

Seeing Tamar through the Prism of an African Woman: A Contextual Reading of Genesis 38¹

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ABSTRACT

It is a truism that marriage is deeply appreciated in Africa. This, among others, is rooted in Africans' love of children. In most African societies, the begetting of children is a social and religious duty attached to marriage and is vital to it. Bearing of children is an end of marriage upon which the wellbeing of the spouse depends. A successful marriage should be "fruitful." As a result, marriage becomes a big challenge when it is "childless." Due to the patriarchal nature of most African societies, it is the women that often bear the brunt of childlessness in marriage. By embarking on a contextual reading of Genesis 38 and applying its theological implications to an African context, this article joins many concerned individuals in suggesting more informed reactions and solutions to the so-called grave problem of childlessness in marriage.

A INTRODUCTION

In many Africa societies, 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 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 emphasizes procreation and blames a woman for any failure in this regard, what is the way out for a "fruitless" marriage? Reading Genesis 38 (Judah/Tamar narrative) against this backdrop reveals a 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 my interpretation of Gen 38 is the

¹ This paper was first presented at the Contextual Interpretation of the Bible session of the *Society of Biblical Literature's* International conference, held at King's College London, UK (July 3-7, 2011). Based on the good suggestions of the participants, few modifications have been made to the original paper.

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 referring to the African context, I will use the Igbo culture of Nigeria as my case study.²

Methodologically, this article has opted for African contextual hermeneutics, especially, its feminist strand. According to Justin S. Ukpong, it 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 subject of interpretation of the biblical text.³

Using African Feminist hermeneutics, I will seek to interpret Genesis 38 from the perspective of the experience of an Igbo (African) woman.⁴ An Igbo woman's experience of subjugation, intimidation and injustice will be related to similar experience(s) in the Hebrew bible. However, the similarity between the two will be non-essential but only existential (based on similar life experiences). The great separation in time, space and context between the Hebrew bible and Igbo society does not allow for essential similarity between them. This approach in combination with narrative analysis will reveal the relevance of Gen 38 for today's Igbo (African) socio-cultural context and society, especially in the face of childlessness and the search for a male child. This article is divided into four parts: (1) the Judah/Tamar pericope vis-à-vis the African emphasis on procreation—Gen 38: 1-5; (2) Tamar's childlessness vis-à-vis the childless married African woman—Gen 38:6-10; (3) Tamar's desperate search

² 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. The 2006 Nigerian census places the population of Igbo people at about 21 million. The majority of the Igbo people are Christians (about 80%) 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).

³ 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* 3/1 (2005): 88.

⁴ Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," 21-22.

for offspring as a mirror of the desperation of the childless African woman—Gen 38:12-26; (4) conclusion, i.e. the implications of the Judah/Tamar story for today's African audience.

B THE JUDAH/TAMAR PERICOPE VIS-À-VIS AFRICAN EMPHASIS ON PROCREATION – GENESIS 38:1-5

The story of Gen 38:1-30 began with Judah's "going-down" (דָּרָא) from his siblings and father, and settling in Canaan with a Canaanite friend named Hirah. There Judah *took* (וַיִּקְחֶה) a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua (v. 2). Although the Hebrew root לְקַח has a rich semantic field, its usage here unambiguously denotes marriage.⁵ In other words, Judah *married* a Canaanite woman. By the quick succession with which Judah's children were born, the narrator highlights the establishment of a family and the having of progeny as the goals of his marriage. Hence, within three verses (vv. 3, 4, 5) the birth of three sons (Er, Onan and Shelah) of Judah is described. In addition, each sexual intercourse of Judah with his wife in the narrative constitutes procreation, suggesting that the end of sexual relations is not only the bearing of children but also the ultimate purpose of Judah's marriage. It is fair to conclude that in these five verses (vv. 1-5) the narrator makes overt the pivotal role procreation plays in the Judah/Tamar narrative.⁶ Moreover, Er's inability to beget offspring with Tamar will pose a big challenge to Judah's aspiration for progeny.

The understanding of Judah's marriage to Shua's daughter as rooted in "bearing of his heirs" resonates with an 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 most marriages in several African contexts primarily geared towards begetting an heir for the family. In Igbo society of West Africa, for example, the begetting

⁵ The root לְקַח can denote: to take, grasp, be carried away, to select/choose, to marry, to capture/seize etc. See P.J.J.S Els *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (NIDOTTE), vol 2, (Carlisle: Paternoster), 1996, 812-817. Obviously, the usage of לְקַח here points to marriage. See Francis Brown *et al.*, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 544.

⁵ BDB, 544.

⁶ Unlike some authors like Steven Mathewson who see these first five verses as playing a subordinate and peripheral role in the pericope, the current reading agrees with someone like Esther Menn who sees it as announcing the theme of the pericope and preparing the reader for what follows. See Steven D. Mathewson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1989): 376. Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Forms and Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 17. Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," *SJOT* 25, no. 2 (2011): 278.

and training of children are the primary ends of marriage.⁷ The social worth of the spouses flows from and depends on the idea of procreation. The perpetuation of the lineage is vital to the Igbo people, and marriage is the natural and cultural way of guaranteeing the survival of the lineage. For the Igbo people, according to Emmanuel Obunna, "children are the uniting link in the rhythm of life guaranteeing the continuation of the family from one generation to the next."⁸ Begetting children, therefore, is a social and religious duty attached to marriage and is central to it. It is this centrality that informs the strong religious and social opinion against the use of contraceptives and the practice of abortion in Igbo society.⁹ As Lucy Mair explains, the basis of this emphasis on procreation "is that the religious values associated with sex are concentrated on procreation and not on sexual activity as such."¹⁰ Thus, sex between married couples is seen primarily as an act of procreation and not mere gratification.¹¹ With sex as an act of procreation par excellence, the idea of voluntary childlessness (often described as living *child-free* in marriage), seen in some parts of the world in which married couples for various reasons wittingly abstain from having children, may seem strange.¹² Among the Igbo people, for instance, every case of childlessness is not only involuntary but also a staggering problem to the couple in question, especially for the woman. In this type of cultural context, one wonders what would have become of a childless woman like Tamar.

C TAMAR'S CHILDLESSNESS VIS-À-VIS THE CHILDLESS MARRIED AFRICAN WOMAN – GEN 38:6-10

Just as childlessness ignites tension in those African contexts where procreation is of utmost importance, so does it also initiate the first tension in the Judah/Tamar narrative (Gen 38:6-10). In Gen 38:6-10, the narrator tells us that Judah gets a wife for his first son Er: "And Judah took a wife for Er his first-born and her name was Tamar" (v.6). Of course the transition from the birth of Judah's children (vv. 1-5) to the marriage of his first son (Er [vv. 6-10]) must have taken a reasonable number of years.¹³ Perhaps the narrator skipped the intervening period because of his focus on procreation of Judah's progeny. Judah's finding a wife for Er to marry once more underlines his strong intent

⁷ Anthony Mary, *The Fifty Steps to Happy Marriage* (Owerri: Assumpta, 1999), 21.

⁸ Emmanuel Obuna, *African Priests and Celibacy* (Ibadan: Ambassador Books, 1986), 29.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Lucy Mair, *African Marriage and Social Change* (London: Frank Cass, 1969), 3.

¹¹ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 163.

¹² Diana Payette-Bucci, "Voluntary Childlessness," *Direction* 17, no. 2 (1988): 37.

¹³ Mathewson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38," 373.

on guaranteeing his future generation. This Judah's action fuels the expectation that Er's marriage to Tamar will lead to children.¹⁴ However, the expectation of children remained unfulfilled because Er did "what was evil in the eyes of YHWH and YHWH killed him." Er's untimely death without an heir, introduces narrative tension into the story. Judah's intent on having a progeny now hangs by a thin thread. At this stage of the narrative, Tamar has mourned her husband and is going into a second marriage, with the reader still hearing no word from her at this stage.

The narrator says nothing about the nature of Er's evil deed and his family mourning his death, but goes straight to announce Judah's next move towards getting a progeny. As Robert Alter observes, "Here, as at other points in the episode, nothing is allowed to detract our focused attention from the primary, problematic subject of the proper channel for the seed."¹⁵ Judah says to his second son, Onan (v. 8): "Go into the wife of your brother and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother."

By presenting Judah's words as an imperative and direct speech, the narrator underlines the importance of the continuity of progeny to Judah. Without wasting time, Judah orders Onan to step in and rescue the situation by begetting an offspring for Er, his brother.

There are indications that Judah's command to Onan hinges on the law of Levirate which makes it a duty of a widow's brother-in-law to raise a child for the deceased brother (Deut 25:5-10). If Onan refuses to fulfill this duty he will expose himself to a harmful public ridicule specifically reserved for a man "who will not build up his brother's family line" (Deut 25:7-8). Onan, without openly rejecting his father's command to beget a child for his deceased brother (maybe for fear of public ridicule), has intercourse with Tamar. But his obedience is only a façade. The narrator tells us that whenever (אָסָבָה)¹⁶ Onan has intercourse with Tamar he spills his semen on the ground because "he knew that the child will not be his" (v. 9).

Since Onan consciously denies Tamar the possibility of procreation, it can be interpreted that he merely uses Tamar as an object of sexual gratification. The unjust implication of such action becomes more significant when interpreted against the background of the role of married women in patriarchal

¹⁴ Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 20.

¹⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 6.

¹⁶ Following Driver's explanation, Mathewson holds that "the construction אָסָבָה should be understood as a frequentative use of the perfect and translated 'whenever he went in' instead of 'when he went in.'" Mathewson, "An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38," 377.

Israel society. In this regard, Susan Niditch notes that the primary duty of a married woman in ancient Israel is to bear children.

Those who have trouble in producing offspring, like Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel, are objects of scorn to the fruitful women in the clan (Gen 16:4). Moreover, they believe themselves cursed, the most unfortunate of women. Rachel's emotional outcry to Jacob, "Give me children or I will die" (Gen 30:1), must be understood in this context (see also 1 Sam 1:6, 7).¹⁷

Against this back drop, it is fair to assume that Onan's refusal to provide Tamar a means of conception is a grave injustice that exposes her to ridicule. Furthermore, unlike Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel whose initial childlessness is natural, that of Tamar is caused by Onan's sexual injustice. But how does Tamar react? For her own part, Tamar 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.

The narrator tells us that: "... what Onan did was evil in the sight of YHWH and he also killed him" (v. 9). We note that this is the second time YHWH is appearing in this narrative and in each occasion he has killed one son of Judah. As Johanna Bos notes, this is surprising "especially in the Genesis context where God is always portrayed as actively involved in the procreation of male offspring not its elimination."¹⁸ One wonders what exactly is the crux of the matter? Is it Onan's monumental injustice to Tamar? Is it his act of spilling of the semen on the ground (*coitus interruptus*)? Is it his disobedience to his father by refusing to raise a child for his deceased brother Er? Even though *coitus interruptus* may not be approved in the Hebrew bible, there are indications that Onan's refusal to provide progeny for his deceased brother Er is the crux of the matter.¹⁹ There is some consensus among scholars on the reason for Onan's death.²⁰ Thus, it is not the *means* but the *end* of his action that is the bone of contention. Since Onan by refusing to provide progeny for his brother disobeyed his father and used Tamar unjustly as a mere object of sexual satisfaction, both transgressions are also (indirectly) implied in his death penalty. As Wenham notes, Onan's action thwarts the realization of YHWH's promise to

¹⁷ Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *Harvard Theological Review* 72/1 (1979)143-149: 144.

¹⁸ Johanna W. H. Bos, "An Eye Opener at the Gate: George Coats and Genesis 38," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 27/4 (1992): 122.

¹⁹ Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," *SJOT* 25/ 2 (2011): 280.

²⁰ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Dallas, TX: Word Book, 1994), 376. Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 363.

the patriarchs of giving them numerous offspring (Gen 17:6; 28:3; 35:11; 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; 32:13).²¹ In addition, Onan's action goes against YHWH's command in the Decalogue to respect and honour one's parents (Exodus 20:12). Perhaps such transgression of YHWH's promise and law justifies Onan's death sentence.

Having lost two sons (Er and Onan) both of whom were married to Tamar, Judah is now left with Shelah, his last son. Naturally, he does not want to lose him and run the risk of having no progeny. Since Judah is ignorant of Onan's *coitus interruptus* and YHWH's action thereof, he perceives Tamar as his sons' agent of death (v. 11cd). From his point of view, marriage with Tamar leads to death.²² As a result, he does not want to give Shelah to Tamar as prescribed by the customary (levirate) obligation. Instead, he sends Tamar home with this instruction:²³ "Live as a widow in your father's house until Shelah my son grows up." In other words, he uses Shelah's young age as an excuse. But the dilemma of Tamar's position is that being a betrothed widow she is not free to marry because the right over the use of her sexuality belongs to her in-laws.²⁴ In other words, she is neither in her in-laws house nor is she "free" to use her sexuality. "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."²⁵ Her action depicts a childless widow who has no other legal option than to obey her father-in-law's command.²⁶

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 the childless married African woman.²⁷ In Igbo society, it is the dream of every woman not only to get married but also to become a mother. Her inability to have children as a means of acquiring mother status is 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.

²¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 367.

²² Bos, "An Eye Opener at the Gate: George Coats and Genesis 38," 119.

²³ Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue*, 363.

²⁴ Madipoane Masenya, "Killed by Aids and Buried by Religion: African Female Bodies in Crisis," *OTE* 19/2 (2006): 493.

²⁵ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 281.

²⁶ See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7.

²⁷ Dvora 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* 28/4 (2004): 406.

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.²⁸

It is only by becoming mothers that African wives in this kind of context feel that their womanhood really being vindicated, authenticated and satisfied. In such African patrilineal societies, an almost similar fate awaits a woman who has "only" girls without boy(s). For instance, in Igbo society, property inheritance (especially assets) is the exclusive right of the male child.²⁹ Thus, a woman with female children but without a male child suffers, 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 are obliged to accept sharing their husbands with another woman in a polygamous family setup "caused" by barrenness.³⁰ Against this unfair background, no woman wants to be childless or to have only female children. Those finding themselves in such a "predicament" are ready to go the extra mile. From this perspective, Tamar's desperation in search of progeny is understandable to an African woman in this context (Gen 38:12-26).

C TAMAR'S DESPERATE SEARCH FOR OFFSPRING AS A MIRROR OF THE DESPERATION OF CHILDLESS AFRICAN WOMEN – VV. 12-26

By introducing a time indicator - *וירבו הימים* (many days later) - the narrator indicates the lapse of a reasonably lengthy period of time after Tamar was sent home.³¹ The evident injustice of allowing her, a childless widow, to stay at her father's house without attention for such a long time is implied here.³² But how desperate is Tamar to resolve her childlessness?

At this point of the narrative, the narrator tells us that Judah's wife died and he mourned her (Gen 38:12). By revealing Judah's intention to go up and shear his sheep at Timnar the narrator signals Judah's readiness to recommence with his normal activities. We may assume that Tamar sees Judah's publicly assuming of normal duties and responsibilities after mourning his wife as a veritable opportunity to take her destiny into her own hands and resolve her

²⁸ Emeifie Ikenga Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Religions* (Enugu: Snaap, 1999), 188.

²⁹ See Ben Okwu Eboh, "Feminism and African Cultural Heritage," *Journal of Inculturation Theology* 5/2 (2003): 134.

³⁰ Emmanuel C. Uwalaka, *Towards Sustainable Happy Marriage: A Functional Approach* (Owerri: Danstaring 2008), 47.

³¹ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 367.

³² Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 7. See also Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 281.

childlessness.³³ Tamar, one might argue, presumed that the death of her father-in-law's wife leaves him sexually starved and in search of sexual gratification.³⁴ So she decided to try her luck with a trick.³⁵ On getting the news of Judah's intended movement, Tamar embarked on a plot (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.

That Tamar made a concerted effort to conceal her real identity and disguise herself is evident in the combination of two verbs of concealment, *כָּסַח* (to cover)³⁶ and *וַתָּכַס בְּצַעַר וְתַחַלֵּף עַל* (*hitp.*, to enwrap oneself):³⁷ (and she covered herself with a wrap and enwrapped herself). As I argued elsewhere, it is significant the measure Tamar took to conceal herself.³⁸ 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) reveals the reason and justification behind Tamar's action. She is motivated by Judah's failure to fulfil his promise of giving her to Shelah. She wants to resolve her dilemma and reinstate herself in a society that has no *real* place for a married but childless woman. In ancient Israel, as Niditch notes,

The young woman is allowed only two proper roles. She is either an unmarried virgin in her father's home or she is a faithful, child-producing wife in her husband's or husband's family's home.³⁹

It is clear that Tamar as a childless widow was in an awkward and very disadvantaged position.

The narrator tells us that "When Judah saw Tamar, he thought her to be a harlot (*זָנָה*), for she had covered her face" (v. 15). Presuming Tamar to be a harlot, Judah immediately reveals his intention to have sexual intercourse with her. Tamar acting like a harlot requested for a price for her service "What will you give me to come into me (v. 16h)?" Judah without hesitation promised her a young goat "I will send you a young female goat from my flock" (v. 17). At this point, Tamar exploits her advantaged position and requests for Judah's signet ring, his cord and staff as a pledge till he brings the goat (vv. 17-18).⁴⁰ Judah's dire need for sexual gratification makes him hand over, without

³³ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 281.

³⁴ Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 123.

³⁵ Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine," 123.

³⁶ BDB, 492.

³⁷ BDB, 763.

³⁸ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 281.

³⁹ Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," 145.

⁴⁰ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 282.

restraint, his signet ring, cord and staff to the harlot (Tamar) as collateral. In the Ancient Near East, these personal items have immense value because they legally identify the owner.⁴¹

The narrator informs the reader that Judah, having fulfilled Tamar's demand, "went into her and she conceived by him." Without doubt Tamar has succeeded in her ploy; she obtained her most sought-after means of survival: conceiving a child. At the same time, Judah satisfied his thirst for sexual gratification. Hence both (actor and actress) left the scene satisfied.⁴²

Given the protracted discussion that transpired between Tamar and Judah, it is puzzling that he failed to recognize Tamar. Madipoane Masenya remarks the following:

What makes one curious as one reads this part of the episode is whether since his proposition to Tamar as well as throughout their entire sexual encounter, Judah had no clue whatever that he was sharing his body with his daughter-in-law. Is this plausible?⁴³

She wonders whether it is not "a deliberate strategy used by the narrator to keep the language of this part of the story ambiguous?"⁴⁴ Alternatively, one may ask whether the narrator's consistent presentation of Judah's ignorance of Tamar's real identity is a strategy to force the reader to see the story in a particular way. Or, perhaps it is indeed Judah's "blindness" to Tamar's real identity that allows him to sleep with her and provide Tamar with a legitimate means of conception. Obviously, Judah's presumed ignorance of the "harlot's" identity helped the progression of the narrative and may explain why the narrator opted for that angle of vision.

The narrator tells us that Tamar, having successfully played the "harlot", returns to her garments and status as a widow: "she removed her veil from her and put on her widow's garments" (v. 19). Meanwhile, in fulfillment of his promise, Judah sends a young goat to the "harlot" through his friend the Adullamite. Surprisingly, the temple prostitute (*קָדְשָׁה* [v.20]) is nowhere to be found, and even questioning the townsfolk about her whereabouts yields nothing. Judah's inability to find the harlot (or temple prostitute as the Adullamite calls her) left him with only one option: to keep his goat and forgo his personal items: "let her keep it for herself" (v. 23b). With this statement, Judah laid to rest the story of his sexual intercourse with the "harlot".

⁴¹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 9.

⁴² Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 282.

⁴³ Masenya, "Killed by Aids and Buried by Religion: African Female Bodies in Crisis," 494.

⁴⁴ Masenya, "Killed by Aids and Buried by Religion: African Female Bodies in Crisis," 494.

The narrator begins the new episode (Gen 38:24-30) with a time indicator: **וַיְהִי בַּמְשֻׁלֵשׁ חֶדְשִׁים** (after three months). In this way, he informs the reader that Tamar's conception has now become a visible pregnancy. The visibility of her pregnancy is confirmed by the accusatory report given to Judah: "Tamar your daughter-in-law has committed sexual infidelity. And even, she is pregnant with a child through her sexual unfaithfulness" (v. 24). Without doubt the report is judgmental and will have severe repercussions not only for Tamar but definitely also for Judah.⁴⁵ Since Tamar is a betrothed widow, only her in-laws have a right over her sexuality. Thus, it is understandable that they would regard her pregnancy presumably as a result of marital infidelity.⁴⁶ As I noted elsewhere, "with Tamar's pregnancy as a legal exhibit, obtaining the two or three witnesses required for condemning a person to death is very simple (Deut 17:6)."⁴⁷ Obviously Tamar is in a serious predicament, ultimately facing the death penalty for adultery (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:21).

How does Judah react to the report? He picks up on the suggestion of adultery and condemns her to death: "Then Judah said, 'Bring her out to be burned! (הוֹצִיאֹה וְתִשְׁרֵף) [v. 24].'" Without hesitation Judah pronounces a death sentence over Tamar.⁴⁸ The imperative nature of Judah's statement suggests that it is an authoritative command upon which people will react. The narrator tells the reader that Judah's command is eventually carried out by a willing anonymous (male) crowd. Once "Tamar was brought out" (v. 25a); presumably, at the city gate (Deut 22:21-24),⁴⁹ all that is left is the execution of the second and deadly part of Judah's order: "to burn her to death."⁵⁰ Tamar, now at the brink of death, and up to now in the narrative since her encounter with Judah is very quiet, suddenly and quite openly offers a self-defense (v. 25).⁵¹

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?"

Her defense is a startling revelation. Tamar vindicates herself from the accusation of marital infidelity and succeeds in overturning the death sentence. Her defense constitutes a rather weighty statement, revealing to Judah that Tamar was indeed the harlot he "went into."⁵² At this moment, it dawns on Judah that by pronouncing death sentence on Tamar he has in fact condemned

⁴⁵ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 283.

⁴⁶ Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 368-369.

⁴⁷ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 283.

⁴⁸ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 284.

⁴⁹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary, Text and Interpretation* (trans. David E. Green; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 269.

⁵⁰ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 284.

⁵¹ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 284.

⁵² Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," 148.

himself.⁵³ Thus, it is Judah who is now in trouble. Unquestionably, "his insinuations have implicated him beyond reasonable doubt. Like a man fallen on his own sword, Judah says: 'She is more righteous than me because I did not give her in marriage to Shelah my son (v.26).'"⁵⁴ Without mincing words, Judah pleads guilty and declares Tamar innocent. The narrator's explanatory statement, "and he did not again sleep with her (*know her* [יִדַּתָּה])" once more underlines the unintentional nature of the first intercourse and assures the audience that Judah never had sexual intercourse again with Tamar. "In this way, the narrator explains why Judah was not accused of incest (Lev 18:15); he took Tamar for a harlot."⁵⁵ Remarkably, Tamar's dubious means of obtaining legitimate means of conception is not condemned. One can argue that the gravity of the injustice she suffered vindicated her action.

At the end of the pericope, the narrator informs the reader that Tamar has twins (Perez and Zerah). Notably, the twins, being fathered by Judah, can now legitimately be regarded as the sons of her late husband, Er. So the hitherto childless woman is now blessed with twins; the once abandoned widow is now a mother and reinstated in her husband's family. Hence, the story ends on a positive note for Tamar. She is not only a mother, but provided male progeny that ensures the survival of her husband's lineage.

There can be little doubt that married African childless women in a similar situation would dream to have the happy ending of Tamar. She is doubly blessed in having twins and, moreover, they are male! From a childless woman's perspective in a similar African context, Tamar's 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 Igbo woman, she has to look for solution elsewhere. For instance, if a childless Igbo woman is a Christian, she may resort to praying for divine intervention. Praying as an instrument to heal barrenness leads to the search for a miracle in what is called "prayer houses" and "miracle centres" that are littered throughout Igbo land and Nigeria.

In the past, if the childless woman is a traditionalist, she might visit traditional healers and fulfill all the ritual prescriptions and sacrifices suggested by them. Nowadays, a good number of women in this predicament 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 resilience is not as enduring as his wife's perseverance. The husband's apparent lack of enthusiasm should not be mistaken for his manly acceptance of the situation. Indeed, for an Igbo man to

⁵³ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 284.

⁵⁴ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 284.

⁵⁵ Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 285.

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."⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

In addition, a man without progeny is not admitted into the prestigious status of an "Igbo ancestor" after his death. Becoming an ancestor requires having children. African names like *Ahamefuna* (my name shall not be lost [an Igbo name]), *Kewan* (marriage and everything parents do are for the child [a name from Nso tribe of Cameroon]), *Nyamekye* (a child is the highest gift to parents from God [a name from Akans tribe of Ghana]) reveal the strong yearning for heir and progeny rooted in the desire for the continuance of the lineage.

To avert the calamity of dying childless or heirless, some men normally look for solution by either divorcing their wife and marrying a "fruitful" one or starting polygamy. The implication is that the husband is tacitly laying the blame of childlessness or the inability to provide a male heir 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 reasons for the failure to conceive. 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.⁵⁸ When discovered early enough these can be cured medically. Regrettably, not all married African couples finding themselves in a context where progeny is regarded as the be all and end all of marriage seek the help of orthodox medical practitioners. Often it is women who bear the brunt of this neglect when orthodox medicine could have helped.

In addition, medical science has shown that the gender of a baby is a natural biological process for which women should not be blamed.⁵⁹ Research

⁵⁶ Alexander I. Abasili, *Resolving the Dilemmas of Life: Way out When There Seems to be no Help and Hope* (Enugu: Snaap, 2004), 54.

⁵⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1985), 108.

⁵⁸ Sylvanus Okechukwu, *Christian Marriage and Genetic Engineering: A Dialogue* (Owerri: St John, 2001), 61.

⁵⁹ 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

into "pre-conception sex selection" shows how difficult it is to manipulate this process.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, child adoption, which is a genuine solution to involuntary childlessness, is seldom seen, especially by men, as a viable solution. In some instances, child adoption is not appreciated because it is regarded as a way to import a "foreigner" into the lineage. It is always a reluctant last resort, which normally exposes the adopted child to ridicule later in life. Subsequently, parents who want to adopt do so secretly and paint 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 others take a long leave-of-absence from their family members.

D CONCLUSION: THE CONTEXTUAL IMPLICATIONS OF JUDAH/TAMAR STORY FOR TODAY'S AFRICANS

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

1 Marriage as search for progeny and procreation is minimalistic

The pericope of Gen 38 began with procreation (v. 2) and ended with the birth of twins (vv. 27-30).⁶¹ In all, five children were born within the scope of the narrative and the narrator carefully underlined each of these births. Given the scope of the narrative one can conclude that the overriding theme of Gen 38 is the search for offspring or progeny.⁶² This theme resonates with the emphasis on progeny in some African contexts. As a result, begetting children defines the success of marriage. Thus, a childless marriage is regarded as a bad omen and societies when being mainly patriarchal, often lay the blame on women (wives).

However, in the present global context this approach to marriage is no longer satisfying. Based on the wellbeing of the couple, and on today's economic exigencies such an approach to marriage and sex is questionable. Marital sexual intercourse should not merely be reduced to its procreative function. It constitutes a minimalistic view that parallels an animalistic perception of the

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 the man that determines the sex of the baby, though unconsciously. See Uwalaka, *Towards Sustainable Happy Marriage: A Functional Approach* 47.

⁶⁰ Uwalaka, *Towards Sustainable Happy Marriage: A Functional Approach* 47.

⁶¹ Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 15.

⁶² Abasili, "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir," 285.

use of sexuality. Companionship and mutual assistance between married partners is a vital purpose of marriage that also deserves attention. Even without children (resulting from causes beyond a couple's control), the companionship of married couples rooted in love constitutes enough grounds for happy married 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 when they cannot bear children, especially, male ones. Married women are valuable for who they are, not merely for their procreative function. However, the realization that a childless marriage remains a good marriage and retains its core and happiness remains in stark contrast with the status quo in many patriarchal societies.

2 Patriarchalism should be replaced with marital justice and sexual fairness

In spite of the vital role played by Tamar in this pericope (Gen 38), her voice is never heard. Without fear of contradiction, Tamar emotionally suffered more than any other character in Gen 38: She lost her first husband; she was unjustly 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, apart from her self-defense, 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 society.

The patriarchal inclination that makes women speechless and powerless in matters that affect them is rejected by article one of Universal Declaration of Human right—"all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Hence, the gender difference in expectations, rights, rewards, duties and obligations of married couples in patriarchal societies which tilts in favor of men is no longer 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 and maleless) married women. The implication is that sexual intimidation, exploitation and coercion perpetrated against women in marriage is unacceptable.

3 The unjust punishment of women in a patriarchal society

Judah's first declaration of Tamar as guilty of adultery ("Bring her out to be burned!" [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]) suggest that men in patriarchal society sometimes blame women

for their mistakes (Gen 38:24-26). Men sometimes use their advantaged position in the patriarchal society unjustly against women.⁶³ For example, in Igbo society some men tacitly blame women for childlessness and bearing of only female 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. Such action is against the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women of December 1979 (article 1[CEDAW]).⁶⁴ Against this backdrop, unjust accusations of women and the appreciation of male over female children need to be seriously questioned. In children's value, there is neither male nor female.

4 Asymmetry in sexual freedom in favour of men is questionable

There are indications that Judah, as a male in patriarchal society, enjoys more sexual freedom and rights than Tamar. For the satisfaction of his sexual desires, he freely meddles with a "harlot," even in the presence of his friend, the Adul-lamite. All he needs to do is to satisfy the emolument demanded by the harlot for her sexual services. The narrator's refusal to condemn Judah's action tacitly signals the acceptance of such behaviour from men in patriarchal biblical Israelite society. In other words, Judah can have intercourse with a harlot to satisfy his sexual desires and she can conceive, but he has no obligations towards her and the children.

Conversely, Tamar lacks such sexual freedom. As a betrothed widow, Tamar's sexuality is under the control of her husband's family. She has no right and power over her sexuality. Since her husband is dead, it is Judah (the *pater familias*) who is in charge of her sexuality and decides her sexual partner. Even while dwelling in her father's house at the order of Judah, she is neither free to marry nor "free" to exercise her sexuality (Gen 38:10). No wonder her "unauthorized" sexual intercourse is tantamount to adultery warranting the death sentence (Gen 38:24). Certainly, from a contemporary perspective such a lop-sided treatment of sexuality is unjust.

Unfortunately, such sexual inequality in the treatment of men and women is still existent today. For instance, although constitutionally adultery is banned for male and female,⁶⁵ in praxis some men treat it almost as only a mar-

⁶³ Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 45.

⁶⁴ The constitution of most African countries prohibits discriminations against women. For instance Nigerian constitution (section 15.2) rejects any discrimination in treatment of persons based on their sex.

⁶⁵ In the Nigerian law, adultery refers to the voluntary extramarital sexual relationship between a married man or woman with any other man or woman not his wife or her husband. Hence, it is gender symmetrical. See "Matrimonial Causes Act" in *Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 1990, Chapter 220*, section 15, 2 (b).

ried woman's sin in Igbo land (and some other patriarchal societies). The sexual injustice inherent in asymmetrical treatment of sexuality (in marriage) in favour of men is grave and unacceptable. In the use of sexuality, both married men and women have equal right and power over each other's sexuality and have equal claim to damages in the event of marital infidelity. The threat posed by Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) especially HIV/AIDS in Africa calls for responsible use of sexuality and sexual fairness among married people. No married person has the right to endanger a partner's life through sexual promiscuity.

5 Tamar's fight for justice as model for subjugated women

Melisa Jackson brands Tamar a trickster⁶⁶ 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 (נָזָר) 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's actions and leaves us without any doubt about her options for obtaining justice.⁶⁷ 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 African 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 in changing the unjust status quo.

6 The dream of bearing biological children needs the support of adoption

By tricking Judah into sleeping with her Tamar eventually resolves and solves her ordeal of searching for a male heir for Er (Gen 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 many married African women: to be able to bear, not only their own children but also a male child (children). However, it is paradoxical that some African societies (for instance Igbo society), where barrenness and a woman's inability to bear a

⁶⁶ See Melissa Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Trickstars and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology," *JSOT* 98 (2002): 30-32.

⁶⁷ Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 269.

baby boy are treated as a calamity, do 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 to becoming parents.⁶⁸ 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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⁶⁸ Brent Waters, *Ethics and Technology: Towards a Theology of Procreative Stewardship* (Wiltshire: Longman, 2001), 70.

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