

Women in Scripture



*A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament*



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Tahpenes

"the wife of the king," from Egyptian *ta*, "the"
hnt, "wife," *pa*, "of the," and *nsw*, "king"

(1 Kgs 1:19–20)

Tahpenes is an Egyptian queen during the time of King Solomon (tenth century B.C.E.). She is mentioned in the Solomon narrative because her sister is given in marriage to Haddad, an Edomite ruler and adversary of Solomon. Tahpenes provides a court upbringing for her sister's son, Gennabath, in line with a long-established Egyptian tradition of caring for foreign royal sons, usually a diplomatic move evidencing good faith and alliance. The boy is the son of the refugee crown prince Haddad, probably giving the Egyptians no more than a minor card to play against Israel at a suitable time.

Because the name Tahpenes is an epithet, it gives no clue as to the woman's identity. Particularly notable is the biblical author's use of the Hebrew term *gehirā* ("queen") with Tahpenes, a title normally reserved for the Judean queen mother, the most important female in the royal family who usually exercised considerable authority in the affairs of the court.

SUSAN TOWER HOLLIS

FOR FURTHER READING: Scheuing, Linda S. "Queen." Toy, Iana. *Patterns of Queenship in Ancient Egyptian Myth and History*.

Tamar 1

"palm-tree," from Hebrew *tamar*, "palm-tree"

TAMAR 1 IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

(Genesis 38; Ruth 4:12; 1 Chr 2:4)

Tamar, whose story is embedded in the ancestor narratives of Genesis, is the ancestress of much of the tribe of Judah and, in particular, of the house of David. She is the daughter-in-law of Judah, who acquires her for his firstborn son, Er. When Er dies, Judah gives Tamar to his second son, Onan, who is to act as levir, a surrogate for his dead brother who would beget a son to continue Er's lineage. In this way, Tamar too would be assured a place in the family; Onan, however, would make a considerable

economic sacrifice. According to inheritance customs, the estate of Judah, who had three sons, would be divided into four equal parts, with the eldest son acquiring one half and the others one fourth each. A child engendered for Er would inherit at least one fourth and possibly one half (as the son of the firstborn). If Er remained childless, then Judah's estate would be divided into three, with the eldest, most probably Onan, inheriting two thirds. Onan opts to preserve his financial advantage and interrupts coitus with Tamar, spilling his semen on the ground. For this, God punishes Onan with death, as God had previously punished Er for doing something wicked.

Although the readers know that God has killed two of Judah's sons, Judah does not. He suspects that Tamar is a "fetal woman," a woman whose sexual partners are all doomed to die. So Judah is afraid to give Tamar to his youngest son, Shelah. As a result, Judah wrongs Tamar. According to Near Eastern custom, known from Middle Assyrian laws, if a man has no son over ten years old, he could perform the levirate obligation himself, if he does not, the woman is declared a "widow," free to marry again. Judah, who is perhaps afraid of Tamar's lethal character, could have set her free. But he does not — he sends her to live as "a widow" in her father's house. Unlike other widows, she cannot remarry and must stay chaste on pain of death. She is in limbo.

Ostensibly, Tamar is only waiting for Shelah to grow up and mate with her. But after time passes, she realizes that Judah is not going to effect that union. She therefore devises a plan to secure her own future by tricking her father-in-law into having sex with her. She is not planning incest. A father-in-law may not sleep with his daughter-in-law (Lev 18:15), just as a brother-in-law may not sleep with his sister-in-law (Lev 18:16), but in-law incest rules are suspended for the purpose of the levirate. The levir is, after all, only a surrogate for the dead husband.

Tamar's plan is simple: she covers herself with a veil so that Judah won't recognize her, and then she sits in the roadway at the "entrance to Enaim" (He-

brew *petah 'ēnayim*, literally, "eye-opener"). She has chosen her spot well. Judah will pass as he comes back happy and horny (and maybe tipsy) from a sheep-shearing festival. The veil is not the mark of a prostitute; rather, it simply will prevent Judah from seeing Tamar's face. And women sitting by the roadway are apparently fair game. So Judah propositions her, offering to give her a kid for her services and giving her his seal and staff (the ancient equivalent of a credit card) in pledge.

Judah, a man of honor, tries to pay. His friend Hirah goes looking for her, asking around for the *qēḏāšā* in the road (Gen 38:21). The NRSV translates this as "temple prostitute," but a *qēḏāšā* was not a sacred prostitute; she was a public woman, who might be found along the roadway (as virgins and married women should not be). She could engage in sex, but might also be sought out for lactation, midwifery, and other female concerns. By looking for a *qēḏāšā*, Hirah can look for a public woman without revealing Judah's private life. The woman, of course, is nowhere to be found. Judah, mindful of his public image, calls off the search rather than become a laughingstock.

But there is a greater threat to his honor. Rumor relates that Tamar is pregnant and has obviously been faithless to her obligation to Judah to remain chaste. Judah, as the head of the family, acts swiftly to restore his honor, commanding that she be burnt to death. But Tamar has anticipated this danger. She sends his identifying pledge to him, urging him to recognize that its owner is the father. Realizing what has happened, Judah publicly announces Tamar's innocence. His cryptic phrase, *šāḏāq minnēnī*, is often translated "she is more in the right than I" (Gen 38:26), a recognition not only of her innocence, but also of his wrongdoing in not freeing her or performing the levirate. Another possible translation is "she is innocent — it [the child] is from me." Judah has now performed the levirate (despite himself) and never cohabits with Tamar again. Once she is pregnant, future sex with a late son's wife would be incestuous.

Tamar's place in the family and Judah's posterity are secured. She gives birth to twins, Perez and

Zerah (Gen 38:29–30; 1 Chr 2:4), thus restoring two sons to Judah, who has lost two. Their birth is reminiscent of the birth of Rebekah's twin sons, at which Jacob came out holding Esau's heel (Gen 25:24–26). Perez does him one better. The midwife marks Zerah's hand with a scarlet cord when it emerges from the womb first, but Perez (whose name means "breaker-breach") edges his way through. From his line would come David.

Tamar was assertive of her rights and subversive of convention. She was also deeply loyal to Judah's family. These qualities also show up in Ruth, who appears later in the lineage of Perez and preserves Boaz's part of that line. The blessing at Ruth's wedding underscores the similarity in its hope that Boaz's house "be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah" (Ruth 4:12). Tamar's (and Ruth's) traits of assertiveness in action, willingness to be unconventional, and deep loyalty to family are the very qualities that distinguish their descendant, King David.

TIKVA FRYMER-KENSKI

SEE ALSO Part I: Bath-sheva; Ruth; Part II: Midwife (Gen 35:7, etc.); Prostitute (Lev 19:29, etc.).

FOR FURTHER READING: Bos, Johanna. "Out of the Shadows: Genesis 38: Judges 4:17–22; Ruth 3."

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TAMAR 1 IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

(Matt 1:2)

The first woman named in Jesus' genealogy, Tamar, who posed as a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law, Judah, is proclaimed righteous (Gen 38:26); she thus anticipates both Mary's unexpected pregnancy and Joseph's righteous behavior. Early Jewish tradition regards her as either Hebrew or a proselyte; in this latter role, she foreshadows (as do Ra-

hab, Ruth, and Bathsheba through Uriah) the Gentiles of Matthew's church.

See ALSO Part I: Rahab.

AMY-JILL LEVINE

Tamar 2

(2 Sam 13; 1 Chr 39)

Tamar, daughter of King David (c. 1005–965 B.C.E.), is listed after David's secondary wives' children in 1 Chr 39 without maternal lineage. However, in 2 Sam 13:1 she is introduced as apparently a full sister of Absalom (third son of David — 2 Sam 3:3; 1 Chr 3:2) and paternal half sister of Amnon (David's eldest son — 2 Sam 3:2; 1 Chr 3:1). She is good-looking and a virgin. Amnon desires or loves her (or both), so much that he becomes ill, but finds it impossible to "do anything to her" because "she was a virgin" (2 Sam 13:2).

Jonahab, Amnon's companion and cousin, advises him to ask David to send Tamar to Amnon's apartments, ostensibly to cook for him and make him well. Amnon does that, and Tamar is ordered by David to go to her brother's apartments. After she prepares food for him, Amnon dismisses all the servants. He asks Tamar to come to his sickroom with the food, where he takes hold of her and asks her directly to have sexual relations with him (v. 11). She refuses (vv. 12–13), citing shame and scandal as reasons. Also, she says, they can get married — David would allow it (which suggests the possibility of accepted royal sibling incest and unions in ancient Israel). Amnon does not listen to her; instead, he overpowers and rapes her. After the event, his "love" immediately turns into "hate." He dismisses her with two words, "Get out!" (v. 15). In spite of Tamar's protests, Amnon orders his servant to throw her out.

Apparently, Tamar feels at this point that she has to protect her reputation and that publicizing her state (the loss of her virginity) is better than concealment. She wears a "long robe with sleeves" or simply "a long outer garment" (Hebrew *kētonet passim*, like Joseph's unique garment in Genesis 37) as signifier of her royal and virginal state (v. 18).



This tiny brown Jasper seal from the seventh century B.C.E. is inscribed with the words "Belonging to Ma'udana, Daughter of the King." It depicts a lyre, which she may have played. Because seals with inscribed names were used to "sign" documents, a seal bearing a woman's name suggests that she could transact business, such as buying or selling property. See Tamar 2: Royal Daughters and Their Garments (2 Sam 13:18).

She tears her garment and displays other signs of mourning: placing ashes and her hand on her head and weeping. This is the last time we will hear Tamar's voice or even of her voice. When she comes to her brother Absalom's house, he immediately understands what has happened. He advises her to keep quiet and forget; she stands no chance against Amnon, "her brother" — implying that Amnon's status as firstborn and heir apparent to David would make legal redress impossible (v. 20). Tamar remains, desolate and mourning — for her virginity, for her life? — in Absalom's compound.

At this point, Tamar virtually disappears from the story. But this is not the end of the incident. Absalom is angry and hates Amnon "because he had raped his sister Tamar" (v. 22), although he