spilling his semen, thus denying the possibility of future offspring. It was according to the *lex talionis* that God killed the one who killed the unprotected being. The decision to have or not to have an offspring was in the hands of the man, but never in consultation with the woman who actually gives birth to a child. Genesis 38 has an overt intent to value the lineage. The story alludes to the fact that Judah's sons disliked the law. Later laws forbid having sexual relations with one's brother-in-law.<sup>8</sup> It is possible to amend the law when the man so wants; it is unthinkable for women to do so. Tamar must have been anxious to have a child and she had the capacity to conceive. Her childlessness was due to her husbands who refrained from impregnating her. Thus a man extended his right over his wife also to her sexuality.

Tamar was told to go back to her own father's house and live as a widow until the third son Shelah would grow up (v.11). She obeys in silence as was expected of all women. She was to remain insecure and unsettled. She is a widow, but also betrothed, and yet unaccepted in the household into which she married. She was innocent concerning her father-in-law's cunning scheme. Judah feared, the narrator tells us, that his last son, Shelah, might also die (v.11) if he allowed Tamar to marry him. It was a conventional belief that certain women had death-dealing power over their husband.<sup>9</sup> The boy is the object of his

father's concern, but hardly the daughter-in-law. We cannot overlook the double-dealing of Judah. He deceived Tamar by telling her to stay home until Shelah grows up while having no intention of giving him to her as her husband. He was not aware of his injustice toward his daughter-in-law.

#### CONFRONTATION OF JUDAH AND TAMAR

The story develops in the central section (vv.12–26), which can be divided into three parts: first, the confrontation of Judah and Tamar who was disguised as a harlot (vv.12–19); second, Judah's searching for a temple prostitute in vain (vv.20–23); and third, Judah's condemnation of Tamar and its aftermath (vv.24–26). The first part which shows the confrontation of the two standing as equals is in contrast with the third part where the same two are in a hierarchical relation within the patriarchal social order. The second part is the episode that joins the two encounters.

After a lapse of time, a new stage opens. Time has passed since Tamar was sent back home, yet nothing seems to have happened. She must have been waiting with mixed feelings of hope and insecurity. She must have felt the time to be like eternity. He who keeps her waiting does not realize how oppressive it is to do so. She could not help but ponder much. Then Tamar heard the news of her father-in-law's coming to Timnah. She understood what had been in the mind of Judah when he sent her away. She can no longer trust Judah. She must take a positive step to save herself by recovering her status within the patriarchy. The story develops by telling the quick reaction of Tamar who went out to meet Judah disguised as a harlot. This is the point where many become scandalized. We must follow the text closely to see the narrator's intent.

We have two protagonists in this section; Judah and Tamar. The narrator justifies Judah's action by alluding to the fact that

Judah was sexually in need. First, he lost his wife and spent some time in mourning, that is, in abstinence.<sup>10</sup> Now the time being over, he goes up with his Canaanite friend to the festival of sheep-shearing at which people take wine in abundance and relax.<sup>11</sup> The fact that the narrator skips details of this festival is due to the presumed knowledge of the contemporary readers. Seeing Tamar disguised as a harlot, Judah takes the initiative and begs her to let him come to her. The narrator does not say that Tamar enticed him. Is it because she just sat and showed no gesture of enticement or because the readers know the common behavior of the harlot that he left this particular unsaid? On the other hand, he clearly defends Judah saying that he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law (v.16a), which means Judah was not guilty of incest. His intercourse with a harlot is never questioned from an ethical point of view. No moral judgment is passed on it. In Israel's patriarchal society, impingement of another man's property was strictly forbidden as against the law,<sup>12</sup> but sexual relations with a woman who does not belong to any man, such as a prostitute, caused no problem. The story ignores the years of solitude, anxiety and possible poverty of Tamar.<sup>13</sup> Consideration of this circumstances slipped away in the male-centered society.

Tamar, taking off her widow's garb and covering herself, sat at the entrance of Enaim. The word *ts'iph* is usually translated as a veil as in verse 14. In the Middle East, it was customary for a married woman to wear a veil, but not a widow. The married woman's face was not to be exposed to any man other than her husband who possessed her. Tamar covered her face with the purpose of hiding herself from Judah. Her veil was different from the ordinary veil of a wife. Yet it must have been the kind that attracts men. The literal meaning of the place where she sat is "at the opening of the eyes,"<sup>14</sup> that is, at the place where the eyes become

opened. The expression is employed metaphorically. Tamar acquired awareness: her eyes were opened and she saw that Shelah was grown and that Judah had no thought of giving him to her in marriage.<sup>15</sup>

The reader can recognize Tamar's insight and Judah's lack of it through verses 14 to 16. They are similar in syntax as well as in key words, contrasting the two protagonists.

v.14 For (*ki*) she saw (*r'h*) that (*ki*) Shelah was grown up yet she had not been given to him in marriage.

v.15 When Judah saw (*r'h*) her, he took her to be a prostitute, for she had veiled her face.

v.16 He turned to her at the road side and said "Come on please, let me come in to you," for (*ki*) he *did not know* she was his daughter-in-law

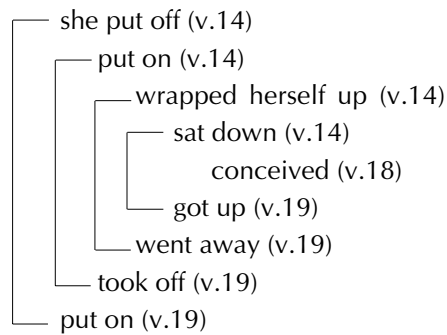
In verse 14 the verb 'to see' illustrates Tamar's insight on a cognitional level. She saw the truth without actually using her sight. Judah, on the other hand, failed to recognize his daughter-in-law although he saw her with his own eyes. He saw her on the physical level but failed on the cognitional level. In the Bible, one can walk the way of wisdom only when seeing leads to knowing.<sup>16</sup> But Judah's lack of insight is a very important hint for the continuing scenario of the narrative, because this failure to recognize Tamar proves him innocent of the crime of incest. While justifying Judah, there is an air of blaming Tamar for deceiving Judah into illicit sexual activity. She is taken to be a loose woman, whereas Judah is a righteous man. In the patriarchal social structure, daughter and wife had their proper places in the family under the control of father or husband respectively. Upon becoming a widow, the woman is alienated and left powerless and marginalized without patriarchal protection. She is incapable of supporting herself. Thus the only means left for her was prostitution.<sup>17</sup> For Tamar, the way to recover her status in the house-

hold was to appeal to Judah's sexual drive and conceive his child; this was the only possibility left to her. The plot of the narrative says nothing about the role of her own father, whose name is unmentioned. What authority could he assume when his daughter was no longer a virgin?

The narrator then invites the readers to hear the secret conversation between the two. We can compare the words uttered by Judah with those of Tamar. The initiative is taken by Tamar rather than Judah all the way through. Responding to Judah's plea to copulate, Tamar asks for the payment first. Each speaks three times alternately standing on equal ground. The conversation is brisk and lucid. Looking at her words closely, the reader can surmise that Tamar has a definite purpose. The verb "to give" is repeated twice in verses 16 and 17, by Tamar and Judah respectively. Her final answer in verse 18 is laconic. She only names the objects she desired: the seal with the cord which hung from Judah's neck and the staff in his hand. She wanted these as the pledge for his delayed payment. The verb is omitted to show the intensity of her desire to reach out to the objects. During the conversation, Judah either answers her question promising to send her a kid or asks what pledge she wants. Contrast is shown also between Judah's impetuous attitude and Tamar's cool calculation. He came unprepared for payment to a harlot, but could not wait for another occasion. He is far from realizing how long he has kept Tamar waiting by not calling her back to marry his own son. A male interpreter wonders how she managed to sustain the deception.<sup>18</sup> But it is more of a wonder that Judah could be so insensitive as to fail to recognize her during the relationship however short the time might have been.

Tamar allowed him to come into her only after having secured the pledge. We are told that Tamar became pregnant immediately. The structure of this section is

worth noticing. The action taken by Tamar to disguise herself as a harlot is very brisk and completely under control. All her actions are in concatenation (joined by Hebrew verbs in the *waw*-consecutive form) to show that the actions followed in succession. Then comes the businesslike conversation and the final achievement. As soon as the end is accomplished her quick consecutive actions to go back to the widow's attire follow. There is not the slightest hint that she might remain a harlot. The conversation between the two protagonists is enclosed by her quick actions of assuming and putting off a disguise which form a chiasitic construction. The structure is focussed on Tamar's conceiving, which was the whole purpose of her disguise.



What was the significance of the objects which Tamar so desired? The seal and the cord are hendiadys: the cord from which the seal is suspended hangs from the neck. The seal was an insignia of a man's property and was widely used in the ancient Near East.<sup>19</sup> Tamar must have wanted to identify the child as Judah's in case of falling under suspicion. The story tells us what actually happened to her and she saved her life by dint of these objects.

What does the staff signify, then? It could have been a cane used as support when traveling. However, this word (*mateh*) is used one hundred and eighty times out of two hundred and fifty occur-

rences to refer to the tribe of Israel. Patriarchs also held a staff to symbolize their leadership and authority.<sup>20</sup> The staff handed over to Tamar as a pledge was symbolic of the authority given over to her, which is hard to believe given the actual situation. However, the story reveals that she was to be a fore mother of the tribe of Judah, the clan of Davidic descent.

Verse 20 opens a new scene after a lapse of three months. Judah asks his Canaanite friend to send the kid of a goat in exchange for the pledge she keeps. The friend asked where he could find the temple prostitute (*qedshah*)<sup>21</sup> who was at Enaim by the way-side (v.21). The words are switched: from the harlot (*zanah*, v.15) to the temple prostitute (*qedshah*, vv.21,22), and from the gate (*petach*, v.14) of Enaim to the road (*derek*) at Enaim. In verse 14, Tamar sat disguised at the gate (*bepetach*) of Enaim. The common Hebrew word for the gate is *sha'ar*, and *petach* for the gate is seldom used.<sup>22</sup> The second Book of Kings speaks of the religious reform of King Josiah. After the destruction of the houses of the male prostitutes, he broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance (*petach*) of the gate (*sha'ar*). The gate, the entrance of the gate, the Canaanite altar and the houses of the prostitutes are likely to have been all in the same precincts. It is puzzling why the narrator connects a harlot with the city gate and a temple prostitute with the road, for usually the opposite was the case; according to prophetic literature, harlots were found on the road.<sup>23</sup> The indiscriminate use of the two hints that the borderline between them was not well-defined at the time of writing.<sup>24</sup>

Judah asked his friend to take a kid, so that he could recover the pledge. Samson also took a kid when he wanted to come to his wife (Jgs. 15:1). A kid was a temple votary offered to the goddess of love, Ishtar/Ashtart.<sup>25</sup> But it might have been an ordinary form of payment during the time when a

monetary system was not yet prevalent. In many places of the ancient Middle East it seemed customary for married women to give themselves to strangers because of some oath. Such sacrifices of chastity in the service of the goddess of love, Ashtart, were considered different from ordinary prostitution.<sup>26</sup> At Canaanite temples there were cultic personnel called temple prostitutes (*qedshah*). They covered themselves as a symbol of dedication to Ishtar, the veiled goddess. The Deuteronomic law precisely prohibits the sons and daughters of Israel from becoming temple prostitutes as a polemic opposition to the Canaanite cult.<sup>27</sup> This alludes to the fact that such things were practiced in Israel and lasted until the reform of Josiah in the last days of the kingdom.

Judah then discouraged his friend who could not find the prostitute and told him to stop searching, saying "let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at" (v.23). One scholar comments that Judah was afraid of losing face.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Judah asked his Canaanite friend to search instead of going himself might indicate a wish not to make the matter public. However, he stops his friend from continuing the search for the temple prostitute when the friend could not readily find her. Some scholars hold that the reason why Judah asked for a temple prostitute rather than a harlot, was that the former was more acceptable than the latter in that particular culture, and was regarded as socially higher in a mixed population of Israelites and Canaanites.<sup>29</sup> Yet, it is not quite convincing when we see the vague usage of these two words. It is more of a puzzle as to why Judah would rather lose his seal and staff, his identification and the symbol of his authority, rather than run the risk of publicity.<sup>30</sup> It seems that he did not think it shameful not to pay the price for her body nor to fulfill the promise he made.<sup>31</sup> Was it purely for the sake of the story's scenario that he stopped

searching? It is clear that the honor of the patriarch preceded justice towards a prostitute who is vulnerable to neglect. A promise should be kept between man and man, but it is considered unnecessary between a man and a woman.

The final part of the main section is the climax, the crucial point at which Judah and Tamar confront one another again. This time, they meet as a patriarch and his daughter-in-law, instead of as a man and a harlot. The text of verse 24 shows a form similar to verse 13: "After about three months Judah was told..." (v.24) and "the time passed when Tamar was told..." (v.13). We can see the contrast in the reaction shown after the time lapse. When the news was delivered, the reaction of Tamar was to use the practical means at hand in order to recover her social status by obtaining Judah's seed for a new life. Judah's reaction in contrast was to order the only woman left in his household together with her fetus to be killed. Thus the contrast is life and death.

We need to consider how Judah was told. The pregnancy of Tamar became obvious in the eyes of the public. The sentence emphasizes that fact by the use of *hinneh* (behold) with an obvious tone of blame. As she was not remarried, the suspected cause of her pregnancy was an illicit act, *zanah*. The English versions, different from Japanese ones, unanimously translate the word in a sense of harlotry.<sup>32</sup> All sexual intercourse outside the marriage bond is termed *zanah*. It includes the activity of the professional prostitute. It also embodies, in its broader context, adultery (*na'aph*) which is the violation of the husband's right of sexual ownership. All these are sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner.<sup>33</sup> The cause of her pregnancy can be judged as harlotry only by knowing the story of her actions. But, the interpretation of *zanah* as harlotry or as adultery

would be determined by Judah's examination and verdict.

Judah declared, "Bring her out, and let her be burned" (v.25). The reason for this death sentence has been variously interpreted. Some think that the patriarch had authority even to declare the death penalty for his household members, or that death by burning was the common punishment for adultery in ancient Israel.<sup>34</sup> replaced later with stoning by the community.<sup>35</sup> Yet, we have to pay attention to the fact that it is by no means certain that the patriarch had such personal power, and usually the prosecution, conviction and execution were all community undertakings.<sup>36</sup>

I am not satisfied by any commentary on Judah's command which contains apparent and manifold contradictions and misjudgments. These have never been examined carefully. They are, first, the contradiction found in terms of Tamar's precarious position. If she had been accused of committing adultery, it must be based on the premise of her questionable betrothal. The story leaves this point ambiguous with Judah's irresponsibility unquestioned. We know that he has no intention of taking Tamar back to marry his last son. He retained power over her without fulfilling his duty towards her. Moreover she is in her "father's house," that is, subject to her own father. If such is the case, Judah, by exercising authority over Tamar, violates another man's right. Judah should have had no right over her. On the other hand, if she is guilty of adultery, her partner should also be executed according to the law (Dt. 22:22-24). If so, Judah is in danger. We can argue from the above considerations that the law is the aftermath or amendment of the abuses. No doubt, a double standard of morality was taken for granted.

The second consideration is the following: if Tamar was a widow, the law prescribes the duty of kindness to her in giving her the remains of crops, but the sexual behavior of

the widow is not regulated. A widow has no obligation to any man's sexual control. Thirdly, we must examine the execution by burning which was declared for Tamar. In biblical law, there are only two cases of the death penalty requiring burning. One is Lv. 20:14 which stipulates that if a man takes (marries) a wife and her mother, all three are to be burned to death. Another is Lv. 21:9 which forbids a priest from letting his daughter become a prostitute. Neither of these apply to Tamar's case. Fourth, becoming a harlot is not a reason for the death sentence. There is no law that commands those engaged in prostitution to be killed. A father is forbidden to allow his sons and daughters to become temple prostitutes, but he is not forbidden to visit a harlot himself. Since harlotry is different from adultery, no one, neither man nor woman, is guilty. Moreover, prostitutes were considered necessary though despised. They are out of the sphere of legal judgment as they do not belong to any man. Tamar cannot be prosecuted on the grounds of prostitution. It may rather be her father who should be punished.

Tamar had no committed no sin for which to be condemned, yet neither could she defend herself, nor have anyone else defend her. All rights are denied her. She is incapable of going through any legal proceedings. She had to submit to multiple injustices instead. We should note the construction of verse 25. Tamar was already brought forth to be executed when she sent word to her father-in-law.<sup>37</sup> Facing Judah who stood as judge, she delivered the message. She would not dare speak to Judah directly, inasmuch as the matter entailed the truth affecting him, and she knew she should not speak what might cause him embarrassment before the public. She must not excite him either, because he was already irritated enough, and he needed to consider the matter calmly. With determination she presented the pledge she had

guarded carefully saying, "It was the owner of these objects who made me pregnant." She dared to say it, because having been sentenced to death, she had nothing left to lose. And after taking a deep breath, she continues, "Please recognize whose these are, the seal with the cord and the staff" (v.25). She must have gasped before she spoke,<sup>38</sup> for she needed great courage albeit she had prepared herself sufficiently already. The tension must have been great for Tamar.

We must take the contrast between the behavior of the two protagonists into account again. Judah's condemnation of Tamar was impetuously declared, while Tamar cautiously schemed to achieve her end. When Judah was informed of the pregnancy of his daughter-in-law, the narrator used only the verbal form, *harah*, without a pronoun, which is the ordinary Hebrew usage. But when Tamar speaks, the subject "I" is placed in front of the verb as "I am pregnant", v.25, to emphasize the fact of her pregnancy which involved the very person of Judah who commanded her to be burned alive. In her heart she must have prayed that he would remember and be honest. Recognizing the objects to be unmistakably his own, Judah faced himself as guilty of incest.

The Talmud comments on this passage that Tamar left it to him to confess but did not openly accuse him, choosing death rather than publicly putting him to shame.<sup>39</sup> Only within a circle of men, is it possible to have such an argument! The honor of a man was so highly valued in the patriarchal culture as to ignore a woman's life and rights completely.

A feminist cannot leave this passage in the hands of male interpreters alone. The sentence of burning to death of Tamar was so hastily proclaimed with peremptory indignation that one cannot but suspect that the rumor of Tamar's adultery was used as a golden excuse to get rid of her whom he

surmised to be a dangerous woman loaded with magical power. She is a prototype of the witches who were burned alive by the hundreds and thousands for centuries on the pretext of eliminating a destructive element of the community.

After discerning the objects presented to him, Judah's final words were uttered.<sup>40</sup> Before the accusers who had held their breath to hear his word, he overturned the verdict and declared Tamar to be in the right. The feminine form of "be righteous" (*tsadqah*) is a unique occurrence in the whole Bible, which means that Tamar is the only woman who was declared righteous.<sup>41</sup> There must have been many women who were righteous, nevertheless they would never be recognized as such unless authorized by a man. The declaration of Judah, "she is more in the right,"<sup>42</sup> does not mean a comparison of the two on the degree of virtue: the grammatical function of the Hebrew preposition *min* (from) in this case is not a comparison, Gesenius asserts, but a relation existing between one person and another.<sup>43</sup> It is an acknowledgement by Judah that he was in the wrong not to have allowed Tamar to marry his last son, Shelah.<sup>44</sup> Was Judah completely free from the thought that she need not be burned to death since by not causing the death of Judah himself she proved herself innocent of the death of his two sons?

The final words of the section conclude with the narrator's comment making doubly sure that Judah never committed incest. We hear nothing about Tamar. But, it is against logic or a lack of integrity on the part of Judah, if he does not allow her to marry his son in spite of his confession that he should have done so. Nothing is said about her marriage with Shelah, which is not likely to have been accomplished. The logic seems to be that Tamar's sons, though Judah's as well, belong to the deceased husband who established his own household by leaving his father's house.<sup>45</sup> Once a son is born, a



woman need not marry again, and this was likely the case with Tamar. Many biblical stories are silent about women after they bear sons. The reason for this is that their lives were considered to be fulfilled by the fact that they then obtained full membership within the household.<sup>46</sup> In the genealogical records, Shelah's position is inconsistent in relation to his brothers, and his descendants are nonexistent.<sup>47</sup> It is probable that, historically speaking, the tribe of Shelah was more connected with those of either Er and Onan rather than Perez and Zerah, who were in closer relation with the tribe of Tamar. G. Adam Smith postulates that in the early times of Israel the tribes intermarried with the Canaanites of Shephelah, especially around Adullam. The sexual intercourse of the individuals in the story alludes to the intermarriage of families.<sup>48</sup>

The closing paragraph forms a framework for the story as mentioned at the beginning. It resembles the story of the birth of the twin brothers in Genesis 25, Esau and Jacob, with an etiological episode. The fate of women has been precarious for thousands of years with the high rate of death at delivery as well as the brevity of life left after the procreation period was over.<sup>49</sup> In the biblical stories, women are forgotten after childbirth, because in many cases they might have been actually dead. Tamar gave birth to Perez who was to become the ancestor of David,<sup>50</sup> which is most important in the mind of the redactor of the closing paragraph. Her name was remembered in the genealogy at least. What more could she desire in the male dominated world?

#### CONCLUSION

The original pieces of the tradition of Tamar on which Genesis 38 is based may have circulated among the mixed tribes of Canaanites and Israelites in western Judea during the pre-monarchic period. The old tradition is not totally erased from the final

text, which is a composite. This phenomena makes the understanding of the text difficult. The story gives some information as to the problems and traits of the Israelite community at the time of composition rather than the preceding background stage. If the biblical stories are written with religious, moral, and didactic intention, what is the message of this chapter? The narrative appears to be secular all the way through without any visible presence of God. It says nothing of God's action or speech and leaves Tamar to act independently and Judah to draw his own conclusion. But one can recognize God's invisible hand that leads both to arrive at a solution. In this sense, it is similar to the wisdom literature, above all the story of Joseph in which the chapter find its place.

The story includes the issues of levirate marriage, as well as exogamy and incest. Within the limited space of this paper, I have concentrated on the points which have been ignored in the androcentric perspective. I suggest looking upon the protagonists of the narrative in terms of prototypes of man and woman. Judah is a typical male, and head of the family. Tamar is a composite type of female: a wife, a widow, a prostitute and a witch.

Motherhood was highly valued. It established a woman's stable social standing through her son, because in case of the death of the husband, his son would inherit the possessions of the deceased but not his wife.<sup>51</sup> In many cultures and in the long history of humankind, a woman had to submit to widowhood for life, wearing distinctive garb to show publicly who she was, for her fate was vulnerable to abuses. Tamar could finally embrace motherhood after a long and difficult struggle. Her widowhood was fraught with danger and instability. No ordinary means could help her recover her rights. Actually, widows and prostitutes had common ground in terms of freedom from male control and consequent exposure

to poverty. Prostitution is historically a functioning institution recognized as a by-product of urban culture. The woman engaged in it could act much more freely than one in the patriarchal social framework. The contrast of Tamar, as a daughter-in-law, as a widow and as a disguised harlot is a good example. Most of the biblical women are mothers or wives, consequently silent and their presence is not in the foreground. The role of women in the family was to remain silent. Those who are out of the social structure, namely the prostitutes, can speak and act much more positively. We also have to pay attention to Tamar who never knew love and care in her family, nor did she experience sexual relations with any man as a sign of affection. Her sexuality was only exploited. She is a prototype of many such women even to this day. As mentioned before, Tamar is also a type of witch. Misogyny is caused by fear. Judah feared that he would lose all his sons because of her. Man is afraid of woman when he suspects that she knows more in an area which is beyond his reach. No woman should be permitted to surpass a man especially in knowledge and wisdom. This fear turns to the aggression of witch hunting. The problem is with the men who burned women.

Judah is typical of a man who is also caught up in the fear of losing honor. He fears lest he should lose his reputation and be laughed at. He values honor more than doing what is right. He has blind spots, many of which become apparent when viewed with feminist insight. Man as an oppressor is unaware of the injustice done to the oppressed when he stays within the patriarchal frame of reference. The narrator's outlook is certainly limited by the cultural and historical situation and background. The typical male stance such as that taken by Judah reveals the narrator's conviction that man is in the right. Judah has the honesty and cool judgment to admit

that Tamar was right. The one who has the last word is the winner.

Men must realize how oppressive they can be to women who are crying out to have their rights recognized in order to be liberated and acquire equal partnership with men. We, who are living at the end of the twentieth century, must redeem the biblical women out of enforced silence and abuse, so that together we can celebrate their autonomy in us and with us.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The other three are Rahab and Ruth in Matthew 1:5 and "the wife of Uriah" in the following verse. Her name, Bathsheba, is not mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> A similar expression, "to take a bride", is also found in Japanese. We can detect the androcentric mentality and culture in both.

<sup>3</sup> See a similar case in the choice of bride for Isaac in Genesis 24.

<sup>4</sup> See W. F. Albright, "Historical and Mythological Elements in the Story of Joseph," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 37, (1918), p. 126. It is difficult to affirm this on the level of the Hebrew bible, for any reference to the goddess is carefully wiped out if not condemned by the law because of its polemical nature. Recent research on archaeological findings cannot deny the close relation of Israelite religion and that of the Canaanites. See Saul M. Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 34, (1988); Walter A. Maier III, *Asherah: Extrabiblical Evidence*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 37, (1986), and their bibliographies.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, there are in Genesis two hundred and sixty-eight names of men and no man appears without a name, whereas we find only twenty-two women with names.

<sup>6</sup> Opinions differ on the understanding of the levirate marriage law. What G. W. Coats asserts in his article, "The Widow's Rights: A Crux in the Structure of Genesis 38," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34, (1972), pp. 461-466, is feasible, that is, sexual intercourse as a means to obtain an offspring is required but not necessarily through marriage. There are different discussions on the levirate law. See M. Burrows, "The Ancient Background of Hebrew Levirate Marriage," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 77, (1940), pp.2-15.

Also, "Levirate Marriage in Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59, (1949), pp. 23–33.

<sup>7</sup> People were said to be ignorant of the existence of the ovum although the ovary was known. The discovery is credited to C. A. von Bahr in 1827. It is likely that men began to realize that the female partner is needed for conception only in the nineteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> See Lv. 18:16; 20:21.

<sup>9</sup> See the Book of Tobit 3:8. Sarah, who married seven husbands, was suspected of killing each one of them. However, the demon actually killed them before they were physically united with Sarah.

<sup>10</sup> There are several references to mourning in the Bible as pertaining to abstention from food and/or sexual relations. See 1 Sm. 31:13; Nm. 20:29; and Dt. 34:8; 21:13. The narrator informs the reader that Tamar understood the situation immediately. See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> There are three other references to sheep-shearing in the Bible besides Gn. 38. 1 Sm. 25:8 assumes the sheep-shearing activity as a part of the harvest festival of flock owners. See H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel, Old Testament Library* (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 202. 2 Sm. 13:28 speaks of a generous service of wine at the festival. The whole tone of the feast is one of relaxing. See Bruce Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 397. Another reference to sheep-shearing is Gn. 31:19. At this festival, it was customary to buy a prostitute and sleep with her in terms of sympathetic magic in order to increase the flock. See *Interpreters' Bible* vol. I, p. 760.

<sup>12</sup> See Ex. 20:17 (the tenth commandment) for instance.

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomic law is especially concerned about the poverty of the resident aliens, the fatherless and the widows. See Dt. 10:18; 14:29; 16:11 and 14; 24:17–21; 26:12–13; 27:19. The last passage quoted specifically speaks of the rights of the widows. Yet of the three categories, women are always mentioned last.

<sup>14</sup> The argument of Ira Robinson that this expression, "the opening of the eyes," refers to the inviting attitude of a harlot is hardly acceptable. He refers to the same expression used in Gn. 3:7 which means the awakening of sexual knowledge, but the interpretation of the selfsame verse is varied, "Bepetah enayim in Genesis 38:14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96/4 (1977), p. 569.

<sup>15</sup> A. M. Silbermann, ed. *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary, Genesis* (Jerusalem: Silbermann, 1933), p. 187. His interpretation is much more to the point in comparison to the comment of Ira Robinson.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, God saw and knew what should be done. See Gn. 18:21; Ex. 2:25.

<sup>17</sup> It is clear from the history of Japanese prostitution that poverty was the main reason for prostitution along with the drive for money on the part of the brokers and the interest of men who wanted to buy sex.

<sup>18</sup> Vawter, op. cit., p. 398.

<sup>19</sup> The cylinder seal with which one sealed a clay pot or document as a sign of ownership was widely known in Babylonia. The custom seems to have come into the Israelite society sometime later. In the books of Jeremiah (32:24) and Haggai (2:23), we see the metaphorical use of the signet: the kings of Israel signed as belonging to Yahweh. Also in the Song of Solomon 8:6, a maiden asks to be put as a seal on her lover's heart and arm, meaning his ownership.

<sup>20</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, eds. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* no. 1352b.

<sup>21</sup> The only other occurrences of this word in the Hebrew bible are in the Deuteronomic law (Dt. 23:18) and in Hosea 4:14.

<sup>22</sup> The only other occurrence in the bible is in 1 Chronicles 19:9 which is post-exilic in composition. Claudia V. Camp explains that by the time of the Greek translation, it was understood that Tamar sat at the entrance of a city. *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), p. 311, n. 49.

<sup>23</sup> See Jer. 3:2; Ez. 16:25.

<sup>24</sup> To my mind, it is difficult to draw a line differentiating between the temple prostitute and the lay prostitute. Phyllis Bird distinguishes the two with the reservation that both share important characteristics including sexual intercourse with strangers. See "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," *Semeia* 46 (1989), pp. 119–139, esp. 126. I cannot totally agree on this point, because we should avoid a monolithic understanding of both a temple prostitute and a harlot. Their status differs according to the ranking within both professions when institutionalized. Their activities vary in the course of history depending on the different functions needed at different times. They change also

depending on what type of god people worship, whether a male god or a goddess, and on what kind of social structure and system they maintained, patriarchy, matriarchy, monogamy or polygamy. When the restriction of monogamy tightens, fidelity is enforced upon a wife, but not on a husband and the institution of prostitution is called for. We must always keep in mind that the biblical account of the history of Israel has a polemical thrust over and against the Canaanite culture. We should not expect to find in it the historical facts which we seek in modern history.

<sup>25</sup> John Skinner, "Genesis", T. T. Clark, ed. *The International Critical Commentary*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1927), p. 453.

<sup>26</sup> The treatise on prostitutes needs historical development and it is impossible to go into detail in this paper. I believe the same study in the history of Japan is feasible, since the institution has endured for over a thousand years.

<sup>27</sup> See Dt. 23: 17; Nm. 30:6; Hos. 4:13ff; Prv. 7:1-27. In actuality, the Canaanite and Israelite cultural life styles must have resembled one another a lot. In Genesis 38, there is no sign of antipathy towards the Canaanites. Judah himself intermarried.

<sup>28</sup> G. von Rad comments that Judah's fear of being talked about if the search went further kept him from accomplishing his purpose. G. von Rad, "Genesis," *Old Testament Library* (London: SCM Press, 1972), p. 360. See also the exposition of honor and shame by Bruce H. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Atlanta: 1981) pp. 25-50.

<sup>29</sup> C. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50, A Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986) p. 54. It has long been considered that the Canaanite cult was different from that of the Israelites who believed in Yahweh. This premise was based on the passionate attack of the Deuteronomic theologians and the prophets. However, recent biblical studies along with the help of archaeology have asserted that the line between the two is very fine and the Israelites themselves were farmers rather than nomads. See especially Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); Israel Finkelstein, "Searching for Israelite Origin," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 14/5 (1988) pp. 34-45; Steven A. Rosen, "Finding Evidence of Ancient Nomads," *ibid.*, pp. 47-53; Saul M. Olyan, *op. cit.*; David C. Hopkins, "The Subsistence Struggle of Early Israel," *Biblical Archaeologist* 50/3 (1987).

<sup>30</sup> John Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

<sup>31</sup> Notice the construction of verse 17: I will send ('*anoki 'ashlak*). There is a subject ('*anoki=I*) preceding the verb to signify the emphasis. Personal pronouns are used as subject of a verb only when the writer wants to place special emphasis on the pronoun. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* vol. III (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 342.

<sup>32</sup> "Your daughter-in-law has played the harlot...she is with child from her harlotry." *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday) p. 296; Vawter, *op. cit.*, p. 398; TANAKH. "Your daughter-in-law has played the whore...pregnant as a result of whoredom/ misconduct." NRSV, New Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>33</sup> Any sexual relationship of a woman outside the marriage bond or without a formal union is termed fornication. When there is already a formal union and the sexual association is found outside this union, *zanah* becomes synonymous with *na'aph* (commit adultery), the latter being thus a narrower term than the former. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* IV, p. 90ff. See also Peggy L. Day, *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 761; Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> See Dt. 22:21, 24; Lv. 20:10. Punishment for adultery varies in the books of the Hebrew bible. Lv. 20:10 prescribes the death penalty for both the man and woman engaged in adultery without specifying the manner. Ezekiel speaks metaphorically of a whore to be stoned and cut to pieces with the sword (16:40). The only instance of burning to death is seen in Lv. 21:9 in speaking of the prostitution of the daughter of a priest, because she profaned her father. We cannot prove, due to the lack of documents, whether burning to death was an ancient custom or not, or again, whether the death sentence for the woman alone was a later or earlier development.

<sup>36</sup> See Anthony Phillips, "Another Example of Family Law," *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980), p.243.

<sup>37</sup> In the Hebrew text, the active participle is used in the sense of a perfect participle. This verbal clause is joined by means of *waw* and the following subject. This means that she was already brought forth when she sent word. See *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), #142e.

<sup>38</sup> The syntax indicates that there was a pause before she spoke.

<sup>39</sup> Baba mezia, 60b, N.3. In Sotah 10b and also in Berakoth 43b, a similar explanation is given, saying,

“it is better for a man that he should cast himself into a fiery furnace rather than that he should put his fellow to shame in public.” The disciple asks, “whence do we know this?” The Rabbi answers, “from Tamar.” Hence, he is not speaking of any man, but a woman.

<sup>40</sup> Claus Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 54. He says that the statement of vindication of Tamar is the goal of the narrative. G. von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 361. He says that Judah’s acknowledgement of her right and his wrong is the climax of the narrative.

<sup>41</sup> The only other application to a woman is found in the words accusing Jerusalem, in allegorical style, of being an adulterous maiden (Ez.16:52).

<sup>42</sup> According to the texts of New Revised Standard Version (Oxford, 1989) and TANAKH (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

<sup>43</sup> *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, *op. cit.*, p. 430, n. 2.

<sup>44</sup> As Brueggeman sees, the narrative skips the story of Judah’s relation with the harlot and goes back to verse 11, which is the sending back of Tamar to her father’s house. Judah’s’s proclamation answers verse 11 and the narrator’s concluding words justify the righteousness of Judah, free from incest, referring to verses 12ff.

<sup>45</sup> See the detailed discussion on the father’s house of Niels Peter Lemcke, *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society Before the Monarchy* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), pp. 245–274. He argues against the

position of Gottwald in *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of Religion of Liberated Israel 1250–1050 BCE* (New York: Orbis Book, 1979).

<sup>46</sup> Vawter, *op. cit.*, p. 400. He says that the life of Tamar has now been fulfilled in the offspring that Judah will accept as his own.

<sup>47</sup> In Gn. 46:12, five sons of Judah are mentioned with the report of the death of Er and Onan. The descendants of Perez are specially mentioned, but nothing about Sherah. In Nm. 26:20, Sherah is mentioned separately from Er and Onan. In 1 Chr. 2:3 Judah’s sons are in two groups according to their mothers. In 1 Chr. 4:21 we cannot find the first three sons of Judah. They are no doubt the tribal names.

<sup>48</sup> See George Adam Smith, “The Borders and Bulwarks of Judea,” *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land XIII* (London: Fontana, 1973), pp. 177–202, esp. 196.

<sup>49</sup> Both Gn. 35:16–18 and 1 Sm. 4:19–22 tell the story of a woman who, after hearing the news of the birth of a son, dies.

<sup>50</sup> The genealogy of the house of Perez is found in Ruth 4:12, 18–22 ending with David, and also the descendants of Perez (Perezite tribe) in 1 Chr. 2:4–5; 9:4; 27:3; Neh. 11:4,6; Lk. 3:33. He is, as is Tamar, mentioned in Mt. 1:3 as among the ancestors of Jesus.

<sup>51</sup> See Susan Niditch, “The Wronged Woman Righted; An Analysis of Genesis 38,” *Harvard Theological Review* 72/1–2 (1979), pp. 143–149.