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Patriarchs, Prostitutes, and Potiphar's Wife: A Study of Genesis 38–39

Mindi Thompson

There are a lot of characters in the Old Testament. These books are full of people whose stories were recorded as part of the larger narrative of God's interactions with his chosen people. These characters do incredible things in the face of extraordinary circumstances. The characters in the Joseph novella (Gen 37–50) are just one example. Jacob's twelve sons are finding themselves in all sorts of interesting situations as they grow up in the promised land. There's the old trickster himself, Jacob, playing favorites with his wives and children. There's goody-two-shoes Joseph, tattling on his brothers and dreaming dreams big enough to pop the buttons on his richly ornamented robe. There's soft-hearted Reuben and lion-hearted Judah, vying for position as leader among their brothers. And those are just a few of the characters in the text.

There are two characters in particular whose stories are often neglected in the larger Joseph cycle. Tamar and Potiphar's wife might seem at first to have nothing to do with each other. Tamar is a Canaanite widow, banished to obscurity until she plays the harlot and pulls one over on her father-in-law. Potiphar's wife doesn't even get her own name, but she's got a house full of servants in Egypt—including a very handsome Joseph. One story sounds like a tearful Hallmark Channel movie, while the other has all the makings of a *Real Housewives* episode. These characters couldn't be more different, yet their stories are told side by side in Genesis 38–39. There must be *some* connection between these women.

A general overview of these chapters reveals a lot of connections between Tamar, Potiphar's wife, and the larger patriarchal narrative. A patriarch (Judah) settles down, takes a wife, and finds a wife for his son. We've seen that story with Abraham and his son Isaac. Another patriarch (Joseph) finds himself in a sticky situation with someone else's wife in Egypt. We've seen that story—twice!—with Abraham and his “sister wife,” Sarah (Gen 12, 20) and again with Isaac and Rebekah (ch. 26). In Judah's story, twins are born, but the younger manages to supplant the older—wait, do the names Jacob and Esau sound familiar? These larger thematic connections are interesting enough. But a closer reading brings up even more ties. Judah is tricked by Tamar's disguise similar to the way Isaac was tricked by Jacob's disguise when Jacob stole his brother's blessing (ch. 27). Tamar's “Recognize, please” when revealing the identity of the father of her child matches the brothers' “Recognize, please” when they present Joseph's bloodied and torn coat to Jacob (ch. 37). And speaking of coats, Joseph will lose another coat in Potiphar's house when he flees from Potiphar's wife. No matter how much these stories might seem to interrupt the flow of the Joseph narrative, their connections demonstrate just how much they belong in the story.

Looking at Tamar and Potiphar's wife specifically, more interesting connections arise. Each woman is depicted as a foreigner. Tamar is a Canaanite married into a patriarch's household, while the patriarch Joseph finds himself enslaved in an Egyptian household that includes Potiphar's wife. Each woman is bound by the cultural expectations of her time. Tamar is passed from husband to husband and, failing to produce an heir, relegated to a life of obscurity as a widow back in her father's household. Potiphar's wife is stuck in a household where her husband “did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate” (39.6). If all he cares about is food, he's not paying much attention to his wife. Some commentators go so far as to suggest

that Potiphar, like many Egyptian officials, was a eunuch.¹ Regardless of Potiphar's attentions or abilities, Potiphar's wife lives in a culture—just like Tamar's—where a woman's primary role is to produce children, preferably male heirs. Joseph Blenkinsopp has accurately noted that “the women on whom our sources report exhibit an invincible desire for marriage and children, not because they were ideologically naive and unenlightened but because they had few, if any, other options.”²

If these two women are so similar, why is one allowed to play the harlot while being declared righteous while the other acts like a harlot and is rejected? What is the difference between the pretend prostitute Tamar and the would-be prostitute Potiphar's wife?

Commentators regularly explain Tamar's actions with reference to the law of levirate marriage. This is a custom practiced not just in Israel but in many ancient Near Eastern cultures. The practice was intended to provide security for childless widows in communities where women had no legal right to own property. The law requires a *levir*—a brother or next-of-kin of a deceased husband—to produce a male child with the widow. That child would be raised as a surrogate heir to the deceased's property. Tamar's situation begins as a normal levir arrangement, with Judah's second son, Onan, commanded by his father to sleep with his sister-in-law upon his older brother's death (38.8). But Onan didn't want to create a child who would potentially compete with his own children for inheritance rights. This is similar to the nearer kinsman-redeemer in Ruth 4 who refuses to marry Ruth because “I might endanger my own estate” (Ruth 4.6). Onan's disobedience becomes his downfall, with his untimely death explained as God's punishment for his wickedness.³ But instead of continuing the levir practice with Judah's third son, Tamar is sent back to her father's household with promises that are never fulfilled. When Tamar takes matters into her own hands with a creative interpretation of levirate marriage, she's smart enough to demand proof of Judah's role as an unwitting kinsman-redeemer. Her foresight saves her life and the lives of her unborn twins. The younger of those twins, Perez, is ancestor to Boaz—no wonder he's willing to serve as a levir—and ultimately King David.

Potiphar's wife may be childless (the text doesn't say) but she's not a widow. Levirate marriage doesn't fit in her situation. Widow or not, if she doesn't have children, she's a failure. Joseph is second-in-command in the household. Potiphar's wife may be looking to him as an equally creative fix in a culture where having children is everything. When Sarah wasn't able to conceive earlier in the patriarchal narrative, she gave her maidservant Hagar to Abraham as a surrogate wife (Gen 16). Why wouldn't the manservant Joseph be a good surrogate husband? He's strong, good-looking, and has brought God's blessing over the whole household (39.5–6). If everything else in Potiphar's house is prospering, why shouldn't Potiphar's wife prosper as well?

But that's not how the story goes. Joseph refuses her proposition, claiming that such a wicked thing was a sin against God (v. 9). Joseph's statement indicates that the arrangement isn't Potiphar's idea: this turns what would have been a socially acceptable practice (surrogacy) into adultery. The wife's accusation later in the narrative also indicates that Potiphar wasn't aware of her intent to secure a child through Joseph. At the same time, though, Potiphar's response is far less severe than the normal punishment for attempted rape. Joseph could have been put to death or forced into hard labor—or emasculated—for his crime. Yet even though the text says that Potiphar burned with anger (39.19), his only response was to place Joseph in the royal prison, a sentence that allowed him again to earn a position of prominence. Perhaps Potiphar knows more than the text lets on about the motivations that led to the alleged crime. Sexual dalliances between elite society members and their household servants were quite common in ancient cultures like this one. Perhaps Joseph's punishment is more for the crime of refusal than anything else.⁴

1. David J. Zucker, “Madam Potiphar's Boy Toy: No Laughing Matter,” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 3.

2. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Family in First Temple Israel,” in *Families in Ancient Israel*, Family, Religion, and Culture series, Leo G. Perdue et al., eds. (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 77.

3. In this time period it was common to explain any untimely death as God's punishment. See Aaron Wildavsky, “Survival Must Not Be Gained Through Sin: The Moral of the Joseph Stories Prefigured Through Judah and Tamar,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 62 (1994): 39.

4. Zucker, “Madam Potiphar's Boy Toy,” 4–5.

Within the larger novella, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife functions to demonstrate Joseph's strong moral character as well as setting the stage for his rise to power. Unlike Tamar, Potiphar's wife is depicted as a temptation for Joseph to avoid. The two stories are likely arranged back to back to highlight Joseph's sexual purity as a foil to Judah's immorality in sleeping with a prostitute—not to mention Judah's refusal to ensure Tamar's legal rights as his widowed, childless daughter-in-law.⁵ Scholars and laypeople alike interpret these twin tales of patriarchs and prostitutes with admiration for Tamar's cunning deception while simultaneously condemning Potiphar's wife for wanting the same thing.

All too often the propositions in these two narratives are viewed solely as sex for pleasure. What modern interpreters fail to remember is that very few—if any—methods of birth control were available to women in ancient times. Having sex meant getting pregnant. Tamar pretends to be a prostitute not because she's looking for a good time but because she desperately wants a child. Why would Potiphar's wife be any different? And yet Potiphar's wife is vilified as an immoral slut while Tamar is praised as "more righteous than I" (38.26). Aaron Wildavsky acknowledges this double standard when he points out that Tamar slept with her father-in-law, an act specifically forbidden in the Torah (Lev 18.15), while Potiphar's wife and Joseph are unrelated adults.⁶ Yes, adultery is a sin—but so is incest.

The purpose of this article is not really about justifying or condemning the actions in Genesis 38–39. Instead, the author is more interested in how Tamar and Potiphar's wife provide examples of the varying ways female characters are depicted throughout the biblical narrative. Women are generally shadow figures in the Bible, mentioned only in passing as someone's wife or daughter or sister. Their primary function is to bear children.⁷ Many aren't named: their identity comes from their role in society. Even prostitutes are divided into (respectable?) cult prostitutes who participate in Canaanite fertility rituals and harlots who have sex for profit. Women in the text who find themselves outside of this normative role as wife and mother are applauded when they do what they can to correct the abnormality, even when their actions are as extreme as Tamar's. A childless woman in the Bible, whether unmarried or widowed, had better find herself a husband. And if she is married without children, she'd better find a way to change her status, whether it's through surrogacy (Sarah with Hagar in Gen 16, or Leah and Rachel with Bilhah and Zilpah in Gen 30), prayer (Isaac for Rebekah in Gen 25.21), or seeking a blessing from a priest who thinks you're drunk (Hannah and Eli in 1 Samuel 1). Over and over in the Bible we read stories of women whose desperate situation—infertility—is changed through human or divine intervention.

The situation is worse for foreign women. Rahab has to demonstrate her worth to the Israelite spies before they're willing to rescue her family and incorporate them into the Israelite community. The book of Ruth is such a compelling tale precisely because Moabites were not allowed to participate as the people of God. The fact that Ruth is King David's great-grandmother—in the same ancestry as Tamar and Rahab—merely reinforces the against-all-odds provision of God to "settle the barren woman in her home as a happy mother of children" (Ps 113.10).

Perhaps Potiphar's wife is left out of this provision because she isn't part of the chosen people. Even though Joseph's presence in Egypt allows for Israel's survival during the famine, there's still a strong anti-Egyptian bias in the text. Potiphar's wife is an Egyptian, which automatically makes her suspect. She's the problem that lands Joseph in prison. Worse, Potiphar's wife stands in the text as an exception to the rule that every woman in the Bible who wants a child gets one. Attaching immoral motivations to her actions may be a way to write her off rather than wrestle honestly with her situation. To be clear: this perspective does not excuse her attempted adultery or her false accusation of Joseph. But perhaps it makes her a little more human, a multidimensional person rather than a flat, passive character.

5. L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74 (2012): 670.

6. Wildavsky, "Survival Must Not Be Gained Through Sin," 41.

7. Easler adds that, in addition to a woman's "primary function" of producing male heirs, they are also expected to do the cooking, cleaning, and spinning. Philip F. Easler, *Sex, Wives, and Warriors: Reading Biblical Narrative with its Ancient Audience* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 99.

Juliana Claassens calls this passive characterization *dehumanization*. In the biblical text, she recognizes “numerous instances in which the worth or dignity of the female characters is threatened, violated, or potentially violated . . . female characters whose basic rights, needs and desires have not been recognized by their respective societies.”⁸ While individual characters in these texts can be criticized for their lack of compassion, Claassens emphasizes the role of the larger culture in “creating conditions responsible for violating the worth of the female characters.” She continues, “The dehumanizing conditions in which these [characters] find themselves are the result of (structural) injustice—that is, in the midst of tragedy, there are people who fail to act for the good of others. It is this mix of tragedy and injustice to which the female characters are left to respond.”⁹ According to Claassens, these texts function not only to identify unjust systems. They are intended to evoke a response from both characters and readers: empathy. Defining empathy as “the ability to *see* the face of the other,”¹⁰ she connects recognition, memory, and action as the process of empathy leading to transformation.¹¹ It is only when we truly see the face of the other that we are able to see to it that justice is done. Judah finally recognized Tamar’s situation and responded with the provision he should have been giving her all along. How might Joseph’s story have gone differently if Potiphar had recognized his wife’s situation and responded with empathy?

A word or two might be said at this point about how our interpretations of different characters in the Bible influence our theological perspectives today. Neither Tamar nor Potiphar’s wife are “go thou and do likewise” characters. Yet we find ways to accept—or at least explain—Tamar’s actions while Potiphar’s wife is nothing more than an evil temptress to be avoided at all costs. For good or for ill, the cultural assumptions of the ancient Near East have been carried forward into a completely different setting as though the way things were is still the way things are. Only when we are able to step back and place ourselves in the other person’s situation can we truly understand the different motivations of different people and the different choices they make in seemingly similar circumstances. Let’s try to give Potiphar’s wife the benefit of the doubt. And let’s be careful when assigning God’s blessing or curse to contemporary situations that we aren’t seeing prostitutes where God sees patriarchs.

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8. Claassens, “Resisting Dehumanization,” 660–61.

9. *Ibid.*, 664.

10. *Ibid.*, 668.

11. *Ibid.*, 669. This material draws from the work of Marjorie Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1999).