

# SEEING TAMAR THROUGH THE PRISM OF AN AFRICAN WOMAN: A CONTEXTUAL READING OF GENESIS 38

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## INTRODUCTION:

In Africa, marriage and procreation are intertwined and inseparable. It is almost always presumed that readiness for marriage is readiness for procreation; to get married is an opportunity to contribute freely, through procreation, to the survival of the lineage and society at large. During marriage (both traditional and Christian), one of the most appreciated and common gestures of good-will shown to the newly married couple is praying for them for the fruit of the womb: ‘may God grant you many children’, ‘you shall give birth to male and female,’ ‘in nine months we shall gather to celebrate the birth of your baby’. In these wishes, both the societal perception of marriage and the use of sexuality in marriage as primarily geared toward the begetting of progeny are encapsulated. The problem arises when a marriage fails to lead to procreation. In a cultural context that stresses procreation and blames a woman for any failure in this regard, what is the way out for a ‘fruitless’ marriage? Reading Gn 38 (Judah/Tamar narrative) against this backdrop reveals its resonance with the African cultural emphasis on progeny and heir. As such, the plight of Tamar represents, in particular, the ordeal of a married childless African woman searching for a child, and in general, the injustice suffered by women in a patriarchal society. The overriding target of our interpretation of Gn 38 is the application of the theological meaning of this text to the African socio-cultural context so as to engender a more informed and just reaction to the so-called ‘grave’ problem of childlessness or the search for a male child in today’s Africa. To avoid being too general in our references to the African context, we will use the Igbo culture of Nigeria as our case study.<sup>1</sup>

Methodologically, we have opted for African contextual hermeneutics. According to Justin S. Ukpong, this is an approach in which “the African context forms the subject of interpretation of the bible. This means that the conceptual framework of interpretation is informed by African socio-cultural perspectives... In this way, the people’s context becomes the

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<sup>1</sup> Geographically, the Igbo people (*Ndi Igbo*) are the indigenes of the Southeastern Nigeria, West-Africa. Approximately, they occupy an area of 15,800 square miles. (See Victor Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 3.) Following the division of Nigeria into 36 states, Igbo people occupy Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi, part of Delta, Cross-river, Rivers and Akwa Ibom states. Their neighbours include Igala to the North-west, the Idoma to the north, the Ekoid Bantu to the north-east, the Annag-Ibibio to the east, the Ijo to the south and the Edo to the west. The 2006 Nigerian census places the population of Igbo people at about 21 million. The majority of the Igbo people are Christians (about 85%) while pockets of traditional religious practitioners spread throughout Igbo land. See Toyin Falola, ed., *Igbo History and Society: The Essays of Adiele Afigbo* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2005), 141.

subject of interpretation of the biblical text.”<sup>2</sup> This approach in combination with narrative analysis will reveal the relevance of Gn 38 for today’s [African] socio-cultural context and society, especially in the face of childlessness and search for a male child. This work is divided into four parts: [1] the Judah/Tamar pericope vis-à-vis the African emphasis on procreation (Gn 38: 1-5); [2] Tamar’s childlessness vis-à-vis the childless married African woman (Gn 38: 6-10); [3] Tamar’s desperate search for offspring as a mirror of the desperation of the childless African woman (Gn 38: 12-26); [4] Our conclusions: the theological import of the Judah/Tamar story for today’s African audience.

### **The Judah/Tamar Pericope vis-à-vis African emphasis on procreation - Gn 38:1-5**

The story of Gn 38:1-30 commences with the announcement of Judah’s separation from his siblings and father, and his settling in Canaan with a Canaanite friend [an Adullamite] named Hirah. Then Judah marries a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua.<sup>3</sup> At this early stage of the story, the narrator’s mentioning of Judah’s *seeing* [וַיִּרְאֵ] ...*taking* ([וַיִּקְחָהּ]) ...and *going into* [וַיֵּבֵא אֵלֶיהָ] a Canaanite woman (v.2) indicates both Judah’s conscious intent on acquiring progeny and the vital role the procreation of progeny plays in the whole pericope. This is further buttressed by the frequency of לָקַח [used here for denoting marriage],<sup>4</sup> בָּא אִלַּי [to have sexual intercourse], הָרָה [to conceive]<sup>5</sup> and יָלַד [to give birth] in the pericope (see vv. 2,3,4,18). Hence v.2 not only tells us that Judah *saw, took and went into* Shua’s daughter, but also that she responded to this male initiative by conceiving and giving birth to a son.<sup>6</sup> As vv.2,3,4,5 reveal, these actions of Judah and Shua’s daughter took place not once, but three times in succession leading to the birth of Judah’s three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. The repetitive nature and detailed

<sup>2</sup> Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 24. See also Joseph Enuwosa, "African Cultural Hermeneutics: Interpreting the New Testament in a Cultural Context," *Black Theology* 3, no. 1 (2005)88-98: 88.

<sup>3</sup> Before this time, marrying Canaanites was not appreciated by the patriarchs: Abraham refused to allow Isaac to marry a Canaanite wife (Gn 24:3); Isaac and Rebecca regretted Esau’s marriage to a Canaanite woman and prevented Jacob from falling into the same error (Gn 27:46-28:1). See Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Dallas, TX: Word Book, 1994), 365.

<sup>4</sup> The root לָקַח can denote: to take, grasp, be carried away, to select/choose, to marry, to capture/seize etc. See P.J.J.S Els, NIDOTTE vol 2, 812-817. Obviously, the usage of לָקַח here points to marriage. See BDB, 544.

<sup>4</sup> BDB, 544.

<sup>5</sup> BDB, 248.

<sup>6</sup> Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 17.

description of the birth of Judah's three sons (in three verses [vv3-5]) suggests once more the vital role of procreation in understanding the pericope, otherwise a brief genealogical statement that Judah had three sons would have sufficed.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the narrator's emphasis on the causal relationship between 'sexual intercourse – conception – giving birth' reveals the expectation, in this pericope, that sexual intercourse should be followed by conception (and birth); separation of one from the other will become an anomaly (as is the case with Onan). In this way, the narrator indicates in the first five verses that the pericope of Gn 38 dwells on procreation of Judah's progeny, and reveals the overriding theme of the pericope – the search for progeny/heir.

Understanding the Judah/Tamar narrative as 'the search for offspring' resonates with the African emphasis on progeny. Just as the narrator depicts Judah's marriage to Shua's daughter and every sexual relationship in this narrative as primarily geared towards procreation, so are almost all marriages in Africa primarily geared towards begetting an heir for the family. In Igbo society of West Africa, for example, the begetting and training of children are the primary ends of marriage.<sup>8</sup> The good of the spouses flow from and depend on this. The perpetuation of the lineage is vital to the Igbo people, and marriage is the natural and cultural way of guaranteeing the lineage immortality. For the Igbo people, and I quote Emmanuel Obunna, "...children are the uniting link in the rhythm of life guaranteeing the continuation of the family from one generation to the next."<sup>9</sup> Begetting children, therefore, is a social and religious duty attached to marriage and is central to it. This informs the strong religious and social opinion against the use of contraceptives and practice of abortion in Igbo society.<sup>10</sup> As Lucy Mair explains, the basis of this African emphasis on procreation "is that the religious values associated with sex are concentrated on procreation and not on sexual activity as such."<sup>11</sup> Among the Igbo people, sex between married couples is seen primarily as an act of procreation not mere gratification.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, the idea of voluntary childlessness, seen in some parts of the world in which couples for various reasons wittingly abstain from having children, is foreign to Igbo culture.<sup>13</sup> Among the Igbo people, every case of childlessness is not only involuntary but also a staggering problem

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Mary, *The Fifty Steps to Happy Marriage* (Owerri: Assumpta, 1999), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Obunna, *African Priests and Celibacy* (Ibadan: Ambassador Books, 1986), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Adiele Afigbo, "Religion and Economic Enterprise in Traditional Igbo Society," in *Igbo History and Society: The Essays of Adiele Afigbo*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2005), 298.

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Mair, *African Marriage and Social Change* (London: Frank Cass, 1969), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 163.

<sup>13</sup> Diana Payette-Bucci, "Voluntary Childlessness," *Direction* 17, no. 2 (1988)26-41: 37.

to the couple in question. In this type of cultural context, one wonders what would have become of a childless woman like Tamar.

## 2. Tamar's Childlessness vis-à-vis the Childless Married African Woman – Gn 38:6-10

Just as childlessness ignites tension in most African marriages, so does it also initiate the first tension in Judah/Tamar narrative (Gn 38:6-10). The episode of Gn 38:6-10 commences with Judah finding a wife for his first son Er: “And Judah took a wife for Er his first-born and her name was Tamar” [v.6]. This action of Judah flows from and supports his strong intent in verses vv.1-5 on guaranteeing his future generation (זרע). Therefore, taking a woman for Er immediately triggers, in the reader, the expectation of conception and giving birth to a child.<sup>14</sup> This expectation, nevertheless, was not fulfilled because Er did “what was evil in the eyes of YHWH” and was killed as a consequence. Er's death without a child, introduces narrative tension into the story. What happens next? How does childless Tamar cope with the situation? How will the lineage be continued?

Without stopping to tell us the nature of the evil done by Er, or the mourning of his death by his father and siblings, the narrator immediately announces Judah's command to his second son, Onan [v.8]:

‘Go into [אֵשֶׁת אָבִיךָ] the wife of your brother  
and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her;  
raise up offspring for your brother.’

Both the imperative nature of this statement (אָבִיךָ)<sup>15</sup> and its presentation in reported speech underlines its importance to Judah. The narrator gives the impression that Judah wastes no time in asking his second son Onan to raise offspring for his brother. In other words, the continuity of his progeny is uppermost in his mind. At this stage of the narrative, Tamar has mourned her husband and is going into a second marriage, but still no word is heard from her.

The narrator tells us that Onan, without explicitly rejecting his father's command to raise a child for his brother Er (perhaps afraid of the monumental implications of refusing to perform

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<sup>14</sup> Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> אָבִיךָ is *qal* imperative masculine singular.

the levirate duty [Dt 25:7]), pretends to obey it.<sup>16</sup> Thus, he goes and sleeps with Tamar but is unwilling to fulfill the purpose of his father's injunction: to give descendant to his brother. During all his sexual intercourse with Tamar "he practices *coitus interruptus*" and wastes the semen on the ground.<sup>17</sup> Since Onan consciously denies Tamar the possibility of procreation, it can be interpreted that he merely uses Tamar as an object of sexual gratification. Tamar, for her own part, says nothing. Perhaps her silence signals her powerlessness to correct Onan as a woman in a patriarchal society. She can only wish and hope that Onan stops his sexual injustice and does what is right. As the narrator's parenthetical note explains, Onan did this because he knew the child would not be his but his brother's. As Arnold observes, Onan knew that if his brother had no progeny, 'his double portion' as the first son would revert to him and his children.<sup>18</sup> The narrator's consistent identification of Er with the epithet 'firstborn' (בכור [vv.7&8]) seems to support Arnold's interpretation. Hence, Onan allows his selfish concerns to override his fraternal loyalty and family duty.

The narrator tells us that [v.9]: "what Onan did was evil in the sight of the YHWH and he also killed him," One wonders what exactly is the crux of the matter? Is it his *coitus interruptus* or his refusal to raise a child for his brother? There is some consensus among scholars that although *coitus interruptus* may not be approved in the Hebrew bible, the crux of the matter is Onan's refusal to generate progeny for his deceased brother and alleviate Tamar's debilitating childless condition.<sup>19</sup> So it is not the *means* but the *end* of his action that is the bone of contention. Wenham affirms that Onan's action frustrated YHWH's repeated promise to the patriarchs that he would make them fruitful and give them numerous descendants (Gn 17:6; 28:3; 35:11; 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 32:13). Such frustration of the divine agenda perhaps merits Onan's

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<sup>16</sup> This custom of levirate marriage makes it the duty of the brother-in-law to raise a child for his deceased brother with his brothers' widow. According to Dt 25:5-10, the brother-in-law in question is to marry his deceased brother's widow and the first child of the marriage is to bear his deceased brother's name "so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel" (Dt 25:5-6). Nonetheless, there is room for the brother-in-law to reject this duty to his brother, although he must endure public ridicule if he does (Dt 25:7-8). In addition, and in the presence of the elders of the town, his brother's widow is to take-off of his sandals and spit in his face saying 'this is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother's family line' (Dt 25:7-8). As Hamilton observes, this is the only Hebrew biblical law that attracts such a humiliation on one who freely absconds from fulfilling it. Victor P. Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50," in *The New International Commentary of the Old Testament*, ed. Robert L. Hubbard (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 435.

<sup>17</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 367.

<sup>18</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 327.

<sup>19</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 376. Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 363.

divine death sentence.<sup>20</sup> One cannot avoid the impression that YHWH's annihilation of Onan signals both his approval of Judah's instruction to Onan (to father a child for his deceased brother) and his support for the levirate law and the grave implication of absconding from such a duty and leaving Tamar under the heavy burden of childlessness. The death of Onan marks the demise of two of Judah's sons directly or indirectly caused by their relationship with Tamar. How does Judah react to this situation?

Having lost two sons (Er and Onan), Judah is now left with Shelah his last son. Naturally, he does not want to lose him also. Since he perceives Tamar as his sons' agent of death (v.11cd), Judah refrains from obeying the customary [levirate] obligation of giving Shelah to her in marriage. To this end, he uses Shelah's young age as an excuse for sending Tamar home with this instruction:<sup>21</sup> "Live as a widow in your father's house until Shelah my son grows up." Tamar, who until now has said nothing in the narrative, responds to Judah's instruction with action. Hence, "she went and dwelt in her father's house." Her action depicts a childless widow who has no other legal option than to obey her father-in-law's command.<sup>22</sup>

Tamar's plight of wallowing childless in a society that places emphasis on procreation and where offspring (especially male) guarantees a woman's security parallels the dilemma of childless married African woman.<sup>23</sup> In Igbo society (and most African societies), it is the dream of every woman not only to get married but also to become a mother and having a child is the only means of acquiring this status. Hence, a woman's inability to become a mother is very detrimental both to her personality and her social status. As Ikenga Metuh notes "motherhood is a much sought after status in most African societies. It is the dream and self fulfillment of every African young woman. A woman who cannot or has not given birth is a social misfit. If she has never conceived she is openly ridiculed and told that she is not a woman."<sup>24</sup> It is only by becoming mothers that African wives feel their womanhood really vindicated, authenticated and satisfied. In most African patrilineal societies, almost the same fate awaits a woman who has 'only' female children without a male child. For instance, in Igbo society, property inheritance (especially assets) is the exclusive right of the male child and only such a child can validly stand as an heir of the family.<sup>25</sup> Thus, a woman with female children but without a male child suffers,

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<sup>20</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 367.

<sup>21</sup> Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 363.

<sup>22</sup> See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 7.

<sup>23</sup> D. Weisberg has observed a contrast between men's reaction to levirate marriage and that of women. Men reject it while women in search of lineage continuity and security are very eager to embrace it (See Deut 25:5-10; Ruth 4). See Dvora E. Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent: Levirate Marriage in the Bible and Ancient Israel," *JSOT* 28, no. 4 (2004)403-429: 406.

<sup>24</sup> Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Religions* (Enugu: Snaap, 1999), 188.

<sup>25</sup> See Ben Okwu Eboh, "Feminism and African Cultural Heritage," *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 5, no. 2 (2003)123-140: 134.

to a large extent, the plight of a childless woman. The extended family and cultural pressure make life unbearable for such a woman and she runs the risk of losing her husband to a 'fruitful' woman. The 'lucky' ones would have to accept sharing their husbands with another woman in polygamous family 'caused' by her barrenness.<sup>26</sup> Against this unjust background backdrop, no woman wants to be childless or to have only female children, and one who finds herself in such a 'predicament' is ready to go the extra mile in finding a solution. From this perspective, Tamar's desperation in search of progeny is understandable to an African woman (Gn 38:12-26).

### **Tamar's desperate search for offspring as a mirror of the desperation of childless African women – vv 12-26**

At this point in the story, the narrator introduces a time indicator וַיִּרְבוּ הַיָּמִים (many days later), which signals the lapse of a reasonably lengthy period of time after the preceding incidents.<sup>27</sup> So Tamar has remained childless for a long period of time. The evident injustice of allowing her to wallow without attention for such a long time is implied here.<sup>28</sup> Surely any African woman who finds herself in the shoes of Tamar would go the extra mile in solving her problem of childlessness. But how desperate is Tamar to resolve her childlessness?

The narrator tells us that Judah lost his wife and mourned her. Since the usual period of mourning in ancient Israel is seven days (Gn 50:10; Jdt 16:24), Judah's mourning may have lasted accordingly.<sup>29</sup> By announcing Judah's plan to go up to shear his sheep at Timnar, the narrator suggests his resumption of normal activities. There are indications that this first movement of Judah after his wife's demise provided Tamar with a long awaited opportunity to reveal her creative genius, take her destiny into her own hands and resolve the nightmare of living without a child. Tamar, one might argue, presumed that her father-in-law (Judah), being recently bereaved, would be sexually starved and in need of sexual gratification, and decided to trick him.<sup>30</sup> Hence, on receiving the information that her father-in-law was on his way to Timnar, Tamar swings into rapid action [v.14]:

Then Tamar removed her widow's clothing, and she covered herself with a veil and wrapped herself, and she sat in an open place, which is on the road to Timnar.

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<sup>26</sup> Emmanuel C. Uwalaka, *Towards Sustainable Happy Marriage: A Functional Approach* (Owerri: Danstaring 2008), 47.

<sup>27</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 367.

<sup>28</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 11 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989), 155.

<sup>30</sup> Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," *Semeia* 46 (1989)119-139: 123.

Worthy of note here is the description of Tamar's covering of herself: **וְתָכַס בְּצַעֲרֵיהָ וְהִחְעֲלָהּ** [and she covered herself with a wrap and enwrapped herself]. The combination of the two verbs of concealment, **כָּסָה** (to cover)<sup>31</sup> and **עָלָהּ** (hithp., to enwrap oneself),<sup>32</sup> reveals the concerted effort made by Tamar to conceal her real identity and disguise herself. The narrator's parenthetical note ("because she saw that Shelah had grown up but she was not given to him in marriage" v.14f-h) almost justifies Tamar and leaves us without doubt that her actions are geared towards obtaining justice on her own initiative.<sup>33</sup> In a sense, she wants to take her pound of flesh from her father-in-law, who refuses to provide her with a means of conception. But does she succeed?

The narrator tells us that Judah mistook Tamar for a harlot (see v.15). Presuming Tamar to be a harlot, Judah immediately enters into a business like exchange with her (v.16cd): "Please let me come into you (or let me lie with you)."<sup>34</sup> Tamar in response to Judah's request, demands a price for her service: "What will you give me to come into me (v.16h)?" Her total control of the entire situation places her in the advantaged position of determining what Judah will give her.<sup>35</sup> Surely her greatest desire is to acquire a means of conception so as to bear offspring for Er and become a mother.<sup>36</sup> Judah without hesitation promises her a young female goat. But Tamar, bent on accomplishing her plan, retorts "Only if you give me a pledge... with your signet ring, and your cord, and staff which is in your hand (vv.17-18)." Judah's strong desire to lie with the 'harlot' (Tamar) makes him hand over his signet ring, cord and staff to her as a pledge. The value of these materials is described by Alter as "a kind of Ancient Near Eastern equivalent of all a person's major credit cards."<sup>37</sup> It is a kind of ID card.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, their immense value and their status as a legal means of identifying the owner is beyond doubt.

The narrator tells us that having fulfilled the demand of Tamar, Judah "went into her and she conceived by him." Surely Judah had accomplished his heart's desire and, ironically, also satisfied Tamar's craving for a means of conception. Since he presumed Tamar to be a harlot he rightly expected no consequence from his action apart from fulfilling his promise of sending a young goat. Nevertheless, from Tamar and the reader's point of view, some consequences are

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<sup>31</sup> BDB, 492.

<sup>32</sup> BDB, 763.

<sup>33</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. David E. Green, Text and Interpretation (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 269.

<sup>34</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Melissa Jackson compares Tamar's action with that of Lot's daughters and labels all of them tricksters whose actions were motivated by the desire to perpetuate their lineage. See Melissa Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology" *JSOT* 98 (2002)29-44: 30-32.

<sup>37</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Steven Mathewson, "Exegetical Study of Genesis 38," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146, no. 584 (1989)373-392: 379.

expected, especially, since conception followed the intercourse, and Tamar not a harlot was involved.

Having successfully executed her plans, Tamar is now with child. She then returns to her widow's garments and status: "she removed her veil from her and put on her widow's garments" (v.19). Meanwhile, Judah sends a young goat to the 'harlot' through his friend the Adullamite, consistent with his promise. Judah's action here raises the question: How genuine is his intent on fulfilling his promise? Before now, Judah has failed in his promise to give his son Shelah to Tamar, but now he is bent on fulfilling his promise to a mere prostitute.<sup>39</sup> What an irony!<sup>40</sup> Clearly, his concern here is geared towards reclaiming his treasured pledges, and is not a sign of consistency with regard to his promises. Surprisingly, the 'harlot' is nowhere to be found, and even questioning of the townsfolk about her whereabouts yields nothing. The Adullamite's extra effort of asking the townsfolk about the temple prostitute is the narrator's way of indicating his determination to retrieve Judah's precious pledges. Since the woman is nowhere to be found, Judah has no option than to keep back his goat and forgo his precious pledge: "let her keep it for herself" [v.23b]. With this statement, Judah believes the tale of his sexual intercourse with the 'prostitute' has ended, albeit with a twist.

The episode of Gn 38:24-30 records the dramatic climax of the entire narrative.<sup>41</sup> The new episode commences with a time indicator **ויהי במשלוש חדשים** (after three months), which leaves us without doubt that Tamar's conception has now grown into a visible pregnancy. The report given to Judah confirms this: "Tamar your daughter-in-law has committed sexual infidelity. And even, she is pregnant with a child through her sexual unfaithfulness" [v.24].

Although the bearer of this report is anonymous ('someone said'), his message is judgmental and with weighty implications. Since Tamar is betrothed to Shelah but is living alone in her father's house (waiting for Shelah to grow up), her pregnancy is presumably a product of marital infidelity.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, with Tamar's pregnancy as a legal exhibit, obtaining the two or three witnesses required for condemning a person to death is very simple (Dt 17:6). From the reporter's point of view, Tamar is susceptible to the grave punishment due for marital infidelity: death (Lv 20:10; Dt 22:21). There is no escape. But how does Judah the father-in-law respond to this report?

Then Judah said 'Bring her out to be burnt!'

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<sup>39</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 368.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology " 39.

<sup>41</sup> Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 368-369.

Without hesitation, Judah pronounces a sentence of adulteress over Tamar using two imperatives (הוציאנה ותרשרי); she is to be burnt. As the head of the family, it is Judah's duty to pronounce the death sentence, but the execution is to be carried out by the community (Dt 22:24). The latter is suggested by Judah's use of the *hiphil* imperative masculine plural: הוציאנה (bring her out), which is clearly a command to be carried out by others. This command is immediately followed by its fulfillment by an anonymous (male) crowd. Thus, "Tamar was brought out" (v.25a); perhaps, at the gate outside the town (Dt 22:21-24).<sup>43</sup> With the first part of Judah's command fulfilled, what is left now is the second and deadly part: 'to have her burnt to death.' Being on the verge of death, Tamar, who until now has not offered any self-defense, rises to the occasion (v.25).

Tamar sent to her father-in-law saying 'by the man to whom these belong  
I am pregnant' And she said 'Take note please, whose signet ring, cord and  
staff are these?'

With this stunning revelation, Tamar vindicates herself from the accusation of marital infidelity and undermines the death sentence. At this point of the narrative, the reason for Tamar's insistence on having Judah's signet ring, cord and staff becomes clear: they will serve as undisputable means of identifying Judah as the man responsible for her pregnancy.<sup>44</sup> Now Judah realizes that by pronouncing judgment on Tamar he has actually condemned himself. So, it is Judah, not Tamar, who is now trapped. Surely, his insignia have implicated him beyond doubt. Like a man fallen on his own sword, Judah says (v.26): "she is more righteous than me because I did not give her in marriage to Shela my son".

Without mincing words, Judah pleads guilty and declares Tamar innocent. According to Menn, "implicit in his public recognition of Tamar's righteousness in Gn 38:26 is a revocation of the death sentence that he earlier imposed upon her in his role as paterfamilias."<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, it is unlikely, as Claus Westermann suggests, that Judah by publicly declaring Tamar innocent is being honorable.<sup>46</sup> A more likely interpretation is that he found himself in a situation in which he had no other option than to acknowledge, on the one hand, his complicity and, on the other hand, Tamar's innocence. The narrator's parenthetical note "and he did not again sleep with her (know her)" once more underlines the inadvertent nature of the first intercourse and assures the reader that Judah stopped at that. In this way, the narrator explains why Judah was not accused of incest

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<sup>43</sup> Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 269.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-270.

<sup>45</sup> Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 270.

(Lv 18:15); he took Tamar for a harlot. Furthermore, on the strength of the injustice done to Tamar, her dubious means of obtaining justice is also not condemned. At the end of the pericope, the narrator tells us that Tamar is pregnant with twins. Notably, the twins she expects are legitimate because they are fathered by Judah and are regarded as the sons of his late husband, Er. So the childless woman is now blessed with twins and the story ends on a positive note for Tamar.

There can be little doubt every married African childless woman would dream to have the happy ending of Tamar: she not only bore twins but *male* twins for that matter. From the African woman's perspective, her worries were entirely eradicated and her joy fully restored. Nevertheless, since the means of conception for which Tamar finally opted (deceiving her father-in-law into sleeping with her) is not readily available to a childless African (Igbo) woman, she has to look for solution elsewhere. If a childless Igbo woman is a Christian, she may resort to praying for divine intervention. This leads to the search for a miracle in the prayer houses and 'miracle centers' littered throughout Igbo land and Nigeria (Africa). If she is a traditionalist, she might visit native doctors and fulfill all the ritual prescriptions and sacrifices suggested by the native doctor. Nowadays, a good number of such women seek the help of orthodox medical practitioners. Meanwhile, as long as there is hope of acquiring a child, the husband will (or pretend to) be willing to participate in the search for a solution, but his perseverance is usually not as elastic and enduring as that of his wife. The husband's apparent lack of enthusiasm should not be mistaken for his manly acceptance of the situation. Indeed, for an Igbo man to die childless or without a male child is a calamity. In Igbo society, "to die childless is tantamount to a descent into oblivion, to be forgotten by both the living and the dead. This is because such a person has left no heir to pour libation for him."<sup>47</sup> As a result, faced with this terrible predicament in the famous Igbo novel, *Things Fall Apart*, "Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his father crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days..."<sup>48</sup> Such a man is not admitted in the prestigious status of ancestor (Ichie) after his death. Igbo names like *Ikemefuna* (my lineage will not disappear), *Ahamefuna* (my name shall not be lost) reveal the strong yearning for heir and progeny based immortality lurking in the heart of every Igbo [African] man.

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<sup>47</sup> Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, *Resolving the Dilemmas of Life: Way out When There Seems to be no Help and Hope* (Enugu: Snaap, 2004), 54.

<sup>48</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1985), 108.

Any married man whose wife is childless or has only female children is subject to both cultural and extended family pressure. The parents and the relatives of such a man will often repeat to him the dreadful consequences of dying childless or without an heir. To avert this type of calamity, men normally look for solution by either divorcing their wife and marrying a 'fruitful' one or in polygamy. The implication is that the husband is tacitly laying the blame of childlessness or inability to get a male child on the wife; a presumption which is both unjust and sometimes unfounded. Indeed, not every case of childlessness can be ascribed to the woman, and only medical examination can identify the culprit (if such is the correct word). Medical science has revealed that some cases of childlessness and infertility are caused by sexually transmitted diseases (STD), poor ejaculation, low sperm count and/or poor ovulation.<sup>49</sup> When discovered early enough these can be cured medically. Regrettably, few married African couples seek the help of orthodox medical practitioners and women often bear the brunt of this neglect. In addition, medical science has shown that the gender of a baby is a natural biological process for which women should not be blamed.<sup>50</sup> Research into 'pre-conception sex selection' shows how difficult it is to manipulate this process.<sup>51</sup> The fact that marrying more than one wife violates the Christian (Catholic) teaching of absolute monogamy and indissolubility of marriage is not strong enough to deter some contemporary Igbo Christians from seeking a solution to childlessness in polygamy.<sup>52</sup> Only very few Igbo men, especially good Christians, who accept the implications of the unbreakable cord of marital indissolubility and the promise of 'till death do we part' can go to any length with their wives in search of panacea solution. Nonetheless, child adoption, which is a genuine solution to involuntary childlessness, is seldom seen, especially by men, as a viable solution. Child adoption is unfortunately not yet well appreciated in Igbo culture (and most African traditions) because for some people it implies the importation of a 'foreigner' into the lineage. It is always a reluctant last resort, which normally exposes the adopted child to ridicule later in life. Till now, it is the common practice of parents who want to adopt to do so secretly, thus painting a picture of bearing the child in question biologically. To this end, some mothers go as far as feigning pregnancy for nine months before adoption, and some others take a long leave-of-absence from their family members. The situation is gradually improving, but it is still far from what is obtainable in Europe and North America.

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<sup>49</sup> Sylvanus Okechukwu, *Christian Marriage and Genetic Engineering: A Dialogue* (Owerri: St John, 2001), 61.

<sup>50</sup> As the analysis of 'gender-determination' reveals, it is a chance process and if anybody is to be 'blamed' for the gender of the baby, it is the man. Women have only two XX chromosomes while men have XY. "As a result, among the millions of sperms a man discharges during coitus, some have XY others XX, of which he will contribute X or Y to determine the sex of the fetus." So in this 'chance process' of sex selection, it is a man that determines the sex of the baby though unconsciously. See Uwalaka, *Towards Sustainable Happy Marriage: A Functional Approach* 47.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>52</sup> Abasili, *Resolving the Dilemmas of Life: Way out When There Seems to be no Help and Hope*, 55.

#### 4. OUR CONCLUSIONS: THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF JUDAH/TAMAR STORY FOR TODAY'S AFRICANS

Studying the Judah/Tamar narrative through the perspective of African women indicates some positive theological implications for addressing some concrete unjust treatment of women in African patriarchal society. Indeed, the parallel between the ordeal of Tamar (in Gen 38) and the unjust treatment of childless African woman is in itself a critique of the status quo in Africa. Here are some of the theological implications.

##### **[a] Marriage as search for progeny and procreation is not enough**

The pericope of Gn 38 began with procreation (v.2) and ended with the birth of twins (v.vv.27-30).<sup>53</sup> In all, five children were born within the pericope and the narrator carefully underlined each of these births. On the strength of this, we conclude that the overriding theme of Gn 38 is the search for offspring or progeny. This theme of the search for progeny in Gen 38 resonates with the emphasis on progeny in every African marriage. Hence, procreation is the primary end of marriage in Africa. Spouses' companionship flows from and depends on this. Begetting children, therefore, is a social and religious duty attached to marriage and is vital to it. As a result, every marriage should be open to fecundity and begetting children defines its success. So a childless marriage is a bad omen and African societies, being mainly patriarchal, often lay the blame on women (wives). Indeed, in the present global context this approach to marriage is no more acceptable. We observe that based on the wellbeing of the couple, today's economic exigencies and the need for population control, such an approach to marriage and sex should be rejected. Marital sexual intercourse should not merely be reduced to its procreative function; such a minimalistic view parallels animalistic perception of the use of sexuality. Companionship and mutual assistance between married partners is a vital purpose of marriage that also deserves attention. Even without children, the companionship of married couples rooted in love constitutes enough grounds for happy married life. In their love for each other, married couple can also enjoy sex that is noble, and both emotionally and physically fulfilling.<sup>54</sup> Such a pleasure also belongs to marital or conjugal love and life. In addition, defining marriage solely on the basis of its procreative function strips marriage of some of its vital aspects and meaning. It reduces married women to child producing machines. Hence, just as a machine is discarded when it stops fulfilling its designated function, so women are discarded in Igbo society when they cannot bear children, especially, male ones. The obvious injustice in this reductionist

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<sup>53</sup> Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 79.

perception of women is underlined. Married women are valuable for who they are, not merely for their procreative function. Igbo society (and Africa) must realize that a childless marriage remains a good marriage and retains its core and happiness.

### **[b] Patriarchalism should be replaced with marital justice and sexual fairness**

In spite of the vital role played by Tamar in this pericope (Gn 38), her voice is never heard. Without fear of contradiction, Tamar emotionally suffered more than any other character in Gn 38: She lost Er her first husband; she was denied a means of procreation by Onan (her second husband); she suffered the death of her second husband Onan; she was unjustly sent back to her father's house by Judah to wallow childless for a long time; and later innocently condemned to death. But the narrator never allowed her to express her feelings. The treatment of Tamar in this narrative parallels the ordeal of many married childless women especially in patriarchal African society. The patriarchal inclination that makes women speechless and powerless in matters that affect them is rejected by YHWH in Gn 38. Hence, the gender difference in expectations, rights, rewards, duties and obligations of married couples in Africa which tilts in favor of men is today no more acceptable. YHWH's punishment of Onan with death for his sexual injustice against Tamar for denying her a means of conception signals his condemnation of sexual injustice against women and his support for fairness in the treatment of (childless) married women. The implication is that sexual intimidation, exploitation and coercion perpetrated against women in marriage is unacceptable.

### **[c] The unjust punishment of women in Patriarchal society**

Judah's first declaration of Tamar as guilty of adultery ('Bring her out to be burnt! [v.24]), his later withdrawal of the sentence based on Tamar's indisputable proof and his acceptance of complicity ("she is more righteous than me" [v.26]) suggests that men in patriarchal society sometimes blame women for their mistakes (Gn 38:24-26). Men often use their advantaged position in the patriarchal society unjustly against women.<sup>55</sup> For example, in Igbo society they blame women for childlessness and bearing of only male children; an action tantamount to holding them responsible for the biological process of gender selection; as if it is in their power to choose their children's gender. We reject such accusation of women and the appreciation of male over female children. In children's value, there is neither male nor female. Western society is exemplary to Africa in this regard.

### **[d] Tamar's fight for Justice as model for subjugated Women**

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<sup>55</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 45.

Melissa Jackson brands Tamar a trickster<sup>56</sup> but I perceive her as a brave and courageous woman who stops at nothing in her fight for justice. She suffered injustice in a world dominated by men but she was resilient to injustice and courageous in fighting against it. This is evident in her decision to conceal her noble identity as a wife and assume the despicable identity of a harlot for the sole purpose of obtaining justice from Judah, her father-in-law. Even though deception is not a virtue, the narrator's parenthetical note ["because she saw that Shelah had grown up but she was not given to him in marriage" v.14f-h] justifies Tamar and leaves us without doubt that she has no other option for obtaining justice.<sup>57</sup> Tamar's success in deceiving Judah and obtaining means of conception is a triumph of justice over injustice for women in a patriarchal society.

To the Igbo women in particular and women living in patriarchal society in general, Tamar is a model for courageous fight against injustice and male subjugation in such a society. Tamar's success against all odds suggests that if they keep up the fight for justice and their right, they will succeed not only in obtaining justice but also change the unjust status quo.

#### **[e] The dream of bearing biological children needs the support of adoption**

By tricking Judah into sleeping with her Tamar eventually resolves and solves not only her ordeal of childlessness but also her longing for a male heir for Er (Gn 38:11-23). From the African perspective, one wonders what would have happened if her twins had both been girls? Luckily she bore two baby boys and her joy at their birth is infectious and completely wipes away her sorrows. Such is the dream of every married African woman: to be able to bear, not only their own children but also a male child (children). However, it is paradoxical that African society (for instance Igbo society), where barrenness and a woman's inability to bear a baby boy are treated as a calamity, does not see child adoption as a viable solution to barrenness. Nonetheless, research has shown that, apart from biologically bearing one's children, adoption is the second viable alternative of becoming parents.<sup>58</sup> This option assumes a higher value in a society like Igbo land where having (at least) a child is a *sine qua non* in every marriage. In such a society, it is very reasonable for childless parents to adopt a child. It is better and easier solution than divorce and polygamy. Surely nurturing a child, who calls one father or mother, from very early childhood to adulthood constitutes in a real sense 'parenting', and makes a couple a real father and mother.

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<sup>56</sup> See Melissa Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Trickstars and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology," *JSOT* 98 (2002)29-46: 30-32.

<sup>57</sup> Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 269.

<sup>58</sup> Brent Waters, *Ethics and Technology: Towards a Theology of Procreative Stewardship* (Wiltshire: Longman, 2001), 70.

