



Who Was Tamar in the Bible?

Tamar was the name of two unique women whose unusual stories can be found in the Old Testament. The first Tamar we read about in Scripture was the widow of Er and Onan, sons of Judah, Jacob's fourth-born son. The second was the sister of Absalom and daughter of King David who was raped by her half-brother Amnon.

Joel Ryan



Story 1: Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38 (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38>))

[Genesis 38](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38>) intersects the Joseph narrative with an absolutely bizarre story regarding one of Joseph's brothers, Judah, and his relationship with his daughter-in-law Tamar.

In the story, Judah, the fourth-born son of Jacob (Israel), had left his father and brothers and married a Canaanite woman named Shua. When their oldest son Er came of age, Judah and Shua found him a wife named Tamar. However, according to Scripture, "Er was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord took his life," making Tamar a widow ([Genesis 38:7](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38:7) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38:7>)).

In levirate marriage, the duty of the brother-in-law was to father a male heir with his brother's widow to carry his brother's name and ensure his inheritance ([Deuteronomy 25:5](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=de+25%3a5) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=de+25%3a5>)). In this case, the responsibility fell to Onan, Er's younger brother. Now although Onan took Tamar as his wife, he refused to bear a child that he would not be able to call his own. So instead of conceiving a child with Tamar, Onan "wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother." It was a vile act that displeased the Lord, and so, "He (the Lord) took his life also" ([Genesis 38:10](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38:10) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38:10>)).

Now twice-widowed, Tamar was childless and alone. Here, Judah was expected to provide another one of his sons to marry and care for Tamar. But rather than offer up his third son, Judah refused, telling Tamar, "remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up. I am afraid that he too may die, like his brothers" (**Genesis 38:11** (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38:11>)).

Now although Judah argued that he wanted to wait until Shelah was older, it's clear that he had no intention of marrying off another son to Tamar, an inexcusable neglect of his fatherly duties and injustice to Tamar. Not only that but Judah had grossly assumed that Tamar was the cause of Er and Onan's downfall, a failure to acknowledge and address the sins of his own children.

And then the story takes another odd turn. Later, after Judah's wife had passed, Tamar disguised herself as a harlot and offered herself to Judah, unbeknownst to him for he did not recognize her. Three months later, when Judah learned that Tamar was pregnant, he insisted Tamar be punished. That's when Tamar brought forth Judah's staff, seal, and cord, which he had given to her on the night of their encounter, to prove that he in fact was the father. In doing so, she had tricked Judah into performing the duties his sons should have.

Filled with guilt, Judah recognized his sin and acknowledged his failure to provide for his daughter-in-law, confessing, "she is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (**Genesis 38:26** (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=ge+38:26>)). In doing so, Judah became one of the first recorded examples of a public confession of personal sin.

Tamar and Judah later bore twin boys named Perez and Zerah. Ironically, out of Perez's line, both King David and later **Jesus** (<https://www.christianity.com/jesus/>). **Christ** (<https://www.christianity.com/jesus/>), the Messiah, were born (**Matthew 1:3** (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=mt+1%3a3>)). This is testament to God's prevailing mercy. For even the most flawed and sinful of men can be used and blessed by God, not because of their merit, but because of His grace and the power of repentance.

Story 2: Tamar, Amnon, and Absalom (2 Samuel 13
(<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13>))

The second Tamar of the Old Testament was the beautiful daughter of David and sister of Absalom. In this story, Amnon, Tamar's half-brother, was consumed by lust for his sister. Advised by his shrewd and manipulative friend, Jonadab, Amnon pretended to be ill, asking for his sister to come and care for him. David, being blind and oblivious to his son's temperament and lust, sent Tamar to her brother. When Tamar arrived, Amnon proceeded to rape her ([2 Samuel 13](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13>)).

Scripture then says that. "Amnon hated her with a very great hatred; for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her... now throw this woman out of my presence and lock the door behind her" ([2 Samuel 13:15](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13:15) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13:15>), 17). Amnon went on to treat Tamar as a used and unwanted outcast, a reputation she likely carried for the rest of her life.

Understandably, when Absalom found out that Amnon had raped his sister, he was furious. David also was very angry but neglected to address Amnon's sin or provide justice for his daughter. In doing so, David failed his daughter and further failed to temper Absalom's rage. "For Absalom hated Amnon because he had violated his sister Tamar" ([2 Samuel 38:22](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+38%3a22) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+38%3a22>)).

Consumed by hatred, Absalom plotted against Amnon and eventually had him killed two years later. Absalom then fled to Geshur and was gone for three years ([2 Samuel 13:34-38](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13:34-38) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13:34-38>)).

Scripture says that David mourned for his sons ([2 Samuel 13:37](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13:37) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+13:37>)), but in failing to confront Amnon for his sin, he had opened the door for Absalom to avenge Tamar and sin also. In doing so, David lost two sons and a daughter, watching as his family disintegrated before his eyes.

Upon being recalled to Jerusalem following his exile, Absalom returned with his own family, which included three sons and one daughter, whose name was Tamar ([2 Samuel 14:27](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+14%3a27) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+14%3a27>)), no doubt named in honor of his sister.

Absalom would later rebel against his father and plunge the kingdom of Israel into civil war. Absalom was eventually killed by Joab, David's general ([2 Samuel 18](http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+18) (<http://www.christianity.com/bible/bible.php?ver=niv&q=2sa+18>)), to the grief of his father.

What Do These Stories Mean?

Two women, two stories. Both deal with the spiritual blindness of father figures and the spiritual corruption and moral failure of young men. Both stories reveal injustices towards women and explore the consequences of sexual sin upon families. But in both unusual accounts, the grace of God is on display for those willing to confess and repent from their sin.

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