

“Finally a book that recognizes misunderstood biblical women as Kingdom builders rather than home-wreckers. What a joy to know teachers have a resource for exhorting their congregations to be like Peter and Paul, and also like Tamar and Rahab. As each chapter vindicates another woman, God’s love for the marginalized and oppressed jumps off the pages reminding us that he welcomes men and women to pick up the hammer and get to work in the *Missio Dei*.”

—**Nika Spaulding**,  
Resident Theologian,  
St Jude Oak Cliff

“*Vindicating the Vixens* is a monumentally important work in that it confronts the prevalent misinterpretations of some of the most critical women in Scripture. The faithful and meticulous research of Dr. Glahn and the contributing authors advances the powerful message of the book—God’s passion for the marginalized, the misunderstood, and the outsider. This book will challenge the way you look at women, both those in the Bible and those you meet every day.”

—**Paul Lanum**,  
Vice President of Publishing,  
RightNow Media

“One of the most important tasks of the believer is to practice faithful exegesis of Scripture—to allow the text to speak for itself without inserting personal or cultural bias. Through the centuries, many women of the Bible have been unfairly labeled, and thus, inaccurately taught. Drawing from faithful study, insight, and experience, the authors expose the errors passed down through the generations and bring to light this beautiful truth: The God of the Bible highly esteems and works through women. Let the vixens be vindicated and the word of God celebrated! I am so grateful for this book.”

—**Rebecca Carrell**,  
Conference Speaker, Bible Teacher,  
KCBI Morning Show Co-Host

“The biblical narrative provides an accurate description of gender. All human beings bear the imago Dei and enjoy the same God-given value and dignity. The fall distorted the relationship of humanity with God regardless of one’s gender. The salvation and restoration that Christ brings to humanity makes no distinction between male or female and, in fact, destroys all human-made gender marginalization. For this reason, it becomes imperative to handle faithfully the biblical text in order to have an appropriate understanding of gender, sexuality, and marginalization. Sandra Glahn selected an important group of contributors who together portray a faithful description of key women in the Bible. This exceptional and relevant text fills an unfortunate gap created by distorted, traditional perspectives and not from the Scriptures.”

—**Octavio Javier Esqueda**,  
Professor of Christian Higher Education,  
Talbot School of Theology at Biola University

“I always love the stories of God’s daughters in the Bible—God’s storybook of the relentless love and pursuit of His people. I especially love when the fuller stories open our eyes to surprising realities. In *Vindicating the Vixens*, Sandra Glahn has pulled together a treasure trove of those stories, written with careful theology, cultural comprehension, and captivating narrative. I can name a few of my favorites—Eve, Ruth, Deborah, Mary Magdalene—but truly, I loved getting to know every one of these too-often maligned sisters better. And so will you, I’m sure.”

—**Judy Douglass**,  
Writer, Speaker, Encourager, Director of Women’s Resources,  
Office of the President, Cru

“*Vindicating the Vixens* is a course correction for the Church—and an invaluable one at that. Chapter after chapter it redeems the reputation of many of the biblical women we’ve often misunderstood. In the process, it removes misunderstandings, misplaced convictions, and unintentional bias and in their place leaves a better sense of God’s love and justice. Reassessing my forgone conclusions has never felt so valuable.”

—**Kelsey Hency**,  
Editor in Chief,  
*Fathom*

# VINDICATING *the* VIXENS

REVISITING SEXUALIZED,  

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VILIFIED, AND MARGINALIZED  

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WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

SANDRA GLAHN  
E D I T O R

 Kregel  
Academic

*Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible*

© 2017 by Sandra L. Glahn, general editor

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*To those who seek to act justly.*

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?*

*To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.*

*—Micah 6:8, NIV*

*Profits from this book benefit the work  
of the International Justice Mission.*



## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

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**Eva Bleeker** (MACE, MAMC, MS) holds two master's degrees from Dallas Theological Seminary and an MS in Narrative Medicine from Columbia University in the City of New York. She serves as a hospital chaplain in Northern Virginia.

**Sarah Bowler** (ThM), communications manager at EvanTell, focused her graduate work on Old Testament Studies. She is the author of *Bathsheba's Responsibility in Light of Narrative Analysis*.

**Lynn H. Cohick** (PhD) is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College. She is the author of commentaries on Ephesians and Philippians as well as *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians*. She is also the coauthor of *The New Testament in Antiquity*, as well as numerous journal articles.

**Sandra L. Glahn** (ThM, PhD), general editor, is associate professor of Media Arts and Worship at Dallas Theological Seminary. She is the author or coauthor of more than twenty books, including the Coffee Cup Bible Study series, and she lectures in the areas of gender, sexuality, aesthetics, bioethics, and medieval art and spirituality. She is also a regular blogger at [aspire2.com](http://aspire2.com) and [bible.org](http://bible.org).

**Carolyn Custis James** (MA) has authored six books, including *Malestrom: Manhood Swept into the Currents of a Changing World*, and *Half the Church: Recapturing God's Global Vision for Women*. She blogs at [carolyncustisjames.com](http://carolyncustisjames.com), [MissioAlliance.com](http://MissioAlliance.com), and Huffington Post/Religion; and is an adjunct faculty member at Biblical Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. She is a consulting editor for Zondervan's Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament. Additionally, she is a visiting lecturer at various theological seminaries.

**Glenn R. Kreider** (ThM, PhD) is professor of theological studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and is the author of *God with Us: Exploring God's Interaction with God's People throughout the Bible*.

**Marnie Legaspi** (ThM) received her BS in Bible from Lancaster Bible College, after which she became a church planter in Eastern Europe. She earned her master's degree in Systematic Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, and her current vocation is working as a full-time mother.

An Arab Christian scholar from Lebanon, **Tony Maalouf** (ThM, PhD) is distinguished professor of World Christianity and Middle Eastern Studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He is the author of *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line*.

**Christa L. McKirland** (MA, ThM), is pursuing a doctorate in theology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Her graduate studies focused on the role of the image of God in human embodiment. She is the coauthor of *Who's in Charge? Questioning Our Common Assumptions about Spiritual Authority*.

**Eugene H. Merrill** (PhD), a past president of the Evangelical Theological Society, is now an independent scholar. Retired after thirty-eight years from Dallas Theological Seminary, he still serves as distinguished professor of Old Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Having earned degrees in Judaica (MA) and Middle Eastern Studies (PhD), he lectures in the areas of Hebrew and Semitic languages, biblical backgrounds, and Old Testament theology. Currently involved in an excavation at the possible site of biblical Ai, Dr. Merrill is the author of numerous reference books, and he has served as contributor, translator, and editor for numerous study Bibles.

**Amy Peeler** (PhD) is associate professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and associate rector at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Geneva, Illinois. She is the author of "*You Are My Son*": *The Family of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews*.

**Ronald W. Pierce** (MDiv, ThM, PhD) is professor of Biblical & Theological Studies in the Talbot School of Theology at Biola University. He served as coeditor of, and contributor to, *Discovering Biblical Equality*. He also authored *Partners in Marriage & Ministry*, as well as a commentary on Daniel.

**Timothy J. Ralston** (ThM, PhD) is a specialist in New Testament and professor of Pastoral Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, where he teaches courses on worship, aesthetics, pastoral theology, and homiletics. He is the author of numerous scholarly essays and journal articles.

After graduating from Bible college in his home country of Australia, **Henry Rouse** (ThM) was a school chaplain and a youth pastor for thirteen years. After earning his ThM in the US, he served on the faculty of Adelaide College of

Ministries in Adelaide, Australia, teaching biblical interpretation and preaching classes. He is currently an itinerant preacher in Adelaide, developing church-based resources aimed at training lay people to study and teach the Bible.

Vocalist and New York native **Sharifa Stevens** (ThM) earned a bachelor of arts degree from Columbia University in the City of New York before moving to Dallas, Texas, where she received a master of theology degree from Dallas Theological Seminary. She currently serves as a writer for the Pastoral Ministries Department of Insight for Living Ministries.

An architect turned vocational discipleship leader, **Karla D. Zazueta** (MACL) holds a master's degree from Dallas Theological Seminary and serves alongside her pastor-husband at Stonebriar Community Church (Spanish Ministries) in Frisco, Texas. She is the author of *Discipleship for Hispanic Introverts: Providing a Cross-Cultural Context for Life Change*. She is also a regular blogger at bible.org.



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## PREFACE

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S A N D R A   G L A H N ,   P H D

**T**he Scriptures contain many stories that include bad girls of the Bible. Jezebel had a man falsely accused and stoned to death so she could grab his property (1 Kings 21). Potiphar's wife abused political and sexual power (Gen. 39). And Salome was complicit in the beheading of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1–12). To name a few.

Yet the Scriptures include numerous stories of men who did evil, too. The first murderer? Cain (Gen. 4). The biggest womanizer? Solomon (1 Kings 11). Jehoram killed his six little brothers and a few officials to secure the position on his father's throne (2 Chron. 21:1–4). And let's not forget the one who betrayed the Lord with a kiss (Luke 22:48).

Doubtless, sin is an equal-opportunity enterprise. And certainly the desire of the team of scholars assembled for this project is not to vindicate women whose actions we should all despise. Nor is it our goal to make men look bad and women look good.

Our motivation is to handle faithfully the biblical text, which involves bringing to light a number of women labeled as “bad girls” who deserve a fresh look. Eve is blamed for the guilt of the whole human race. Yet, is that how the author of Genesis intended his readers to perceive her? People say the Middle East's problems go all the way back to Sarah because she was so desperate to conceive that she chose a sinful way to build Abraham's legacy. But did she? And was the author of the book of Esther really trying to show through Vashti's choice that bad things happen when women refuse to submit—even to unjust husbands?

In many cases the evil which people have seen in some of the Bible's so-called bad girls is sexual, even when the text suggests otherwise. Or sometimes the women in question were involved with sexual acts, but is it possible that we accuse them falsely? For example, some blame Bathsheba for seducing King David, but is that really how the text describes her actions?

People remember that the Canaanite Rahab was a harlot, but wasn't that her occupation before her statement of faith in Yahweh? Ruth gets accused of propositioning Boaz at the threshing floor. But did she? People vilify Tamar for seducing Judah, but is it possible she was exercising a legal right? (And why is Judah remembered for something other than his immoral act when we read about *him* in Jesus's genealogy?) Vashti's narrative is treated as if she was all that stood in the way of a Disney-princess love story rather than as a victim of exploitation. So why do we downplay the pain inflicted on her? People say Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute, but doesn't the text say only that she was delivered from demons? And when the women of Jesus's genealogy are mentioned, often speakers say that they were added to show that God forgives sexual sin. But is a focus on their sexual histories really what the Gospel writers were going for?

Then there's "the woman at the well." Jesus, a Jew, spent time with and spoke to a Samaritan at a time when Jews and Samaritans refused to speak to each other. Indeed, he spoke to a *woman*, even when doing so was taboo (see John 4:27). Now, while this woman's past with five husbands has led many to assume that she dumped multiple partners and had loose morals, is it possible that we have grossly misunderstood her—and what Jesus was communicating when he brought up her past?

Our view of these women and others has important ramifications. I was taught repeatedly that Jesus brings up the Samaritan woman's sin because that is what we should do when we talk with people about Jesus—start by talking about people's separation from God. But what if Jesus was actually reaching out to her with empathy at her greatest point of loss? Might that affect how we communicate the good news?

In her address to a 1940s British Public Morality Council, Dorothy L. Sayers talked about what she called "The Other Six Deadly Sins." Although more than seven decades have passed since she delivered the speech, little has changed. Sayers noted that a person may be "greedy and selfish; spiteful, cruel, jealous, and unjust; violent and brutal; grasping, unscrupulous, and a liar; stubborn and arrogant; stupid, morose, and dead to every noble instinct"<sup>1</sup> yet still we are ready to say of that person that he or she is not immoral if none of the sins in question were sexual. Sayers tells of a young man who once requested of her with perfect simplicity, "I did not know there were seven deadly sins. Please tell me the names of the other six."<sup>2</sup>

The tendency to blame women for sexual offenses has affected how we read about them in the pages of holy writ. And in numerous cases—some of which this work will explore in depth—women in Bible stories have either been falsely accused or their actual sexual sin has been held against them like a scarlet *A*, when that sin was not even the point of the biblical writer.

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1. Dorothy L. Sayers "The Other Six Deadly Sins," *Creed or Chaos?*, 63.

2. *Ibid.*

In addition to maligning some Bible women, we have marginalized others, wrongly downplaying or even ignoring their contributions. For example, Hagar was a God-fearing, abused slave from whom African Americans have long drawn inspiration. Yet most Bible studies done in white churches approach Sarah as the flawless hero and ignore Hagar altogether.

Some say that God used Deborah as a prophet/judge only because a good man couldn't be found, but does the text say anything of the sort? When I was in Bible college, I had a New American Standard Bible that featured some charts, and I noticed that the roll of judges included Barak, whom the text does not call a judge, but excluded Deborah, who is called both judge and prophet—joint titles given only to one other person, Samuel. Wondering about this omission, I read commentaries. And I found that the reason some gave as justification for replacing Deborah was that the writer of Hebrews 11 mentions Barak, but not Deborah. This, they said, proves he was the *real* judge.

But that Hebrews text actually says this: “And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (Heb. 11:32–34). Certainly it's true that the author mentions Barak and not Deborah by name. But the phrase “and the prophets” is broad enough to include her. And the writer goes on to describe those who “put foreign armies to flight.” Certainly Deborah is included in that group, as well (see Judges 4–5).

With the mention of David, the author of Hebrews includes the era of kings in the annals of faith history. And during that time, Huldah was among the prophets. Yet many people, folks with a lot of Bible training, have never heard of her. Why not?

All of the abovementioned women are the subjects of a fresh look in this work. Additionally, a chapter has been included to revisit the Virgin Mary, because many Protestants—perhaps in a pendulum-swing away from what they view as Mary-worship—ignore Mary altogether. I've attended numerous women's Bible studies focused on women of the Bible, and not one has ever included Jesus's mother. Yet where Protestants are quick to view the Virgin Mary as flawed, others have made her so pure that she remains unapproachable to the average person. The result: Another good Bible woman struck from the list of lives for us to emulate.

Like Dorothy L. Sayers, I never wanted to make “women's issues” my topic of focus. But I've also seen new life breathed into women who see with fresh eyes how the text values them—rather than criticizes, minimizes, or stereotypes them. And I've also see the positive effects on men and on male/female relationships when men gain a clearer understanding of the text as it relates to great women of faith. Additionally, if the author's point in the case of each of these

women differs from what we've made it—and this is a key question—what *are* the truths and applications we've missed?

One of the greatest surprises—and pleasures—for me as I edited this work was to find, as the chapters came in, that as slandered or ignored women in the Bible were vindicated, we recovered more than just a sense of how we should honor them. We could also see more clearly the point that the biblical author was actually trying to make by including these women in their stories. And time and again, God's heart for the the silenced, the marginalized, the powerless, the Gentile, the outsider, was what had been missing.

I've gathered a team of male and female scholars from different nationalities and ethnicities, as well as educational institutions and religious traditions, to address these issues and more. The writers are “all over the map” on their view of women preaching and even in their approaches to the women explored in this book. But they agree on this: We must revisit what the Scriptures say about some Bible women we have sexualized, vilified, and/or marginalized. Because, above all, we must tell the truth about what the text says.

Maybe you suspect we're doing this because the radicals and liberals are taking over (cue evil laugh). Or you might think we're pushing some social agenda. Neither is the case. Conversely, there are compelling reasons that a reexamination is necessary.

First, doubtless the issue of gender roles in the church and society is a hot topic, and there are some radicals out there. We need to make sure our position is truly grounded in the Word. As such, we acknowledge that more men and women should be partnering in ministry, imaging God as male and female. If we are *rightly* criticized for having vilified some women in the Bible, let us embrace the fact that Jesus is the Truth, and listen to truth, regardless of its source.

Another reason to reexamine some passages is because of what's at stake. Our own view of women reveals what we think God says about half the people on the planet. And our view of women will also determine how we treat our female friends and coworkers, our mothers, our daughters (if we're parents), and our wives (if we're husbands). Our perspective affects how we view power and how we see sex. If our views are based on faulty interpretations of Scripture, we will embrace a faulty view of God. Indeed, God's very reputation is at stake if we misunderstand how to view those who image him.

A third reason to reexamine some women in the Bible is because new information has come to light. The Internet has given researchers access to information and to additional colleagues inaccessible even ten years ago. Online availability of ancient documents, archaeological finds, geographical surveys, and research projects from all over the world have given us clearer pictures of what the ancient world looked like. Social history studies are helping scholars better identify how people wore their hair and why, how they greeted each other, and ancient views of acceptable and unacceptable practices. Gender studies help us read between the lines for power differentials and subtexts.

Does new information and nuanced language solve all our problems? No. But an exploration of it will help us better understand how cultures and societies have developed over millennia, and how beliefs and viewpoints have changed. And these factors will hopefully help us better understand how to view Scripture and apply it in our own time. The world has not always had a postmodern or post-Industrial Revolution way of looking at life and labor or the roles that humans play. So we need to take a step back and consider how those before us did see life and roles. Perhaps new data does not answer all our questions, but it may help us ask better questions.

One more significant change in recent years is a beautiful broadening of the makeup of participants in biblical translation and interpretation. More women have entered the academy, and more members of underrepresented groups are engaging in theological conversations. And the enhanced ability to share information from a distance allows us to welcome more international perspectives and include broader socioeconomic representation, all of which creates synergy and enriches our knowledge. Aussie Henry Rouse, whom you will meet in the chapter on hermeneutics, put it this way:

For the first forty years of my life, my library of Christian authors consisted primarily of white western males. But what happens when the task of biblical interpretation is faithfully applied by an Asian woman or a Latino man? Does an Ethiopian believer see things that a European misses? Would a woman catch things in the text that a man might miss? Does this Aussie bloke see things slightly differently from how an American might? (Consider what we envision when we hear the word “football.”) The truth is that never before has there been such a diversity of eyes on the text in conversation with one another. It is no longer just males who do biblical interpretation, nor is it just people from your demographic grouping. And this is a wonderful development. We do well to listen to what everyone has to say, especially because the new eyes are just as well educated (sometimes more), trained (sometimes more) and godly (sometimes more) as you and I are.

Although the authors contributing to this book may have many differences, we are united in our desire to be faithful in biblical interpretation (more on that ahead, too), and our desire is to reexamine the topic thoughtfully, intelligently, and prayerfully.

Not all contributors agree with each other on every point. But I have left in their varying views, in order to challenge our thinking and drive us back to the text. I’ve been guided in this by Rupertus Meldenius (c. 1627), who wrote, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” Additionally, the authors’ contributions have not been edited in a way that would give them similar voices. So you will find variety in tone, style, and even number of footnotes and transliterations from chapter to chapter.

Also, to benefit sexualized, vilified, and/or marginalized women in our own day, profits from this project will benefit the International Justice Mission (IJM), which seeks in the name of Christ to empower the sexualized, marginalized, and vulnerable.

Despite her hesitation about addressing issues related to women, Dorothy L. Sayers eventually felt compelled to speak out. That's because she noticed some characteristics of Christ's interactions with women that drive us, too:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as “The women, God help us!” or “The ladies, God bless them!”; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman's nature.<sup>3</sup>

It is this Jesus whom we hope to help readers see more clearly, love more dearly, and follow more nearly until his kingdom comes and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Sandra L. Glahn  
Dallas, Texas  
Summer 2016

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3. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human? Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society*, 68–9.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	The Anchor Bible
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i>
BADG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i>
BDB	<i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i>
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i>
HALOT	<i>Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>



# INTRODUCTION: THE HERMENEUTICS OF “HER”

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HENRY ROUSE, THM

I grew up in the 1970s. We didn't have smartphones, text messaging, emails, or the Internet. But we had color TV, and we watched *Happy Days*. Life was good. I started using Brylcreem when I was fourteen, had my sights set on a black leather jacket, and “The Fonz” was my hero. You remember Fonzie, right? Blue jeans, leather jacket, motorcycle—he was cool, slick, and tough. All the guys wanted to be like him, and all the girls wanted to be with him. Everything he did was great. He saved females in trouble, rescued nerds from bikers, and taught us all lessons about working hard, respecting our parents, and being cool. Fonzie had only one problem: He could never admit he was wrong. He knew when he was wrong, and he would *try* to admit it, but he just couldn't say the words. “I was wr-wr-wr-wr . . . I was wr-wr-wr-wr . . . I was not exactly right.”

Like Fonzie, most of us find it hard to say, “I was wr-wr-wrong.” It's hard to admit to my kids when I get angry and I need their forgiveness. It's hard to confess to my wife that I forgot that important thing because I failed to pay attention. I don't like being wrong, and I don't like admitting it. It makes me feel weak. And it assaults my pride. And if I admit I'm wrong in one area, in how many other areas have I been wrong? My own self-delusions of intelligence and superiority come crumbling down. So, I prefer to protest, shift the blame, excuse, and rebut—just let me keep my pride intact.

What does this have to do with hermeneutics and women in the Bible? A lot. What if I've been wrong about a lot of Bible stories? Seriously, what if I, what if you, have been wrong? What if some of our views about certain women in the Bible are mistaken? What if the conclusions we have drawn from these faulty views are misguided? And what if these misguided conclusions have led us to poor applications? Would you and I be prepared to admit we were wrong? Would we be willing to confront ourselves in the mirror and be really honest?

Or are we just like Fonzie—too tough and too cool ever to admit that we could be wr-wr-wr-wr . . . not exactly right?

Before we go any further, I want to be really frank. This is not some book written by theologically liberal, wannabe scholars attempting to be politically correct or manipulating the text in order to be culturally relevant. The contributors to this book love God’s Word. And we don’t see our task as reinterpreting the text to make it more relevant or more acceptable than it already is—as if that were possible. Our goal is simply to study it and make sure we are being faithful to it. We are not questioning the inspiration, inerrancy, or infallibility of the Scriptures. We are, however, questioning the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of our human interpretation of them. I say these things because often those who challenge us to revisit some of the texts we’ll explore in this work get accused of having a low view of Scripture. But as I said, the issue here is not one of inspiration but of interpretation.

Indeed, each one of the contributors to this book believes that Scripture is God’s revelation of himself, his work, and his plans for humanity. Being divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, the original text is authoritative, reliable, and useful in all that it teaches. And any view that treats it as less than this, we believe, diminishes its authority, reliability, and usefulness in the affairs of human life. It is the very Word of God.

Not only are the Scriptures God-breathed, we believe, but they also consist of writing. Of all the means of communication God could have used, he chose to inspire human authors to write. He could have used a DVD (Divine Video Disk) series with episodes from every era of biblical history—a holographic projection, perhaps, with messages from Adam and Eve, Abraham, Ruth, Peter, Paul, and Mary. Yet God chose to use human beings with all their faults and failures, personalities and problems, backgrounds and baggage. And he moved them to write. So the Word that we have is the *written* Word. It’s divine in its source, absolutely; but it’s also literature. And as it is a work of literature, we must—and this is critical—discuss and study it as literature without diminishing its divine origin.

Our motives in studying are also essential. As the late Dr. Howard Hendricks used to warn, study of the Bible is not meant to make us smarter sinners. We are not increasing knowledge of the text or correcting faulty understanding so we can wow our friends with great dinner conversations, impress ourselves with the abundance of our theological knowledge, or make us critics about everyone else’s misguided efforts. The goal of our instruction is love (1 Tim. 1:5), the personification of which is Jesus Christ. Conformity to his image is our goal. And the bearing of God’s image is not solely for our own benefit. We are meant to be light to others in order to bring them to know God (Isa. 49:6, Matt. 5:14–16). It is our belief that a more accurate understanding of how the Scriptures present women in the text will help tear down walls of misogyny that have stood as barriers between people and the God who inspired the Word.

So how do we handle the text? *How* we study Scripture, the process we use to understand it, is hermeneutics. And part of the challenge in understanding Scripture is that people use different hermeneutics. Rather than going into an extended discussion of various methods, however, we will simply outline the method used by the authors of this book.

As we approach Holy Writ, there are certain literary rules we follow to interpret it accurately, understanding writing as a science, an art, and a practice that requires the help of the Holy Spirit. Yet to call it an “art” is not to suggest that we interpret Scripture as we would an abstract painting or sculpture, in which authorial intent often matters little. Hermeneutics is the craft of using well the laws of interpretation, and doing so in the context of community.

That community can involve our brothers and sisters in the faith from past eras. But it also includes men; women; Aussies (like me); Palestinians (like Dr. Maalouf, who wrote the chapter on Hagar); Californians (like Dr. Pierce, who wrote the chapter on Deborah); transplanted Americans living in Scotland (such as Ms. McKirland, who wrote on HulDAH); Chicagoans (like Drs. Cohick and Peeler, who wrote about the Samaritan woman and Junia); African-American New Yorkers (like Ms. Stevens, who wrote the chapter on Vashti); an expert on Latino discipleship (like Ms. Zazueta, who wrote on Mary Magdalene); and all number of combinations. The more eyes and perspectives on the text, the better.

Belonging to Christ means becoming a member of a body with many parts. Yet pop Christianity has sold us an individualistic view of spirituality. We can have any version of the Bible we like. We can have it downloaded and read to us on our smartphones. We can “do church” online. We can worship alone. We can tithe online. We can listen to the best preachers in the comfort of our own living rooms at a time that suits us. We can even grab our two best mates and “do communion” on Saturday night before the big game. Do you see a problem with this picture? It’s not that any one of these things breaks with church tradition, or even violates Scripture. Rather, it’s that the combined effect can lead to an individualistic Christianity that is not biblical Christianity. The church, the body of Christ, is a community. And while we are told to pray in our closets (Matt. 6:6), we do our theology, our hermeneutics, in community.

So how do we eliminate the guesswork and arrive at a faithful interpretation of Scripture? I suggest six questions to ask every time we approach the text. These will give us a sound basis for interpretation and application.

## SIX QUESTIONS WE BRING TO THE TEXT

### **What does the text actually say?**

It is critical that the first step in biblical interpretation is knowing exactly what we are looking at. We all come to the text with baggage and preconceived ideas. Often, we’ve already heard sermons, memorized verses, and read devotional

books on the passage at hand. So we may think we know what it means as soon as we read it. But we must stop and ask, “What does the text actually say?”

### **What do I observe in and about the text?**

We begin with genre. Historical narrative differs significantly from poetry, which differs significantly from apocalyptic literature. Authors use different genres and styles to convey different messages. If I want to tell my wife how much she means to me, I might use poetry to get my point across. I could write, “I would swim the seven seas for you.” If I do so, I’m not lying, but she knows it’s impossible, and I hate swimming. Yet the message of the poem is true. I’m saying that I love her and would do whatever I could to bring her happiness. Genre matters.

We also pay attention to the details of the passage. We consider all the words that the Spirit inspired the authors to use, and we look at how the authors have put together those words to form phrases and sentences. We’re not just looking for a general vibe of the passage. We’re not jumping to conclusions. We take time to notice the grammar and structure. What are the key nouns and verbs? How does the author use them in the sentence? How do the words relate to one another? We identify words that require extra study, perhaps because they are unusual or unfamiliar. We observe whether the words are being used in a literal sense (e.g., water in a lake), illustratively (e.g., lake of fire), or perhaps in a figure of speech (“come hell or high water”). We look for words that the author seems to be emphasizing, often by repetition, such as the word “sent” in the David-and-Bathsheba story.

Something else we observe is the context of the passage. Every word, sentence, and paragraph sits within a greater context. Each chapter exists within a book, and each book exists within the context of the whole Bible. Whenever we take a verse out of its context and turn it into a greeting-card saying or bumper-sticker proverb, we are in danger of ignoring the context and missing the truth.

### **What did this text mean to the original audience?**

Next, we seek to put ourselves in the shoes of those who heard or read its words the first time. We seek to know why Moses wrote what he did to the Israelites, newly freed from Egypt and headed to Canaan. We want to understand what the Corinthians understood as they received their letters from Paul. We try to stand in the sandals of first-century persecuted believers as they heard the Gospel of Mark for the first time. This step is the heart of interpretation. What did the text mean to the original audience?

Often the text itself gives us clues. So we identify when the text was written and in what circumstances. We try to discover the author’s purpose in writing. And although the Bible was written for us, we have to understand that it wasn’t originally written *to* us. So discovering the author’s original intended meaning helps us better understand how it applies today.

We ask, “What particular situation or need caused the author to write these things to these people?” and “What response was the author looking for from the original recipients?” Knowing the answers to these questions helps us connect the dots to similar issues or situations that we might struggle with today. For example, we don’t concern ourselves with meat sacrificed to idols, as Paul did. But we do have concerns about causing weaker believers to violate their consciences—a timeless issue in Paul’s situation.

To discover the author’s intended meaning and how the original audience would have understood it, we look at background information. We study the text linguistically and literarily to discover how people wrote when the author wrote the text. How were certain words used, and what did they mean? What styles of writing were common? What metaphors and figures of speech were used then, and what did they mean?

We also study history and geography to understand what was going on in the specific places of the world of which the Bible speaks. Who was in political control? What was the economic situation? Which peoples held power and influence at the time? Did the topography or weather of a region affect the readers’ understanding?

Recognizing that every word of Scripture was written within a cultural context to people in a cultural context, we must take culture into account when interpreting the Bible. The culture of the author and audience significantly affected their understanding of what was written. Cultural background studies include explorations of what people believed, how they thought and communicated, what they did, how they lived their daily lives, and how they worked. Such studies cover categories such as politics, religion, economics, agriculture, social and familial habits, fashion, diet, architecture and art, to name a few.

In the past few decades, especially with the influx of more women into history departments and participating in archaeological studies, emphasis has expanded from political history to include more social history. What did people wear? What did they eat? What was the average life expectancy? Because so much of the New Testament relates to the lives of non-elites, Christians seeking a better understanding of cultural backgrounds have especially benefited from this development—and at a time when we can more easily communicate findings through electronic media.

### **What was the point?**

A key task of hermeneutics is to understand the point the author was trying to make. When Paul spoke of “coverings” in 1 Corinthians 11, we seek to find out if he was primarily concerned with fashion trends or if what someone did with his or her hair had symbolic meaning. In the same way that an American wearing a ring on the fourth finger of the left hand has meaning, what did it mean for a Corinthian to wear his or her hair a certain way? Our background studies combine to help us determine the real point of the passage. As we take all this into account,

perhaps we conclude that Paul was primarily concerned about husbands and wives showing respect to Christ and each other in the context of public worship.

### **What truths in this text are timelessly relevant?**

Before we skip ahead to application and demand that men cut off ponytails and women wear hats to church, we ask, “What truths are timelessly relevant?” In asking this question of a passage, we are not seeking to ascertain what parts of the Bible are still relevant, as we believe the entire Word of God is relevant. What we are doing is taking the biblical truth and asking which applications from this passage are always relevant to all people. We want to know what truths apply regardless of when, where, and to whom they are applied. For example, Old Testament biblical law said a rapist had to marry his victim. Does this mean we advocate for criminal-victim marriages today? The practice, as envisioned for the original audience, was to make the one who violated a woman responsible for her lifelong care. The Bible has always stood for justice, but how that works itself out in different eras and places may change from culture to culture. The Scriptures are absolute truth; how we apply them has some fluidity.

### **How does the part fit the whole?**

For a truth to be timeless and universal, it must be consistent with the entire teaching of Scripture. For example, the Bible is always consistent in the theological truth that husbands and wives should show respect for each other, even if the practical expression of that truth changes from one period to another. Consider that, at one time it was considered a mark of respect to rise from my seat whenever a woman entered the room. This was not always the way, and certainly is no longer practiced in the northern suburbs of South Australia. In fact, in some circles people view such practices as archaic, sexist, and disrespectful. Those of us who like the practice have to be careful that we don’t disrespect the very principle of respect by clinging to applications that are no longer valid.

Instead of jumping straight to application after a quick reading of a biblical passage, we must understand the timeless truth behind a practice in order to make sure the practice lines up with that truth. Do you greet everyone with a holy kiss? Some do, but some don’t. The ones who don’t aren’t necessarily disobedient, even though the instruction to do so appears in the imperative.

Indeed, some may object at this point by saying, “Well, I just take the Bible literally!” But the reality is this: No, you don’t. Do you regularly invite strangers to use your guest room or couch (Heb. 13:2)? Have you followed Jesus’s command to sell all you have to give it to the poor so that you may have treasure in heaven (Luke 12:33)? Do you follow his command to wash others’ feet (John 13:14)?

No, we don’t take the Bible literally in a consistent manner. But we should take the Bible as literally as it was intended to be taken. We treat metaphors as metaphors, poetry as poetry, and narrative history as narrative history. We don’t

turn poetry into narrative, apocalyptic passages into scientific treatises, nor read metaphors as real life. We don't do that with any other piece of literature, nor should we do so with the Bible—special as it is.

### THEY WERE SINNERS LIKE WE ARE

You would think after nearly two thousand years of studying the New Testament and even longer for the Old, we would have things worked out by now. Why isn't what our forefathers and foremothers believed good enough for us? Assuming that they had it all right, that would be a fair deduction. But did our spiritual ancestors have everything right? Did the early church even get everything right?

Faulty thinking revealed itself almost as soon as the church was born. Racism surfaced in Acts 6 with the controversy between the Hellenistic widows and the Hebrews. Did they not understand that all men and women were created equally in the image of God? It seems that the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to write the book of Acts, in part, to demonstrate clearly that the gospel message was for people of every tribe, tongue, and nation. And that was not a new message. God told the Israelites that they were to be a light to the nations (Isa. 49:6), but many of them didn't seem to get it then, either.

After the church was established, more problems arose. Paul had to get serious with the Galatian church, because they were turning away from grace and going back to legalistic Judaism. Didn't they know that salvation was by grace through faith? Theological correction of the church's biblical interpretation began early. And we've been doing so ever since, because in our humanity, we always have a way of messing things up.

The Reformation was probably the biggest reexamination of biblical interpretation in modern history. Protestant Christians affirm that a reexamination of the kind that Luther undertook was necessary and good. Because of Luther's reexamination, we have a great appreciation for salvation by grace through faith in Christ. Hadn't the church in the first fifteen centuries read Galatians? Of course they had. But somewhere along the way, the interpretation of many became faulty, which led to poor application. That was just one of the corrections that Luther brought by reexamining the biblical interpretation of the day.

Another more recent reexamination of biblical interpretation concerned slavery, segregation, and human rights. Slavery in the US was defended by some people's biblical interpretation. Yet the very reexamination of this interpretation caused people to see anew that all human beings are equal and worthy of respect, regardless of the color of their skin or the nation in which they were born. Slavery wasn't an issue fought entirely in the realm of biblical interpretation, but for a nation that held deeply religious views centered in the Bible, the interpretation of verses about slavery had great bearing on the eventual outcome.

We have always been reexamining our biblical interpretation, because we understand that every generation has its unique brands of blindness. For example, the medieval mystics might have starved themselves and deprived

themselves of too much sleep, but they also prayed much more than most of us do. Additionally, we all come to the text with preconceived ideas, so it stands to reason that our biblical interpretation has some fallibility. Instead of fearing a reexamination, we should pursue a constant reexamination in order to challenge ourselves toward growth. The alternative is to assume we have it all figured out and cling to the status quo.

There are only two possible results of reexamination—and both are beneficial. Reexamination either confirms that something is right and strengthens our understanding and faith, or it points out where we have been wrong and enables us to correct our course, leading us closer to conformity with Christ. We can't lose. But it might require us to change some of our views, confess our mistakes, and admit that we were wr-wr-wr-wr... Can you say it? Wrong.

SECTION I

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THE WOMEN IN JESUS'S GENEALOGY:  
MORE THAN REDEEMED SINNERS



CHAPTER 1

TAMAR:  
THE RIGHTEOUS PROSTITUTE

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CAROLYN CUSTIS JAMES, MA

War creates moral dilemmas. In Germany during WWII, a young Jewish girl bravely faced a life-altering moral catch-22. German soldiers were rounding up Jewish friends and neighbors and transporting them to Nazi concentration camps. At any moment, she and her family could be next. Well aware that a concentration camp meant suffering and death to her entire family, she made a fateful moral decision. To rescue her family from a horrific fate, she gave herself to the Nazi soldiers. From that day on, her self-identity changed forever. She saw herself as a prostitute. The successful rescue of the family she loved came at unspeakable cost to her—leaving permanent scars of a trauma she would carry to her grave and a dark secret that, if revealed, would brand her in the eyes of others with an indelible stigma as a Nazi collaborator, an immoral woman, or both. Instead of being hailed as the selfless hero she truly was, she'd be classed as damaged goods. Faced with the moral dilemma of either losing her entire family in a Nazi death camp or prostituting herself to Nazi brutes, she chose the latter.

Bible stories also reveal moral dilemmas. Tamar, the infamous Canaanite daughter-in-law of the Old Testament patriarch Judah, faced a life-altering moral dilemma as well. But it's difficult, if not impossible, for modern readers to view her in that light because, when we read her story in Genesis 38, the word "prostitute" leaps off the page and colors everything else we read or think of her. That one word says it all. Without a pause, the judicial gavel comes crashing down with a thud, and we become incapable of seeing that she is dealing with a complicated situation. Instead, with a single blow Tamar

is tried, convicted, and sentenced with no possibility of parole. Never will I forget the awful words of condemnation that thundered from the pulpit of one pastor. “Tamar corrupted the line of Christ!”

If we know anything at all about the story of Tamar and Judah, we know it as one of the most salacious moments in the entire Old Testament. Tamar, the unscrupulous widowed daughter-in-law of the patriarch Judah, disguised herself as a prostitute in order to seduce her own father-in-law. How could the story of Tamar be anything other than a tawdry scandal?

Often pastors preaching through Genesis opt to skip over Tamar’s story, which interrupts the far more interesting and better-known story about Joseph, popularized by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The gripping story of Joseph, sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt, carries on seamlessly without her anyway, sparing the pastor from the awkward challenge of trying to explain her bewildering R-rated story. In addition to the obvious concern that such adult material is unsuitable for a general audience, pastors also face the daunting challenge of trying to salvage any useful application or word of inspiration to offer their congregations. Besides, just when suspense is heating up in the Joseph story and folks are hanging on the edge of their seats, it seems counterproductive to switch to a seemingly irrelevant story that will likely take the oxygen out of the sanctuary.

Even those who courageously wade into this perplexing narrative seem to find little more than fodder for warnings about the seductions of manipulative, vindictive women. Some think Tamar was so selfishly determined to become a mother that she was willing to stoop to anything, even prostitution, to conceive a child—a method that allegedly gave her the added benefit of getting even with her unsuspecting father-in-law for breaking his word to her. All of this makes the prospect of rescuing Tamar from her “vixen” status seem unpromising, to say the least. The evidence is stacked against her. But upon examination, the Bible actually contains significant clues that warrant a closer look, and which should raise doubts about any negative opinions of Tamar.

For starters, her descendants don’t regard her as a skeleton best kept hidden in the family closet. Moments when you’d think Tamar’s shady chapter of family history should remain behind closed doors are precisely the moments when they bring her out into the light. She is publically named in a beautiful wedding blessing at the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, two individuals of sterling character—hardly a fitting moment to broach the subject of a family scandal. Yet, there she is in glowing words of blessing: “Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah” (Ruth 4:12, NIV). Significantly, both King David and his son Absalom named their daughters “Tamar” (2 Sam. 13:1; 14:27). In the Hebrew culture, names carried a lot of weight, for parents chose names that gave their children reasons to aspire, not as cause for shame or for them to be ridiculed. Then, of course, the apostle Matthew names Tamar (along with

four other women) in the royal genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:3)—a noticeable break from the customary exclusion of women from genealogies, and reason to reexamine those other women’s stories too.

But by far the most compelling reason to reconsider negative opinions of Tamar is another word that shows up in her story—when none other than Judah himself describes her as “righteous” (Gen. 38:26). How can the shameful actions of Tamar be considered “righteous”?

### TAMAR IN PATRIARCHAL CONTEXT

One of the biggest mistakes we make in attempting to understand biblical narratives is failing to take into account the cultural context in which they occur. Biblical stories take place within an ancient patriarchal culture that is utterly foreign to our Western, American, egalitarian culture. This puts us at a serious disadvantage when we interpret Scripture, especially when we come to stories such as Tamar’s. Without insight into the customs of ancient patriarchy, we will miss, distort, or trivialize the message.

Unfortunately, the fact that patriarchy appears on virtually every page of the Bible has led to the mistaken conclusion that patriarchy (at least a kinder, gentler version) is the divinely ordained way God means for us to live. But, as I’ve argued elsewhere, “Patriarchy is not the Bible’s message. Rather, it is the fallen cultural backdrop that sets off in the strongest relief the radical nature and potency of the Bible’s gospel message. We need to understand that world and patriarchy in particular—much better than we do—if we hope to grasp the radical countercultural message of the Bible.”<sup>1</sup>

Patriarchy creates moral dilemmas, too. Tamar’s story is a key example of how far afield we’ve gone in understanding the Bible—and her story in particular—by failing to employ this powerful interpretive tool. Details of the ancient patriarchal culture will surface as we examine Tamar’s story. For the moment, it will suffice to mention three elements of patriarchy that shape this particular story and create that dilemma for Tamar.

First, patriarchy (“father rule”) invests men with priority, power, and authority over women and relies on female submission. Patriarchy essentially deprives women of agency and legal rights. Females become the property of men and are expected to submit. We will see in Tamar’s story that Judah held life-and-death power over her. Without investigating the charges against her and with a blatant double standard, he immediately demands an honor-killing for *her* sexual “misconduct”—a violent response that occurred back then and still happens today in intensely patriarchal cultures whenever a female is involved (or alleged to be involved) in something that tarnishes the honor of men in her family.

Second, patriarchy invests men with power and authority over other men, with devastating consequences in both directions. Something profoundly

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1. James, *Malestrom*, 31.

unhealthy happens when one man wields power over another. The patriarchs owned other men (and women) as slaves, as well as the children their slaves produced. *Primogeniture*—described by some as the linchpin of patriarchy—ranked sons by birth order. It established within the family unit a fixed male hierarchy among brothers. Primogeniture elevated a man's firstborn son over his younger brothers, making him something of a crown prince in the family and giving him authority over his younger siblings. The eldest brother also inherited twice as much of a man's estate as his other sons.

Tamar's story makes no sense unless we see how she gets caught in the crossfire of primogeniture, both within Judah's family of origin and among his sons. At the same time, it is important to note how the Bible repeatedly overturns this culturally established order<sup>2</sup> in the stories of the patriarchs—most often by God's decree. God chose Isaac, not Abraham's firstborn, Ishmael. Although parental favoritism played a role in Isaac's family (for Rebekah preferred Jacob, and Isaac favored Esau), God chose the younger twin Jacob, not Esau. But things got wildly out of hand when it came to Jacob's sons, for Jacob played favorites and broke primogeniture with his wives and with his sons. His favoritism shattered the family.

Third, under patriarchy a woman's goal in life was to produce sons for her husband. Doing so was her duty as a woman and her sole contribution to the family. Producing a male child was also a matter of honor to preserve her husband's family line. Family survival depended on her producing at least one son. Society determined a woman's value by counting her sons. The gold medal of womanhood was to be acclaimed as “the mother of seven sons.” So it was exceedingly high praise indeed when the women of Bethlehem praised Ruth to Naomi as “better to you than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15, *NIV*). Such a cultural value system sheds light on the anguished desperation barren women such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Hannah experienced, and why the postmenopausal widow Naomi was beside herself after both her sons died without either of them fathering sons. “To die without a male descendant was to be erased from history”<sup>3</sup>—an utter calamity in the ancient world. And the blame and shame for this deficiency fell on the widow for failing, literally, to deliver.

Although many interpreters view Tamar's actions as her personal obsession to have a baby and fulfill her womanhood, we will soon see that Tamar was motivated by something much deeper.

### TAMAR THE CANAANITE

Tamar's story doesn't exist in isolation. Not only is it embedded within the ancient patriarchal culture, it is nested within layers of family history. Understanding both contexts is necessary to make sense of her story. Those other stories are also

2. For a more thorough discussion of how the Bible critiques and dismantles patriarchy, see my book (James), *Malestrom*.

3. James, *Lost Women of the Bible*, 107.

important to get a clearer sense of Judah, the man with whom she must deal. In addition, they serve to inform us that Tamar's situation as Judah's daughter-in-law was about as far from ideal as a young girl can get. Rather, from the start, the marriage arrangement that placed Tamar into Judah's dysfunctional family also put her at risk from Judah as well as from his sons.

Beyond that reality, even before Tamar entered Judah's story, she had huge strikes against her. Not only was she an outsider to the mainstream story that focused on Abraham and his descendants, she was a foreigner. Indeed, she was the worst kind of foreigner—a Canaanite (Gen. 28:1). Previous marriages in Abraham's family regarded a Canaanite woman as a serious threat to the purity of their calling. Canaanite women were considered a contaminating influence that would draw Abraham's descendants away from God. The patriarchs were dead set against their sons marrying Canaanite women.

When Isaac needed a wife, his father Abraham made his servant swear that he would “not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites” (24:3). To avoid that undesirable outcome, Abraham sent his servant back to his God-fearing relatives to find a suitable bride (24:38). Isaac voiced similar concerns when he commanded Jacob, “Do not marry a Canaanite woman” (28:1) and sent him packing to those same relatives. So before we even read the word “prostitute” in her story, Tamar the Canaanite is already giving cause for concern.

In contrast, the name “Judah” is held in high regard throughout the Bible as the father of Israel's largest tribe and of the kingly line of David and Jesus. Consequently, it's easy to gloss over the deeply flawed Judah we encounter in the story involving Tamar. Instead, she often serves as a scapegoat for everything that happens between them. As a result, we won't understand Tamar or the significance of her actions if we don't reexamine the man who collides with her and how colliding with her affects him. Tamar is no sidebar or incidental figure in the Genesis narrative—nor even in the gripping Joseph saga. Events in this often-neglected Tamar chapter, and Tamar's role in particular, hold the key to understanding the story it seems to interrupt. So we must do some serious digging into the backstory before we're ready to talk about Tamar and the pivotal role she takes, but rarely gets credit for, in the story of God's people.

Of the family stories that surround Tamar's story, obviously Judah's is the most immediate. In turn, his story is tangled up with the surrounding story of his younger half-brother, Joseph. And of course, both brothers' stories reside inside the story of their father, Jacob. At the time of events involving Tamar, Jacob was the current family standard-bearer for the covenant promises God gave to his grandfather Abraham and father Isaac. This is the family God blessed and appointed to move forward his redemptive purposes for the whole world.

Despite the fact that at this point in the narrative Joseph owns the spotlight at the expense of Judah and his nine other brothers, God ultimately chooses Judah to be the promise-bearer for the next generation. Judah's branch of Abraham's family tree will produce King David and ultimately Jesus, the promised Messiah. So

regardless of how the focus settles on Joseph from Genesis 30 on, the Judah thread that winds its way through those final chapters in Genesis deserves careful attention.

### TAMAR'S DYSFUNCTIONAL IN-LAWS

By the time Tamar enters the story, Judah is in a moral nosedive—weighed down by a boatload of dysfunctional family relationships that have left him with a throbbing father-wound and a boatload of resentment.

Judah's family got off to a terrible start when his father, Jacob, married his mother, Leah, unintentionally, instead of her younger, more attractive sister, Rachel. For seven years, Jacob worked for the right to marry Rachel. Since he arrived in Paddan Aram with essentially the shirt on his back, Jacob's labor was a variation on the bride price that he negotiated with her father, Laban. But on the long-awaited wedding night, Laban substituted Leah for Rachel. The unsuspecting Jacob didn't discover the switch until "the morning after." (It must have been very dark on their wedding night, or Jacob must have been very intoxicated.) Needless to say, Jacob wasn't pleased.

When he confronted Laban, his father-in-law pointed to primogeniture. It would be a breach of custom to marry the younger daughter off before her older sister. Undeterred, Jacob demanded the right to marry Rachel too, which he did a week later, locking himself into working seven more years for Laban and the sisters into a fierce and agonizing rivalry. Evidently, primogeniture thinking with respect to Leah stopped there, for although she was Jacob's first wife, Leah was unloved and couldn't win Jacob's love, despite the fact that she produced six sons for him. Jacob's heart belonged to Rachel, wife number two. But for Rachel, no amount of love could compensate for the miserable fact that, unlike her sister, Rachel was barren.

By volunteering their slave-girls, Bilhah and Zilpah, as surrogate wives, the warring sisters produced a grand total of twelve sons for Jacob: six by Leah, two apiece by Bilhah and Zilpah, and at long last Rachel delivered two more sons—Joseph and, finally, Benjamin. Even in this episode, we see another example of the dark side of patriarchy—the sanctioning of sexual slavery. With the birth of Joseph, patriarchal favoritism within the family escalates to a whole new level.

Jacob's flagrant favoritism of Joseph became the proverbial "last straw" for Joseph's ten older brothers, igniting jealousy and a consuming hatred for Joseph that ultimately turned to violence. The text states flatly that Jacob "loved Joseph more than any of his other sons" (37:3, NIV). Jacob's favoritism took on public physical dimensions when Jacob gave Joseph a "royal robe"—an overt sign of the preeminent place Joseph held both in his father's heart and in the family.

As a teenager, Joseph himself threw gasoline on his brothers' smoldering hatred when he unwisely (if not arrogantly) announced two dreams in which his brothers and parents bowed down to him. Seething sibling anger burst into flame, and a murder plot began to form. The story took an appalling turn when Judah assumed the lead among his brothers. Together, they seized a propitious opportunity to sell

Joseph as a slave to an approaching caravan of Ishmaelites en route to Egypt. The brothers shredded and doctored up Joseph's royal robe with the blood of a goat to deceive their father into thinking a wild beast had killed Joseph.

Jacob was inconsolable. Bereaved of Joseph, Jacob turned his love and favoritism on Benjamin, the son Rachel died delivering.

Although Judah was Jacob's fourth son, there is reason to believe he saw himself as the heir apparent to the rights of the firstborn. Judah's three older brothers had disgraced their father and disqualified themselves as honorable sons. Reuben (Jacob's firstborn) slept with Bilhah, his father's concubine. This was "a defiant act by which a son becomes 'a stench in [his] father's nostrils.'<sup>4</sup> . . . After the rape of their sister Dinah, Simeon and Levi (sons two and three) sought to vindicate family honor with a bloody massacre of the Shechemites, making Jacob himself 'a stench'<sup>5</sup> and raising the threat of retaliation among other tribes in the region."<sup>6</sup> If it is true that Judah felt entitled to the rights of the firstborn, then his resentment took on deeper meaning when Jacob showered affection and privilege on his youngest son, Joseph.

As an aside, it is worth noting that in all of these destructive family dynamics, Jacob himself would have benefitted from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. One can only wonder how the surrounding cultures would have marveled at Jacob's family if Jacob had sacrificially loved his wife/wives and cared as much about them as he did his own body, if he had nurtured his children (not just the firstborn or his favorite at the neglect of the others), and if he, as a slave owner, had remembered that he too had a master. Not only Jacob's story, but the stories of the other patriarchs as well, would read differently—vastly so—if they had followed culturally subversive instructions such as Paul's to the master of the Roman household (Eph. 5:25, 28; 6:4, 9).

Even so, long before Paul's input was available, the gospel of the Messiah to come was touching down in these stories and changing lives in radically unimaginable ways. Unlikely as it seems, Judah's story will bear that out. But at this point in the story, fallen patriarchal family values, favoritism, and broken relationships drive the action. The story plays out like a Shakespearean tragedy at multiple levels.

## TAMAR AND THE SONS OF JUDAH

By an arranged marriage (and not by choice), Tamar landed in the wake of Judah's horribly dysfunctional family history. The pain of his father's rejection had turned Judah into a dark, hardened man. Engulfed by a deeply painful father-wound, Judah had proven he was capable of murder—a proclivity that ultimately threatened Tamar. Having instigated the sale of his own seventeen-year-old

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4. Genesis 35:22; much later, when King David's son Absalom pitched a tent on the palace roof and slept with his father's concubines, it was a public act of defiance, making Absalom "a stench in [his] father's nostrils" (2 Samuel 16:21–22, NIV 1984).

5. Genesis 34:30 (NIV 1984).

6. James, *Malestrom*, 86.

brother, Joseph, into the living death of slavery, Judah had become a human trafficker. How else are we to describe his actions? In the grand family tradition (following his father Jacob's deceit of Isaac to obtain Esau's blessing and Laban's deceit resulting in Jacob's marriage to Leah), Judah was also a deceiver. He heartlessly pulled off a cover-up that brought a torrent of grief down on his father by allowing him to believe his favorite son, Joseph, was dead. It is not an impressive resume. Judah was hardly the kind of father-in-law any decent parent would wish for their daughter, especially given the powers patriarchy granted a father-in-law. As it turns out, Judah's sons weren't any better.

In the aftermath of these events, Judah leaves his family and migrates into Canaanite territory, where he forges friendships with Canaanites, marries a forbidden Canaanite, and ultimately begins acting like one. A terrible silence underscores the reality of Judah's father-wound, for there is no mention of Jacob inconsolably grieving Judah's departure or sending a search party to find and bring him home. Instead, still shattered over losing Joseph, Jacob is now lavishing his devotion on his twelfth son, Benjamin.

Judah's wife gives birth to three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Tamar enters the story as the wife Judah "got" for his eldest son Er—a euphemism for an arranged marriage. Contrary to the biblical depiction of the marriage relationship where "a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (2:24), in patriarchal cultures the wife is absorbed into her husband's family. She becomes their property and comes under the thumb of her husband's family.

People I've met from patriarchal cultures describe dynamics in mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationships as extremely difficult, and express astonishment that Ruth the Moabitess didn't jump at the chance to leave her mother-in-law, Naomi. In Tamar's case, we know nothing of how things went with her mother-in-law. Judah was the in-law who wielded absolute control over her. Within patriarchy, a girl becomes marriageable when she reaches puberty, so Tamar was likely married off in her early teens. Before she ever conceived a child, God took the life of her husband Er, because he was "wicked in the LORD's sight" (38:7, NIV). We are spared the sordid details, but it is not a stretch to imagine that Tamar experienced the brunt of marriage to a wicked man.

At this point, the story moves into a strange ancient cultural custom. "According to patriarchal customs widely practiced at the time (later formalized as the levirate law under Moses),<sup>7</sup> the surviving brother and the deceased man's widow are honor-bound to marry and produce the missing male heir who will assume the vacant spot on the family tree."<sup>8</sup> Whenever I've taught the story of

7. "If [a brother] dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall . . . marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so the name of the dead brother will not be blotted out from Israel" (Deut. 25:5–6).

8. James, *Malestrom*, 88.

Tamar, women tell me this part of the story is “creepy.” In compliance with this practice, Judah passes Tamar over to his second son, Onan, with a mandate to fulfill his duty to his dead brother.

But Onan is a wicked man too. Although he marries Tamar, it is all a sham. Instead of impregnating her, he continually uses her for his pleasure (v. 9), and when he does so, he spills his seed on the ground to prevent her from conceiving—no doubt an early form of contraception, but in this case a violation of his family duty. He feigned honor by marrying her and then repeatedly abused her in this manner. He knew full well the son Tamar conceived wouldn't be his, but his brother Er's. We may be without details of what marriage to wicked Er was like, although marriage to any wicked man is no picnic. In contrast, Onan's treatment of Tamar was overtly abusive, and the narrator gives us God's perspective on the matter.

Again, we are told of another of Judah's sons that “what [Onan] did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so the LORD put him to death also” (v. 10, NIV), leaving Judah with one remaining son who at the time was too young to marry.

### TAMAR'S MORAL DILEMMA

A word of explanation is in order—not to justify Onan's actions, but to illuminate his motive and also to provide a framework for Tamar's subsequent actions. A man's responsibility to father a son for a blood brother who died without a son came at an exorbitant cost. Under simple modern inheritance laws, anyone knows the death of an heir means the surviving heirs inherit more. Under primogeniture, the gains were even higher if the deceased brother was the firstborn. Onan was acutely aware of the heavy price he'd pay if Tamar conceived a son for his brother Er.

The math is actually pretty simple. Under patriarchy, a man divided his estate among his sons, although not equally. Primogeniture designated a double share to the firstborn son. So, for example, as the father of three sons, Judah would divide his inheritance into four equal parts. Two-fourths (the double portion) went to his firstborn, Er; Judah's two younger sons would pocket one-fourth apiece.

The death of Er was a financial windfall for Judah's two surviving sons. Now Judah's estate gets sliced into three parts instead of four, with two-thirds going to Onan and one-third to Shelah—a sizeable increase for both of them. Onan's inheritance more than doubles, jumping from one-fourth to two-thirds. If family honor takes precedence, and Tamar conceives a son, Onan's inheritance plummets from a full two-thirds of Judah's estate to a measly fourth—a whopping loss of nearly 50 percent of Judah's estate.

Obviously, family honor created a tremendous conflict of interest for Onan. Would he fulfill his duty to his brother, by marrying Tamar, fathering a child with her, and forfeiting Er's inheritance, which would go to their offspring? Or would he keep his winnings to himself? No one has to wonder what a financial advisor would tell him. This family duty was an enormous call to sacrifice for the good of a brother who wasn't even around

Turns out, Onan was willing to violate family honor to preserve his holdings. The price he paid for his wicked actions cost him a whole lot more than a slice of Judah's estate. After Onan's death, Judah superstitiously concluded that Tamar was the reason his sons were dying. So Judah sent her back to her father to wait until Shelah reached marriageable age, having no intention of following through with a marriage between Tamar and Shelah. Judah preferred enduring dead branches on his family tree to risking the life of his only surviving son.

A long time passed—long enough for Tamar to realize Judah had no intention of following through on his promise of a marriage to Shelah. This realization marked the tipping point for Tamar. His deception created the moral dilemma for Tamar. Would she resign herself to Judah's roadblock to the fulfillment of her duty to her dead husband? Or would she resort to other means to rescue the dying line of Er?

Remarkably, the stakes from Tamar's point of view had nothing in common with how Onan or Judah saw things. Both men were driven by self-interest at the expense of others. Suddenly, there was a member of the family who was moved by a wholly different motive. She would not be party to forsaking family duty in the name of self-preservation. She would sacrifice herself for the sake of another, if that's what it took—even for a dead man who would never know what she was willing to risk to perpetuate his branch of the family tree.

## A RIGHTEOUS PROSTITUTE

Often called “the world's oldest profession,” prostitution today has been more accurately recast as sex trafficking. We now know criminal elements are at work enslaving women and girls (men and boys too)—victimizing tens of millions of God's image-bearers globally and profiteering on selling their bodies again and again. No longer are prostitutes regarded as “the problem.” It has become evident that the vast majority of them are victims of crime. Laws are changing to reflect this understanding so that law enforcement's practice of arresting prostitutes is stopping and instead they're going after the johns<sup>9</sup>, pimps, and traffickers.

Sex trafficking is a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions in our twenty-first-century world. In their Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* bestseller *Half the Sky*, authors Nickolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn identified sex trafficking as “one of the paramount human rights problems of this century.”<sup>10</sup> Sex trafficking is not simply a problem elsewhere, but as President Jimmy Carter stated in *A Call to Action*, “It is known that teenage girls are sold by pimps and placed in brothels in all large American cities, almost invariably

9. “The label ‘john’ is the slang expression used to refer to men who solicit the services of prostitutes and is thought perhaps to have resulted from so many men seeking anonymity by saying their name was ‘John.’” James, *Malestrom*, 213.

10. Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, xiii.

with the local police being complicit or waiting for ‘more important’ things to command their attention.”<sup>11</sup>

Prostitution is a violent and hideous thriving underworld fueled primarily by “johns”—men who seek to feed their sexual appetites both virtually through pornography, and in person at strip clubs, massage parlors, brothels, and hotels, and who are willing to pay. Sex trafficking is entirely demand-driven, and the demand for sexual services is insatiable.

When encountered in Scripture, stories such as Tamar’s, Rahab’s, and that of the sinful woman who wept and poured perfume on Jesus’s feet give the church opportunities to raise the subject of prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse and to confront an issue to which the church cannot in good conscience turn a blind eye. We need to confront the issue, first of all, because this crisis seeps into the church. Tragically high numbers of Christian men and boys (and some women, too) are complicit—those who sit in church pews, study in seminaries, serve on elder boards, and stand behind pulpits but who nevertheless are addicted to pornography, which depends largely on exploiting trafficked women and girls.

But a second reason human trafficking is an important issue is the simple fact that, as God’s image-bearers, we have a responsibility to engage an evil that destroys the lives of everyone who comes in contact with it. It even affects those of us who have the power to do something to address these atrocities, yet choose to do nothing. We are mistaken to convince ourselves that this crisis has nothing to do with us. Human trafficking is happening within our own communities—both the buying and selling of human flesh. This is not an issue the church can afford to avoid. The Bible brings it up.

So what causes a girl or a woman to become a prostitute?

A major cause is simply the reality of being born female in a world that privileges males and disadvantages females. The devaluing of girls combined with poverty is a deadly cocktail for hapless girls. Parents and other relatives are known to offload their daughters—even little girls—selling them to traffickers, sometimes in hopes of deriving income from their trafficked family member’s “employment.” This is patriarchy at its worst.

A thriving sex-trafficking industry means the vast majority of women and girls are *not* voluntarily involved, but are forced into prostitution—sold by relatives or ensnared by pimps. Pimps prey on vulnerable, at-risk, unhappy, and runaway girls. These girls are prime targets for pimps who spot them in malls, at Starbucks, hanging out after school, and in our neighborhoods. A pimp patiently woos, indulges, and grooms a girl into a corner from which there is no escape. Then suddenly, no more Mr. Nice Guy. He uses violence, threats against family members, and drugs to intimidate, control, and bolt and lock the door to a way out. In some cultures, a sexually violated girl brings shame on her family, so even if she somehow escapes she has no place to go.

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11. Carter, *A Call to Action*, 128–29.

Is there such a person as a righteous prostitute? The writer of Hebrews seems to think so, exalting Rahab the harlot as an exemplar of faith (Heb. 11:31). Believe it or not, there are also altruistic motives for becoming a prostitute. That Jewish girl in Nazi Germany is a perfect example of self-sacrifice for the good of others. Sometimes a destitute woman sees no other alternative than prostitution to keep her children alive. It will no doubt come as a surprise to many readers that Tamar fits this category too, for family honor in Judah's family is being cast aside—a travesty that forces her to devise a dangerous scheme to pose as a prostitute to rescue the dying line of her wicked and undeserving husband, Er.

Prostitution is just one form of abuse that illuminates the enormous power differential between males and females. That differential is greatest where patriarchal values are in force. Under patriarchy, any power a woman enjoys resides in a male relative who is willing to speak for her and take action for wrongs she has suffered. Even then, the motive is often because the alleged crime violates *male* honor in the family and has little or nothing to do with vindicating her rights. She has no power of her own—no voice or agency or rights.

In the West, a breach of contract similar to what Judah was doing would be reason enough for Tamar (with or without her father's involvement) to haul him into court and fight for justice. But patriarchy fundamentally deprives women of legal rights and consequently moves justice beyond their reach. Stories like the one Jesus told about the widow badgering successfully for justice from the unjust judge undoubtedly astonished his hearers, who would find it hard to imagine a just judge, much less an unjust judge, granting a widow—i.e., a silent one—a hearing or to acknowledge that she had any legal rights. The story wouldn't have had nearly the same impact if the plaintiff had been male.

The ironic fact about prostitution is that in a strange way it simultaneously exploits and inverts the power dynamic between men and women. Patriarchy empowers and privileges men and renders women powerless. Prostitution is one of many ways that men use their power and privilege to exploit and abuse women. At the same time, the very men who feel empowered over women by pornography or prostitution are proving themselves to be utterly weak and powerless to women—a fact reinforced by the sexual addiction that ultimately overcomes and dominates them. Thankfully, many men are in the battle with women to end sex trafficking, pornography, and all other forms of violence against women and girls. But the fact remains (and Judah is Exhibit A) that, in some men, unbridled sexual passion is a self-destructive weakness where women unknowingly prevail.

Turns out, in Tamar's case, prostitution was the one way she could overcome the man who wielded total power over her. She ran a terrible risk that came with a lot of "what-ifs." What if he avoided her, and someone else approached? What if he saw through her disguise? What if her scheme backfired and she was discovered? What if nothing came from this, and she failed at her objective? What was she doing to herself? What is clear from Tamar's actions is that reckless impulsiveness was not part of her plan. She's considered all the what-ifs and taken measures to protect herself.

Tamar didn't pose as a prostitute because she was looking for a new career. She wasn't doing this because, in her heart of hearts, she was a temptress. Nor were her actions payback for a father-in-law who lied to her. Family honor compelled Tamar to act, coupled with a determination to right a wrong, for her own honor was at stake. Family duty to her dead husband was being ignored. She had only one objective in mind and was willing to risk her life to achieve it. In fact, it is fair to say that a good measure of desperation drove her to accomplish her goal through such unorthodox means.

Suddenly, Judah's once passive daughter-in-law summoned courage and took matters into her own hands. To grasp the terrifying danger of her mission, only imagine what fate awaits the young woman in today's Middle East who gets pregnant from prostitution.

### TAMAR AND JUDAH THE "JOHN"

Another extraordinary irony of the Tamar/Judah story is the one-sided bias that heaps endless criticism on Tamar and not a lot (if any) on Judah. Judah is one of the leading lights in biblical history. Despite Joseph's prominence, Judah's legacy will ultimately surpass the younger brother's, for Judah is the father of Israel's leading tribe and of the line that carries forward the promises God gave to Abraham. Judah's name appears in lights in the genealogies of King David and Jesus.

As already noted, judgments of Judah's daughter-in-law are not so forgiving. Mention the name "Tamar" and eyebrows go up. It happens again and again with the so-called "vixens" of the Bible. In my book *Lost Women of the Bible*, I observed, "The belief that there's a temptress inside every woman leaps out into the open. . . . As soon as anything of a sexual nature occurs, the woman involved becomes the prime suspect. She bears more of the blame and carries the guilt a whole lot longer than the man involved. . . . It's disheartening to see just how unredemptive and one-sided our memories can be."<sup>12</sup>

Up to this moment in the story, Tamar accepted the passive role that patriarchy expected of her. She was taken as a wife for Er, passed on to Onan, and finally sent home to wait for Shelah.

Now, however, Tamar commands the action in the story. She knows her duty to the family and to her dead husband. The shame of Tamar's childlessness will be intensified if her husband's name dies out. Culturally she is honor-bound to fulfill this duty. Judah is standing in her way. In a decisive flurry, she sheds her widow's garments and her passivity, disguises herself as a prostitute, and stations herself in Judah's path.

Tamar's radical actions must be qualified by three important facts. First, Judah himself has become a widower and is emerging from a season of grief. Tamar's actions will not dishonor or wrong his wife. Second, with respect to levirate practices, ancient Hittite and Assyrian laws indicate that if a brother refused or didn't exist to

12. James, *Lost Women*, 104.

produce a son to perpetuate his deceased brother's name, responsibility to marry the deceased's widow fell to the dead brother's father. So, although technically fathering a child by his daughter-in-law was against Judah's will, it was a valid option.

Third, and most remarkable, is Tamar's confidence that Judah will fall for her scheme. It is a damning indictment of his character—and evidence of how far this son of Jacob has fallen—that she knew him to be that sort of a man. A possible contributing factor on that particular night is the fact that Judah had been partying—eating and drinking at the sheepshearing. The alcohol level in his bloodstream may have heightened his gullibility. It is also entirely possible that his failure to recognize Tamar is a painful reminder of just how little she mattered to him—evidence of the fact that he really didn't know her at all.

Predictably, Judah takes the bait. He approaches the mysterious prostitute, and the negotiating begins. He doesn't have money, so he promises to send her a goat in exchange for her sexual services. Like a shrewd, tough-minded businesswoman, Tamar demands a pledge and drives a hard bargain, obtaining his seal and staff as security. In today's world that is roughly the equivalent of a man's ID—his driver's license (or passport) and his credit card. If Tamar becomes pregnant (which she does), she won't require a paternity test to prove Judah is the father of her child.

Later, Judah sends his Canaanite friend, Hirah, back with the promised goat and to retrieve his belongings. But the prostitute is nowhere to be found. No one in the area has seen or knows anything about a shrine prostitute. Judah fears becoming a laughingstock, so chooses to drop the matter. But he has a whole lot more to fear than laughter.

Hard as it is to believe, Judah hasn't hit bottom yet. True, his altitude is even lower than it was at the beginning of Tamar's story—that hardened, dark figure, capable of murder, a callous human trafficker, instigator of a felony, a man who knows how to cover his tracks at the cost of deceiving and devastating his elderly father. Now he's added "john" to his resume. Although his second son, Onan, willfully spilled his seed on the ground, Judah was reckless with his by soliciting a prostitute. He exhibited no sense that as a covenant grandson of Abraham, his duty before God in potentially fathering children was a sacred one. But his precipitous descent wouldn't stop until he was forced to look in the mirror and see the kind of man he had become. And the person brave enough to hold that mirror will be his daughter-in-law—a very pregnant Tamar.

### TAMAR CONFRONTS JUDAH

Tamar's story reaches a hair-raising climax when someone reports to Judah that his daughter-in-law is "guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant" (Gen. 38:24, *NIV*). Judah's response is abrupt, instantaneous, and horrific. "Bring her out and have her burned to death!" (v. 24, *NIV*). The double standard in his response is breathtaking. He condemns her for a crime he, too, has committed. Yet it is in his power, and he is determined to carry out her sentence. Now, at last, he can rid himself of Tamar.

This is when Tamar presents Judah with irrefutable evidence that he is the man by whom she is pregnant. She shows him his seal and staff—the mirror that confronts Judah with his own reflection.

In a recent radio interview, I was one of two guests discussing Tamar from the perspective of *Lost Women of the Bible*. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't dislodge the other guest from believing Tamar was a vixen. The word "prostitute" was insurmountably hung around Tamar's neck. Strangely, Judah doesn't see her that way. His words about Tamar are so unexpected, English translators have nuanced the wording in our Bibles to "She is *more* righteous than I" (v. 26, emphasis added).

It gives the impression that Judah is suggesting they are both righteous. The difference between them is only a matter of degree. In his opinion, her righteousness score is a bit higher than his—when on the surface, at least to the uninformed Western eye (including that other radio guest), *both* are guilty of profound unrighteousness—she for playing the prostitute, he for soliciting her services. "She is more righteous than I" sounds like spiritual mumbo-jumbo or a clumsy attempt at dodging the truth about himself. That interpretation fits the Judah we have known all along, when actually his words are an emphatic vindication of Tamar and condemnation of himself.

Clearer translations render Judah's words as, "She is righteous, not I" or "She is righteous; I am not." The word "righteous" is the defining word in Tamar's story, eclipsing the label "prostitute." This vindication of Tamar comes from the chastened lips of her dark and hardened father-in-law. It is one of the most powerful moments in all of Scripture—when the prodigal takes an honest look at himself and comes to his senses.

### TAMAR THE *EZER*-WARRIOR

When God created the woman, he said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make an *ezer* [helper] suitable for him" (2:18). This powerful statement indicates the fact that men and women need each other. God doesn't narrow the parameters of his statement to marriage, the home, the church, or any other sphere. It is a blanket statement encompassing every arena of life. Something serious is missing if men operate in any venue without partnering with women. This sheds a glaring light on how the marginalization and oppression of women is not only disastrous for women, but also for men.

The Hebrew word *ezer*<sup>13</sup> (usually translated "helper") is a military word that is used most often (sixteen of twenty-one times in the Old Testament) for God as the *ezer* of his people. *Ezering* is how God's daughters uniquely image him. Every

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13. *Ezer* is a military term, appearing twenty-one times in the Old Testament: twice referring to the woman (Gen. 2:18, 20); three times for military powers Israel turned to for help (Isa. 30:5; Ezek. 12:14; Dan. 11:34); the remaining sixteen occurrences refer to God as Israel's helper, each time with military imagery (Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Ps. 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19 (translated "strength" in the NIV); 115:9, 10, 11; 121:1–2; 124:8; 146:5; and Hos. 13:9. For a more complete discussion of the *ezer*, see James, *Half the Church*.

time the word *ezer* appears in the Old Testament, it is in a military context. God is our “sword and shield”; he is “better than horses and chariots”; he stands “sentry watch” over his people. Twice *ezer* is used to describe the woman at creation (2:18, 20). Even the Garden of Eden wasn’t a safe place. Danger lurked. A powerful enemy was plotting an imminent attack. God’s commands raised the threat alert to red—to “guard the garden,” to “rule and subdue,” and to refrain from eating fruit from dangerous trees.

From all indications, Eden was a warzone, and the *ezer* is a warrior—called to join the man in ruling and subduing God’s creation, pushing back the darkness, and battling the enemy of all God’s image-bearers. God summons his daughters to embrace God’s heart for the world and for our brothers and to bring our wit, wisdom, and righteous determination to his mission in the world, even when it means standing up to men.

Tamar was no vixen when, honor-bound, she stood up to plummeting Judah, insisting on fulfilling her righteous duty despite the risk to herself. Tamar was an *ezer*-warrior—one of the best examples we have in the entire Bible, and Judah needed her. He hit a brick wall when Tamar stood up to him. That collision was the turning point for Judah. He became a better man because of her.

Strange as it sounds, it’s hard to imagine a stronger, more exemplary *ezer*-warrior role model than Tamar, the righteous prostitute—not because she played the prostitute, but because she subverted cultural expectations of herself and stood up for what was right in God’s eyes. No wonder Judah called her righteous.

God further vindicates Tamar when he blesses her with twin sons. Perez and Zerah replace each of her two dead husbands. But we cannot comprehend the powerful way God worked through Tamar’s battle to rescue those two unworthy men if we think the story ends with her triumph. Which is why we leave Tamar’s story and follow Judah’s revised trajectory, where Tamar’s influence lives on and changes the outcome of the larger family narrative.

### VOLTE-FACE

Judah doesn’t resurface in the Genesis narrative until four chapters later. Meanwhile, Joseph escapes Potiphar’s wife (a true vixen) only to land in prison. His ability to interpret dreams lands him before Pharaoh, who releases Joseph from prison and elevates him to second in authority and power only to himself.

Judah reenters the story when Egypt and the surrounding regions, including Canaan, are in the grips of a devastating famine. In the West, we have thankfully been spared the horrors of famine, although from the comfort of our well-stocked homes we are witnesses to appalling images of famines elsewhere in the world.

God used a famine to cross Judah’s path with the brother he once wanted to kill, but trafficked instead. It was a moment neither of them saw coming. But the Judah we meet in the remaining chapters of Genesis is not the same Judah who was quick to order an honor-killing of Tamar for a crime he too had committed.

By the time Judah reappears, he and nine of his brothers (all but Benjamin, Joseph's only full blood-brother) have, at their father's direction, already made one trip to Egypt for food. Joseph recognized them at the time and inquired of their father and if they had another brother. The plot thickened when Joseph set the terms for seeing him again: These Hebrew brothers will not see Egypt's second-in-command again if they come without their younger brother.

When a second trip to Egypt becomes a dire necessity, another family crisis erupts. One can only imagine the emotional angst playing out in the hearts of the brothers. Jacob is now playing favorites with Benjamin and is refusing to let him go. Jacob's grief over Joseph remains as intense as ever, and the thought of losing Benjamin too is unbearable.

Once more Judah steps into the spotlight. He reassures his father by taking full responsibility for Benjamin's safety. But that is nothing compared to what happens in Egypt. Genesis 38 may be the most annoying chapter in the Bible, but it is not possible to explain the radical change that takes place in Judah or how relationships with Joseph resolve if we forget Judah's eye-opening collision with Tamar. That encounter is not an irrelevant interruption, but is the turning point both in Judah's life and in Joseph's story.

God is at work in this family, and it is never more obvious than in the climactic scene that reunites twelve deeply divided brothers. Judah is transformed. He's frankly unrecognizable. The interview with Joseph goes better than the brothers could have hoped. He is cordial, and favors them with a feast and gifts. They leave in high spirits, only to be chased down by Joseph's men, who search their bags and discover Joseph's silver divination cup (planted by Joseph's subordinates) in Benjamin's sack. Benjamin is Joseph's only full brother and Jacob's new favorite son.

With an unhealed father-wound still throbbing, with his father, Jacob, still playing favorites and talking as though Judah, his mother Leah, and his brothers don't exist, and with Benjamin heading for the living death Judah once chose for his half-brother Joseph, Judah steps forward. He begins to speak—unaware that the ruler he is humbly addressing is Joseph, the brother he sold into slavery some twenty years ago.

What follows is a striking demonstration of God's power to produce the kind of man he intends for his sons to be. I can't improve on what Judah said. It's best to let him speak for himself: "My lord, I guaranteed to my father that I would take care of the boy. I told him, 'If I don't bring him back to you, I will bear the blame forever.' So please, my lord, *let me stay here as a slave instead of the boy*, and let the boy return with his brothers. For how can I return to my father if the boy is not with me? *I couldn't bear to see the anguish this would cause my father!*" (44:32-34, emphasis added).

Judah's speech is a radical reversal that not only reveals a radically transformed man, but is also the turning point for Joseph, who, up to this moment, has been tormenting his brothers. Sobs and hugs characterize the interaction that follows as Joseph reveals himself to his brothers.

## TAMAR THE EXEMPLAR

Judah may not rise to power in the world's eyes. Joseph may always eclipse him. But the story of Tamar and Judah deserves more thoughtful attention, not simply to exonerate Tamar from the label “vixen,” but because we need her brand of *ezer*-warrior courage and commitment to doing what is right for the battles in which God is calling us to engage. We need more stories of courageous women like Tamar and the young Jewish girl who faced down fear and life-threatening danger for the sake of others. Their narratives will help us courageously step up to do what God is calling us to do, regardless of the odds.

But we need Judah, too. His story fuels our hope that even the most dark and hardened human beings—those with murder in their hearts, who are willing to traffick other human beings, to exploit women, and to carry out an honor killing—are no match for the gospel.

Jesus's gospel turns everything right side up in this fallen world. His gospel exposes patriarchy for the abusive social system it is. It mobilizes a marginalized woman to act with extraordinary boldness to reveal a patriarch's hypocrisy thus leading to his renewal. Her story is not a recommendation of prostitution as a means of furthering the redemptive plan of God or in any situation, but I do see why Judah (and God's Word) declare Tamar “righteous.”

God works in mysterious ways, and Tamar's story is a startling example. Far from the vixen many believe her to be, Tamar is a hero we should admire—an *ezer*-warrior who does the right thing at enormous risk to herself. Sometimes our prejudices cause us to miss the power of God's Word and avoid narratives that we desperately need in our own stories.

God works through Tamar's bold actions to rescue her dead husband from extinction and her utterly lost father-in-law from a destructive downhill slide. Her actions bring about one of the most remarkable redemptive stories in all of Scripture. Not only do we owe her an apology for ignoring what the Bible says clearly about her, we stand in her debt—for the family line she was fighting to save was the royal line that ultimately led to Jesus. God chose a marginalized Canaanite woman to put the power of his gospel on display, and to advance his redemptive purposes for Judah and for the world.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can Tamar's righteous actions and Judah's radical U-turn in response take male/female relations to a whole new level among Christians today?
2. Have you ever been “set straight” or rescued by someone you thought was “less righteous” than you? Explain.
3. How can we live for righteousness in our relationships and circumstances?