A Transgender Gaze at Genesis 38

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ABSTRACT

While queer interpretation of the Hebrew Bible has begun to flourish, readings which focus particularly on trans and gender-diverse experiences remain lacking. In this article, I offer a trans reading of Gen 38, the Judah and Tamar narrative, drawing the text into dialogue with a trans hermeneutic. This allows me to reflect on trans and gender-diverse experiences while also shedding new light on the biblical narrative. In the course of this reading, I focus on three narrative aspects which I believe are particularly relevant to trans and gender-diverse lives: Tamar’s precarity, her engagement in sex work, and the complexity of her motives for doing so. This reading is intended to counter transphobic uses of the Bible, contributing to a growing body of trans affirmative biblical studies and providing some new answers to questions about the text.

KEYWORDS

Tamar; Genesis 38; transphobia; transgender gaze; queer interpretation

Transgender people across the globe face intense discrimination; systemic barriers routinely deny them jobs, homes, and healthcare, and their mere existence is enough to expose them to the very real threat of violent death. Analysis of European Union LGBT survey data suggests that transgender (trans) people face “serious and repetitive victimisation in the EU.”¹ One in three trans respondents to this survey felt discriminated against because of their trans identity when looking for a job,² and one in five noted that they felt “personally discriminated against” by healthcare or social service personnel.³ According to the 2016 annual report of the Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) project, “For a long time, trans and gender-diverse people in all parts of the world have been victims of horrifying hate violence, including beatings, mutilation, rape, and murder.”⁴ Between 1 January 2008 and 30 June 2016 the TMM project recorded 2,910 murders of trans and gender-diverse people;⁵ these are only the reported cases which are accessible to TMM researchers, and so the true number of trans and gender-diverse people murdered in this time is likely to be much, much higher. As the TMM project report suggests, “these 2,190 murders are only the tip of the iceberg.”⁶ To exist as a trans person, to have the audacity to

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² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Being Trans, 9.
³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Being Trans, 9.
⁵ Balzer/LaGata and Berredo, TMM Annual Report 2016, 12.
⁶ Balzer/LaGata and Berredo, TMM Annual Report 2016, 12.
live while being transgender, is to risk death at the hands of transphobia. If we hold any kind of commitment to social justice and the eradication of gender-based violence, then it is clear that something must be done.

In a 2015 article for The Guardian, Harmony Rodriguez suggests that “increased positive representation of trans people is one of the greatest things that could have happened to trans women as a group.” Rodriquez recalls that “in [her] childhood, any trans or gender non-conforming person on television or in film was almost always treated as a villain or a dead body.” It would be naïve to suggest that these tropes have disappeared; trans people are still commonly either demonized or victimized in mainstream media. However, we have also seen an increase in the positive representation of trans and gender non-conforming people. In 2014, for example, actress Laverne Cox appeared on the cover of Time magazine, and in 2016, Aydian Dowling was the first trans man to star on the cover of Gay Times. Yet this growing representation of trans people is not an unqualified good; Rodriguez observes that “hypervisibility is what turns trans women’s lives into spectacle,” citing occasions on which famous trans women have been subjected to “invasive questions about surgical status or former names.” The growing representation of trans people is promising, but, as Rodriguez argues, “it isn’t enough.” To be effective as a means of tackling violent transphobia, representations of trans people need to be positive and humanizing. They need to cover the diverse range of trans experiences, and to show that trans lives are beautiful, valuable, and deserving of respect. Most of all, representations must demonstrate that trans and gender-diverse people are worthy of living long and fruitful lives.

Trans Representation and the Transgender Gaze in Biblical Studies

How might the field of biblical studies contribute to positive and empathetic representations of trans and gender-diverse people, and thus play its part in the liberation of trans and gender-diverse people worldwide? The need for this type of biblical work is particularly pressing, considering the ongoing use of biblical texts within conservative religious discourses surrounding trans and gender-diverse people. For example, the recently released article on gender theory by the Vatican is an incredibly harmful text, which attacks the rights of trans people to exist on the basis of a cis-heteronormative reading of

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8 Rodriguez, “Trans Visibility.”
9 Rodriguez, “Trans Visibility.”
10 Rodriguez, “Trans Visibility.”
11 Rodriguez, “Trans Visibility.”
the Genesis creation account.\textsuperscript{12} Caroline Blyth and Prior McRae argue that such biblical interpretations “represent a dangerous form of symbolic violence, which sanctions and justifies the intolerance and marginalization—the othering—of trans people.”\textsuperscript{13} While debates surrounding trans people may not explicitly, or indeed deliberately, advocate for violence against them, the very idea that the existence of this vulnerable group is up for debate is itself an act of violence. Trans people exist, and to suggest that they do not enact a form of symbolic death. It seems clear to me, then, that those of us working in the field of biblical studies who are committed to supporting and defending trans and gender-diverse people must produce works which demonstrate that trans and gender diverse subjectivities are, in fact, represented in biblical texts.

Such work is not without precedent. Over the past twenty years, the use of queer approaches in biblical studies have become increasingly common; a number of biblical scholars have attempted to uncover latent queer themes in biblical texts and to read the Bible in relation to LGBT experiences.\textsuperscript{14} However, scholarship which engages with trans and gender-diverse experiences remains, for the most part, scarce. If biblical studies is to make a valuable contribution to trans and gender-diverse liberation, this must change. A notable attempt to begin plugging this gap in biblical scholarship is Teresa J. Hornsby and Deryn Guest’s book \textit{Transgender, Intersex, and Biblical Interpretation}.\textsuperscript{15} In this vitally important work, Hornsby and Guest challenge heteronormative and transphobic readings of the Bible. They argue that, “if the power of heteronormativity resides in its unquestioned status of ‘normal’ ... the buttress of the whole façade is Bible translation and interpretation.”\textsuperscript{16} They therefore boldly set out to dismantle the foundations of this incredibly harmful use of biblical texts:

In short, we are trying to undo the heteronormative way in which biblical texts have been read and used; we are both using the lens of trans theory to interpret texts in and new and illuminating ways; we are both committed to the ethical imperative to

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Giuseppe Versa and Angelo Vincenzo Zani, “Male and Female he Created Them”: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education (Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education, 2019).
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Teresa J. Hornsby and Deryn Guest, \textit{Transgender, Intersex, and Biblical Interpretation} (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).
\end{itemize}
do this given the way Scriptures can be mobilized for transphobic purposes; and we are both working toward more inclusive curricula for the field of biblical studies.\footnote{Hornsby, “Introduction,” 11.}

In carrying out this work, Hornsby and Guest have produced a valuable resource which significantly informs my project here. In particular, I am drawn to Deryn Guest’s introduction of the transgender gaze into biblical studies. The transgender gaze, as understood by Guest, “exposes the constructedness of gender (noting how sex/gender stability is maintained and how disruptions to it are suppressed) … and confronts heteronormativity with alternative visions of gender that may be fragile but are resilient and capable of shifting paradigms of existing thought.”\footnote{Deryn Guest, “Modeling the Transgender Gaze,” in Hornsby and Guest, Transgender, Intersex, and Biblical Interpretation, 50–51.} Thus, employing the transgender gaze in biblical studies does not require uncovering biblical texts that may be understood to contain trans characters. Indeed, this idea is inherently problematic: “transgender” is a modern term, dating to the mid-twentieth century, and designates a concept with no simple equivalent in the culture that produced the biblical texts. Instead, reading with the transgender gaze implies being prepared to challenge the assumptions about sex and gender which characterize dominant interpretation, and to highlight incidences of gender variance and non-conformity in biblical texts which disrupt normative gender performances. By reading through the lens of transgender and gender-variant experiences, I am able to challenge transphobic biblical interpretation by demonstrating that the hegemonic gender norms often purported to be upheld in biblical texts are also destabilized by those same texts. Thus, in my application of the transgender gaze, I do not attempt to argue that the Hebrew Bible explicitly depicts trans characters, but rather that echoes of trans experience can be read into the text, and that this dialogue between trans lives and biblical texts can both challenge symbolic violence enacted against the former \textit{and} enhance our understanding of the latter. As Guest suggests, “Applying the trans gaze to biblical texts is a vital new hermeneutical lens that offsets the heteronormative ends to which biblical texts are often put and provides a counter-discourse to those who use the Bible to denounce transgender or transsexual persons.”\footnote{Guest, “Modeling the Transgender Gaze,” 79–80.} The employment of the transgender gaze is thus a vital move if the field of biblical studies is to play its part in tackling transphobia and gender-based violence.

\section*{Genesis 38 and Trans Interpretation}

Why, of all the diverse texts of the Hebrew Bible, have I attempted a trans reading of Gen 38? Tamar is not the most obvious biblical character upon which to focus a trans reading. Nothing in the narrative would appear to dispute or cast doubt on the fact that Tamar is...
born biologically female and identifies as a woman; she adopts the traditionally feminine roles of wife, widow, daughter, and mother, and her natal female sex is confirmed by the statement that “there were twins in her womb” (Gen 38:27). However, I believe that numerous features of Tamar’s character and story offer themselves up to a trans reading and provide the opportunity for reflection on the trans experience. As I demonstrate below, the events of Genesis 38 bear a striking resemblance to some common experiences of trans and gender-variant people in the contemporary world. While Tamar is not trans, some of the things she experiences in the narrative resemble experiences which are common among trans and gender-variant people. As such, applying the transgender gaze to the text, reading it alongside and through the lens of trans experiences, holds the potential to expose new layers of meaning within the text, to provide new answers to questions which have puzzled biblical scholars for decades, and to demonstrate that biblical texts can be read in ways which are trans affirmative rather than transphobic. In particular, the features of Genesis 38 which I believe are particularly relevant to a trans reading include Tamar’s precarious situation, her engagement in sex work, and the risk of violence she faces.

Tamar’s Precarity

Tamar was originally married to Er, the first-born son of Judah (Gen 38:6). However, Er “was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death” (38:7). Following the convention of levirate marriage, which requires that a man marry his widowed sister-in-law in order to father a male heir for his deceased brother, Judah orders his second son Onan to have sex with Tamar (38:8). Onan, however, reluctant to father a child that would not be his, “spilled his semen on the ground” (38:9). For this he, like Er, is also killed by God (38:10). Rather than having his youngest (and now only) son Shelah attempt to conceive a son with Tamar, as the convention of levirate marriage requires, Judah sends Tamar away, telling her to “remain a widow in [her] father’s house until [his] son Shelah grows up” (38:11). The reader is informed that Judah does this because he fears Shelah will die like Er and Onan (38:11); he associates Tamar with death, despite his sons having died as a result of their displeasing the Lord.

Denied a son who, through his inheritance, might care for his mother, Tamar’s position is highly precarious. There are few means available for a widow like Tamar to support herself in the patriarchal world of the Hebrew Bible. Instead, as Karel van der Toorn observes, in biblical society, “the widow is dependent on the kindness of her environs ... her social position is extremely shaky.” While it seems that Tamar’s situation is stable in the

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20 The notion of binary biological sex has been problematized, and rightly so. Here, out of convenience, I use the term “biologically female” as shorthand to refer to the character’s presumed demonstration of primary and secondary sex characteristics conventionally described as “female.”

21 All Bible references are taken from the NRSV.

course of the narrative, as we can only assume her father accepts her back into the household, her future is less certain. She is reliant on her father’s kindness, and were he to pass away there is no guarantee she would be left with any kind of economic security. Furthermore, since Tamar has already been married and is technically required to conceive a son by Shelah, it seems unlikely that she will be able to find a new husband. As such, Tamar finds herself in a vulnerable position with no easy way out; she risks being left destitute.

Trans and gender-variant people regularly experience levels of precarity which might be compared to Tamar’s situation in the middle section of Gen 38. As mentioned above, trans and gender-variant people commonly face discrimination when seeking employment, meaning they are likely to have difficulty supporting themselves economically. Just as Tamar, a widow in biblical society, has little hope of achieving economic self-sufficiency, so trans people in the contemporary world are often unfairly denied the employment required for their survival in the current global capitalist reality. In Britain, for instance, a report by Stonewall found that “Half of trans and non-binary people … have hidden or disguised the fact that they are LGBT at work because they were afraid of discrimination.” Moreover, “One in eight trans employees (12 per cent) have been physically attacked by colleagues or customers in the last year.” These shocking statistics demonstrate that trans people have great difficulty finding safe employment and, consequently, securing economic self-sufficiency. In addition, trans and gender variant people may lack familial support systems as the result of rejection by family members who could otherwise provide a certain level of economic security. The Stonewall report also found that “only one in four trans people … say that all their family members who know that they are trans are supportive,” and “one in four trans people have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives” due to financial hardship, unemployment, discrimination, or familial rejection. Tamar, in her widowhood, is forced to rely on her father; trans and gender variant people are often compelled to seek support from family members who might reject them on the basis of their gender identity and/or expression. It is reasonable to say, then, that there is a striking similarity between the precarious situation Tamar finds herself in and the precarity that many trans people face. How, though, do trans people and Tamar’s character tackle this precarity, and are there any similarities between the solutions to which they turn?

Sex Work in Biblical Narrative and Trans Reality

In order to improve her precarious situation, Tamar decides to engage in sex work. When Tamar hears that Judah is going to Timnah, she removes her widow’s clothes, puts on a veil, and sits in a place on the way to Timnah (Gen 38:14). She is aware that Shelah is fully grown.

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26 Bachmann and Gooch, *LGBT in Britain*, 15.
but has still not been given to her in marriage. Judah sees Tamar but assumes she is “a prostitute,” failing to recognize her because she has “covered her face” (v. 15). He then has sex with her (and impregnates her) offering her as payment a kid from his flock. As he does not have the kid with him, she takes his signet, cord, and staff until such a time as he can deliver the payment to her (vv. 16–18). Denied long term economic security, Tamar therefore has to take matters into her own hands. She engages in sex work, and it is this action that ultimately remedies her situation; impregnated by her father-in-law, she gives birth to two sons and thus secures her future.

This facet of the text immediately resonates with trans experiences; around the globe, many trans people engage in sex work, often because no other professions are available to them. According to a report by the American National Center for Transgender Equality, “12.8% of participants (n=829) reported engaging in the sex trade or trading sex for access to housing.”27 When employment discrimination prevents trans and gender-diverse people from finding economic security, selling sex may be the last available means to earn money and survive. As Juno Mac and Molly Smith state in Revolting Prostitutes, “survival sex work may be dangerous, cold, and frightening—but for people whose other options are worse (hunger, homelessness, drug withdrawal) it’s there as a last resort: the ‘safety net’ onto which almost any destitute person can fall.”28 People in the most precarious situations, including many trans and gender-diverse people, retain the option to sell their bodies, and this is an option trans people are often forced to choose. The TMM Annual Report 2016 observed that, “among trans and gender-diverse murder victims whose profession was known, 65% were earning a living as sex workers.”29 Clearly, sex work is a necessary reality for many trans people, and a dangerous one at that. The criminalization of sex work in most countries leaves sex workers without labour rights or adequate support systems; sex workers who are mistreated, abused, or attacked are unlikely to report these crimes to the appropriate authorities as doing so might (and often does) result in further violence at the hands of the police, including arrest and criminal charges. Smith and Mac, discussing countries where sex work is fully criminalised (such as the USA and South Africa), observe that “if the sex worker is classed as criminal, their relationship with police becomes automatically adversarial.”30 They note that “across nations where sex workers are criminalised, stories emerge of police officers capitalising on the weakness of their victims in order to inflict beatings, rape, and extortion to an extent where sex workers fear police more than clients, managers, or the public.”31 This vulnerability, coupled with violent transphobia, makes the life of a trans sex worker very dangerous indeed.

31 Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*, 129.
In the biblical world too, sex workers find themselves in a precarious and vulnerable position; while their services are sought by men, they also risk violent punishment by the patriarchal regime. In her discussion of prostitution narratives of the Hebrew Bible, Phyllis A. Bird notes that “the harlot is both desired and despised, sought after and shunned.”32 While biblical sex workers may be tolerated, not to mention the objects of male sexual desire, they are also considered detestable. They exist on the fringes and in the shadows, “never a fully accepted person in any society.”33 The book of Proverbs states that “a prostitute is a deep pit; an adulteress is a narrow well. She lies in wait like a robber and increases the number of the faithless” (Prov 23:27–28). Here, sex workers are associated with a lack of piety and perceived as leading men astray. The locus of immorality is identified primarily in the sex worker, rather than in the man who pays her for sex. Similar associations are seen in the prophetic texts of the Tanakh, where sex work is often used as a metaphor for the Israelites’ lack of faith. Hosea, for example, is commanded to “take for [himself] a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord” (Hos 1:2). Hosea takes Gomer as a wife, and the children she conceives by him are given symbolic names,34 which serve as allegorical punishments of the people of Judah and Israel (Hos 1:3–8). The immorality of “whoredom” is thus associated with the immorality of forsaking the deity, and Hosea threatens Gomer the sex worker and her children with sexual and physical violence (Hos 2:3–5). Clearly, sex workers in the Hebrew Bible are vulnerable to, and considered deserving of, violence, despite their existence attesting that there is a demand for their services among Israelite and Judean men.

In Gen 38, when Judah receives word that Tamar “has played the whore [and] she is pregnant as a result of whoredom,” he demands that she be put to death: “Bring her out, and let her be burned” (38:24). This is in spite of what I perceive to be Judah’s clear familiarity with sex workers: as soon as Judah saw his disguised daughter-in-law, “he went over to her at the roadside, and said, ‘Come, let me come in to you’, for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law” (v. 16). It seems clear from Judah’s readiness to sleep with the disguised Tamar that he regularly employed sex workers. As Bird observes, “He embraces the whore, but would put to death the daughter-in-law who ‘whored.’”35 Judah’s actions demonstrate the contradictory thinking surrounding sex work in the biblical imagination; men in the Bible have no qualms about buying sex, but nor do they have any qualms about killing the women who sell it.

Trans people experience this same contradiction, often with similarly violent implications. Pornography featuring trans people is incredibly popular, and this popularity is

33 Bird, “Harlot as Heroine,” 121.
34 The children’s names are Jazreel, meaning “God sows” (1:4), Lo-ruhamah, meaning “not pitied” (1:6), and Lo-ammi, meaning “not my people” (1:9).
And yet, as Shon Faye observes in an article on trans dating, “a lot of men are ashamed of their desire for trans women.” Trans people, like sex workers (and it is important to remember that these groups intersect), are both highly sexualised and stigmatised. Men want to sleep with trans women, but they also want to murder them, as the high rates of intimate partner violence experienced by trans women demonstrate. A 2018 study found that among young trans women in Chicago and Boston, forty-two percent of participants reported having experienced at least one incident of intimate partner violence. Judah wants to sleep with Tamar when she is dressed as a prostitute and he is unaware of her identity (Gen 38:16), but when he finds out that she has “played the whore,” he intends to have her burned (v. 24). Like many trans people, Tamar finds herself caught in the crossfire of sexual desire and violent hatred.

Why Play the Whore?

Why does Tamar decide to dress as a sex worker and sleep with her step-father? This is an extreme course of action, and one which we can only assume was motivated by significant concerns on her part. As is typical of biblical narrative, Gen 38 gives us no explicit insight into Tamar’s inner life; instead, her motivations must be inferred. Perhaps the most obvious motivation we can postulate for her character is a need for economic and social security. As discussed above, Tamar finds herself in a precarious position, and conceiving offspring by her father-in-law has the potential to improve her situation; were she to have a son by Judah, the child would receive her first husband’s inheritance and as an adult, would be able to care for her. This economic explanation for Tamar’s actions is one commonly offered by biblical scholars. For example, Susan Niditch advances this view, observing that, “if her husband dies, the woman must rely on her children for support,” because “those women who somehow find themselves between categories [of virgin, wife, and mother] are without patriarchal protection and in a sense are misfits in the social structure.” Alexander Abasili, reading Gen 38 through an African hermeneutical lens, echoes Niditch’s sentiment, postulating that Tamar “wants to resolve her dilemma and reinstate herself in a society that

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39 If, that is, the motivations of Tamar are of any interest to the interpreter; a shocking but perhaps unsurprising number of biblical scholars pay little attention to her character at all, despite her clear position at the centre of the narrative.
has no real place for a married but childless woman.” Similarly, Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg writes that Tamar “waits until Judah is widowed and then conspires to have sex with him in order to conceive the son—and thereby the economic security—that Judah has prevented her from having.”

However, I suggest that economic motivation alone is inadequate to fully explain Tamar’s actions in the narrative. Although her socio-economic position when she decides to “play the whore” is far from ideal, it does appear to be stable, at least for the time being. Tamar’s future may be uncertain, yet an economic motivation for her actions does not seem convincing enough on its own to explain her actions, especially considering the great danger to which she exposes herself. After all, Judah is prepared to have Tamar killed until he realises he is the father of her unborn children. As Sarah Nicholson notes, “The problem is that the risks Tamar takes are disproportionate to her immediate situation. She has been sent back to her father’s house, but there is no suggestion in the text that her immediate economic circumstances are dire.” The situation in which Tamar places herself so as to improve her circumstances appears much more dangerous than her current situation.

Employing the transgender gaze to this narrative offers alternative motivations for Tamar, which, when coupled with her economic needs, might provide a more convincing explanation for her actions. Trans experiences illuminate that human beings need more than safety, and that certain needs, such as the need for intimacy, might, at times, override the desire to avoid dangerous situations. In a study of HIV risk in transgender women, Melendez and Pinto suggest that the desire of trans women for a partner, “one person in their lives who loved and accepted them for who they are ... may make safer sex a distant priority for them.” Precisely because trans women experience “the highest levels of experiences of discrimination, harassment and violence amongst the different LGBT groups,” their desire and need for a long-term partner can outweigh their considerations of safety. Jasmine, one of the participants in Melendez and Pinto’s study, told researchers that “a lot of times you meet somebody and you feel as though that this person’s going to love you, so you ... you risk a lot of things ... To make this person happy, you know, you feel as though if you don’t use it (condom) it’s going to be closer, it’s going to make him love you even more.” It seems that for trans people who face intense and constant discrimination, “the need to feel

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loved, to feel ‘closer’ to someone, can trump the knowledge that one needs to be protected against disease.” While maintaining one’s safety and health is important, finding intimacy with others matters too, and these two needs can come into conflict. This is particularly true when high levels of social exclusion make finding intimacy more difficult, as is the case for many trans and gender-diverse people.

Perhaps, then, this is why Tamar places herself in so risky a situation; she has lost two husbands (Gen 38:7–10), she has been denied a third (v. 14). Confined to her father’s house and wrapped up in her widow’s clothes (v. 14), Tamar may feel intensely lonely, and so she seeks the comfort and satisfaction of a physical relationship. Nicholson suggests that “the reason [for Tamar’s actions] may be very simple: sex often is. Perhaps she simply wants [Judah’s] body.” Going further, we might suggest that Tamar desires not only the physical intimacy of Judah “[going] into her” (v. 18), but emotional intimacy too; Melendez and Pinto found that “intimate relationships were emotional locations in which participants could be themselves.” It seems reasonable to suggest that Tamar, as a woman in a patriarchal society which denies her agency, might also seek the emotional outlet which an intimate relationship can offer.

Of course, the intimacy that Tamar finds with Judah is fleeting at best; Tamar makes a one-off transaction with Judah, and we are told explicitly that Judah “did not lie with her again” (Gen 38:26). Tamar takes great risks and, if it is intimacy she desires, finds extremely limited success. However, considering the context in which she acts, it may be that having sex with Judah is the only option open to her. Tamar lives in a society governed by strict sexual norms, and bound by the convention of levirate marriage which Judah refuses to honour, few avenues of sexual practice are available to her. As Nicholson observes, “If her options are restricted to celibate widowhood or marriage to Shelah, she has very little opportunity to express her sexuality.” Judah may seem a strange choice for Tamar in her search for intimacy, but who else is available? After all, Shelah remains inaccessible and when Judah discovers that Tamar has “played the whore” (v. 24) he commands, “Bring her out, and let her be burned” (v. 24). If Tamar had “played the whore” with any other man and become pregnant, she would have been killed. Tamar knows that if she becomes pregnant from sleeping with Judah he will not kill her, but will instead accept this as a fulfilment of the levirate marriage convention and recognize his own lack of righteousness; thus, he may have been the one man with whom she could seek intimacy (however fleeting) without risking her own execution. Moreover, this union carried the added potential of improving her future in economic terms. The combination of a need for economic security and a desire for

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51 It takes a certain leap in interpretation to infer that Tamar knows what will happen if she becomes pregnant by Judah, but I would argue that this supposition is necessary to make sense of the narrative; without such an assumption the story makes little sense.
intimacy, as uncovered by the transgender gaze, thus offers a more convincing explanation of Tamar’s behaviour than economic motivation alone.

**Intimacy and Risk**

As well as a desire for intimacy and economic security, reading Gen 38 with the transgender gaze also suggests another possible factor in Tamar’s character motivations: she may, in fact, feel ambivalent about her own safety. Such ambivalence towards one’s own wellbeing is a feeling shared by many trans and gender-diverse people. As a result of transphobic abuse and institutionalized discrimination, trans and gender diverse people experience mental health difficulties at a rate far higher than the general population. These difficulties commonly include self-harm and suicidal ideation. For instance, a study carried out by the Scottish Transgender Alliance in 2012 found that “the majority of participants, 84%, had thought about ending their lives at some point. 35% of participants overall had attempted suicide at least once and 25% had attempted suicide more than once.”

Suicidal thoughts are a burden carried by the majority of trans people. In the face of constant discrimination, they struggle to survive both the violence of others and their own intrusive thoughts of self-harm. I suggest that viewing Tamar’s character through the lens of trans and gender-diverse lives, it is reasonable to consider that her character might experience similar harmful impulses. The idea that Tamar may desire death, or at least feel ambivalent about her own safety, is not commonly considered by interpreters, and yet it would explain her apparent disregard for the risks she faced by “playing the whore.”

Clara, one of the trans women in Melendez and Pinto’s study, described her ambivalence about contracting HIV through unsafe sex practices, because she felt that dying from the disease might free her from a life in which no man would ever truly love her. As she says, “Maybe in a few years ... I wouldn’t be scared to get infected because I do not think I would like to live a life, after 40, which is a hard stage for you and it is very sad to be alone and to feel that no one wants to be with you.” For Clara, the prospect of getting older and losing her beauty, combined with the belief that she would not find real love, led to a hesitant desire for a dangerous disease; as Melendez and Pinto note, “Clara associated HIV with death and saw an early death as a possible escape from her life. She felt that getting HIV could help prevent a life where no man would want to be with her and where she would feel alone and unloved.” While the feelings expressed by Clara do not explicitly articulate suicidal ideation, she does nevertheless demonstrate a propensity towards self-harming behaviours and a level of ambivalence about the value of her own continued existence.

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I suggest that there are striking similarities between Clara’s experience and the narrative position Tamar's character occupies. Tamar finds herself confined to her father's house, living out a lonely and somewhat meaningless existence, which will only worsen with the eventual death of her father and her subsequent loss of economic security. Unable to fulfill the role designated by her patriarchal context (i.e. to have and raise children), and denied other paths to personal fulfillment by that same context, Tamar's life lacks both purpose and security. Bird suggests that Tamar "has been denied the means of performing her duty toward her deceased husband and for achieving a sense of womanly self-worth in bearing a child." While I question Bird’s assumption that Tamar necessarily desires motherhood, and the implication therein that motherhood is the only way women can achieve a sense of self-worth, within the context of the narrative it does seem fair to say that having a child is perhaps the only viable route forward available to Tamar’s character. And as Tamar continues waiting for her levirate marriage to Shelah to be fulfilled, she grows older and thus, as a subject of patriarchy, her worth as a bride diminishes and her chances of finding fulfillment through motherhood decrease even further. Although the biblical text does not give us insight into Tamar’s inner life, it may be that she harbours similar fears to Clara, who expressed anxieties about being unable to find intimacy and love. Perhaps Tamar worries that in widowhood, her youth and beauty are unappreciated and the chances of a happy, partnered life are slipping from her grasp. If anything, Tamar’s fears would be more justified than Clara’s. While transphobia has convinced Clara she is unlovable, this is not true; it is entirely possible that she will find love that lasts into old age. Tamar’s character, on the other hand, really does face a life without the possibility of intimacy. Dominant socio-cultural discourses thus cause both women to lose their sense of self-worth. The discourse of transphobia convinces Clara that she is unlovable, while patriarchal discourse deprives Tamar of intimacy and the chance of a fulfilling partnered life.

If Clara’s fears about the future can lead her to consider the possibility of contracting HIV as a positive event that releases her from a lonely life, then perhaps Tamar’s fears about her future could lead her to disregard her personal safety. Death, even the violent death she risks by engaging in sex work, would offer Tamar an alternative to what she may have considered a miserable and purposeless life. The risk Tamar’s actions engender seem to outweigh the desperation of her situation if we assume that she desires to go on living, but if she feels an impulse towards death, or even just a level of ambivalence about her life, then the scales are rebalanced. A combination of a need for economic security, a desire for intimacy, and a disregard for personal safety, as illuminated by the application of the transgender gaze to the narrative, seems to me a more convincing account of Tamar’s motivations than a recourse to economic motivation alone.

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56 Bird, “The Harlot as Heroine,” 123.
Conclusion
In the course of this trans reading of Gen 38, I have offered new answers to the question of Tamar’s motivations, as illuminated by trans and gender-diverse lives. More importantly, however, I have also offered a response to those who seek to use the Bible as a tool to further justify violence against trans and gender-diverse people. Genesis 38 resonates with trans experiences, including Tamar’s marginalization as a widow, her engagement in sex work and the risk of violence this entails, her desire for intimacy, and her possible desire for death. By highlighting these shared experiences, we can begin to challenge transphobic readings of biblical texts. In a world in which trans people continue to be murdered merely for existing, the search for analogues of trans experiences in the narratives of the Bible is of vital importance. Among the murders recorded by the TMM project in 2016, there is one report of a thirteen-year-old trans girl who was “selling sex” at the time of her murder in Araraquara, Brazil. The girl, whose female name was not reported, “was found lying in the street with 15 knife wounds all over her body, including her head and face, as well as with a broken finger and fractured skull.” For trans victims of violence, like this unnamed girl, the search for trans representation is not merely an academic exercise, but a matter of life and death. It is my hope that readings such as the one above can help contribute to a world in which this is no longer the case.

Bibliography


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