

Women in Kingly Genealogies: The Queens, Widows, and Prostitutes that Changed the Story

Lydia Joy Dowdell

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Randall Price, Ph.D.  
Thesis Chair

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Jeffrey Dickson, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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James H. Nutter, D.A.  
Honors Director

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Date

**Abstract**

While there are creative pieces theorizing about Tamar and her inclusion in both David and Jesus' genealogies, there is a lack of research comparing King David's genealogy in I Chronicles 2 with the kingly genealogies of the same time. Comparing the two shows that genealogies in the surrounding nations—Assyria, Babylonia, etc.—are lacking women. In contrast, the Old Testament is filled with kingly genealogical records that list and name women.

This thesis will touch on the differences and similarities between the kingly records/genealogies, theorize and explore the levirate marriage custom and matrilinear descent, and attempt to provide a better understanding of Tamar and what set Ancient Israelite society apart from the surrounding cultures.

## **Women in Kingly Genealogies:**

### **The Queens, Widows, and Prostitutes that Changed the Story**

Today, it can be easy to read current cultural values backwards into history, to look at current traditions and codes and condemn those in history who did not follow these same rules. Looking back at traditionally patriarchal societies, such as those depicted in the Bible, it often seems as though women are rarely listed in history. Writing from such a viewpoint, feminist Uta Schmidt says, “Even if women are at the center of their stories, they get marginalized by the framework of history that is presented in the Books of Kings. Thus, whether their position is on the fringe or at the center depends on how their stories are read and from which angle they are viewed.”<sup>1</sup> The Bible mentions many different women. Often, however, it may seem as if their lives are depicted on the sidelines; sometimes they can feel like plot devices in the lives of key male figures. This does not afford a whole picture of the text and the role of women. In order to attain a deeper understanding of the cultural view of women in the Bible and the theological ramifications of that, one must examine the culture of their time, and in some cases to even compare that culture with those around it.

### **Introduction**

Ancient Near Eastern societies were patriarchal societies. A patriarchal society (for the purpose of this thesis) is one where men are in power, hold all the societal influence, and fathers are the only genealogical determiner. However, in the midst of Ancient Near Eastern records of kings and their sons, the line of King David stands out. In I Chronicles 2 something counter-

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1. Uta Schmidt, “Center or Fringe? Positioning the Wife of Jeroboam (1 King 14:1-18),” in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. by Athalya Brenner-Idan and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 96.

cultural occurs. In a genealogy from Israel (or Jacob) to David, there is one female name: Tamar, the Horite. It is expected that the inclusion of a female from a hostile nation would be explicitly excluded from the narrative, but Tamar is clearly listed. Ruth, a Moabite, will gain her own inclusion in other texts and genealogies. What does this say about Ancient Israelite society? Why would a Gentile woman be included in this kingly genealogy (which will be later identified as the messianic genealogy)? This thesis will start with a brief summary of Ancient Near Eastern genealogic records and customs, with some specific examples and patterns. It will then compare those to the biblical texts and examine Tamar and other key women, ending with a consideration of the significance of naming mothers of kings in the Ancient Near East. This thesis will argue that the inclusion of women in kingly genealogies suggests that in Ancient Israel, multiple wives of the same husband each started separate lines of genealogies and families, which means that Ancient Israel was not a simple patriarchal society. Instead, God called His people to be a society that valued women, contrary to the nations surrounding them.

### **Dating the Texts**

There are a couple of different systems for dating the Old Testament. This is a complex topic, and this thesis will not attempt to provide any sort of comprehensive discussion on this topic. For the purposes of this discussion, this thesis will be relying on the traditional dating system for the Old Testament. Structurally Genesis 37-50 is a complete story unit, with seven-

part symmetries.<sup>2</sup> This puts Tamar's story as happening in the 1870s BC; the genealogies in I and II Kings being recorded in the 500s BC; and I and II Chronicles in the 400s BC.<sup>3</sup>

### **Kingly Records**

Several types of kingly records exist from Ancient Near Eastern cultures. The principal types are King Lists and King Chronicles. The King Lists function as a sort of genealogy, giving the king's name, how long he ruled, and typically the name of his son who succeeded him. The King Chronicles dive deeper into the events during a king's reign. Inside the chronicles are records of battles, enemy attacks, accomplishments, family drama, and again the list of succession to the throne. There is not always a clear distinction of when a King List has enough extra information to be considered a Chronicle, but these two categories encompass the focus of this discussion.

The Assyrian King List follows a simple pattern. A section from The Assyrian King List reads:

Bel-bani son of Adasi; he ruled as king for ten years.  
Libaya son of Bel-bani; he ruled as king for 17 years.  
Sharma-diM (I) son of Libaya; he ruled for 12 years.  
Ib-tar-Sin son of Sharma-diM; he ruled for 12 years.  
Bazaya son of Ib-tar-Sin; he ruled for 28 years.  
Lullaya son of a nobody; he ruled as king for six years.<sup>4</sup>

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2. David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis—Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 62.

3. Andrew E. Steinmann and Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2019) 360.

4. James Pritchard (Ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 565.

Here the text states the king's name, that he was in fact king, if he was the son of the previous king, and how many years he ruled. The Babylonian King List B, shows the same thing:

Sumuabi, king, 152 years.

Sumulail, 35 years.

Sabu, his son, same (i.e. king) 14 years.

Apil-Sin, his son, same, 18 years.

Sinmuballit, his son, same, 30 years.

Hammurabi, his son, same, 55 years.<sup>5</sup>

Once again, the text gives the king's name, who his father was, and how long he reigned as king.

A section of Babylonian King Chronicles demonstrates a more detailed account than the King Lists. The beginning of the Chronicle Concerning the Later Years of Nabopolassar reads:

The eighteenth year of Nabopolassar: In the month of Elul the king of Akkad mustered his army and following the bank of the Tigris he went up to the mountain of Bit-Hanunya in the district of Urartu. He set fire to the cities (and) plundered them extensively. In the month of Tebet the king of Akkad went home.<sup>6</sup>

Here, the text gives an account instead of simply a piece of lineage. In Ancient Near East cultures, King Lists and King Chronicles give a distinct picture of public thought about the King and the succession process of the throne. Some other kingly records give other accounts of the society, depending on how detailed the record was.

### **Women Appearing in Kingly Records**

Within cultures and kingdoms of the Ancient Near East, there were different reasons a woman would appear in a royal or legal record. Unnamed women were occasionally mentioned

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5. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 271.

6. Albert Grayson, *Text from Cuneiform Sources* (Locust Valley, New York: J. J. Augustin, 1975), 97.

when their existence had some impact upon a key male figure. The text may record that he had daughters, or he gave women as gifts, or that his story began in the womb of his mother. In all the occasions women are incidental to the main story.

Another reason for the mentioning of women in historical texts is that they held some form of political power. Perhaps as the mother of the king, they achieved special status, or had some political sway. Maybe they were rich princesses who contributed to society.<sup>7</sup> Maybe as queen, they reigned once their husband had died (e.g., the Egyptian New Kingdom Queen Hatshepsut). In kingly records for early Mesopotamia, women were hardly ever presented as mothers: “A mother is mentioned only six times, and what is even more surprising, such a term is never used in an inscription left to us by a woman. Third millennium women apparently wanted their social roles to be recalled rather than their maternal obligations.”<sup>8</sup> This pattern does change in some of the later years Mesopotamia records, with mothers being mentioned in a few key genealogies. These positions of political power varied from culture to culture, but they are attested in many ways, even in grave site discoveries: “Although texts and images represent ancient Mesopotamian women far less frequently than they do men, and although women did not have independent access to political power, elite women nonetheless played crucial roles in the highest levels of society, and many appear to have had some degree of creative, cultic, and

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7. Seth Richardson, “Goodbye, Princess: Iltani and the DUMU.MUNUS LUGAL,” *Journal of cuneiform studies* 69, no. 1 (2017): 67.

8. Stefan Nowicki, “ANE Today - 202007 - Women in Early Mesopotamian Royal Inscriptions,” *American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR)*, last modified July 22, 2020, accessed September 14, 2021, <https://www.asor.org/anetoday/2020/07/women-mesopotamia-inscriptions>

economic autonomy.”<sup>9</sup> A lot of these women have been lost to history, but the ones who made the official record did so because of their great power.

The final category found in many Ancient Near Eastern texts for the recording of women is that they had some religious significance. As priestesses, their lives impacted those around them. This concept can be seen in even non-Ancient Near Eastern cultures from that time. Mycenaean palatial archives tell of a “mysterious Potnia, a term designating a female personage or personages in high power, who could have been deities, queens, priestesses, or a combination thereof.”<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the mother of a divine king was considered divine by association.<sup>11</sup> And far more frequently than any other mention of a woman, a female name will appear if she was an actual goddess. Several kings went to great lengths to record their offerings and temples dedicated to various goddesses. While a very interesting topic, this thesis will deal with the recording of human women in these kingdoms, and not with the worship of various goddesses. Women are not present in the narrative unless they filled one of these roles. They must have had some impact on the king, have had their own political power, or have had significant religious significance.

### **Specific Babylonian Women Appearances**

In Babylonian society, women do not seem to appear in the kingly genealogies, but they are occasionally referenced in the king chronicles or other legal documents when they had

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9. Amy R. Gansell, “Women in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, ed. by Sharon L. James and Dillon Sheila (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 23.

10. Kasia Szpakowska, “Hidden Voices: Unveiling Women in Ancient Egypt,” in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, ed. by Sharon L. James and Dillon Sheila, (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 42.

11. Gay Robins, “Problems Concerning Queens and Queenship in Eighteenth Dynasty Egypt,” *NIN: Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity* vol. 3 (September 2002): 2.

significant political power. This can be witnessed in the example of the Babylonia Princess Iltani, a name that appears in a couple texts and seems to belong to at least three different people.<sup>12</sup> While there is not sufficient information to know for sure, it seems that this name does not refer to these women's actual names, but the office they held.<sup>13</sup> The original holder of this office may have been named Iltani, but the research currently "suggests that this is no single 'princess' we are dealing with, nor any series of them, but a class of women under the protection of the Crown, organized in a household possibly eponymous<sup>14</sup> for a long-deceased, original princess."<sup>15</sup> This role possessed some level of power and approval from the king, enough to be mentioned several different times.

Grant Frame's *Rulers of Babylonia: From the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination (1157-612 BC)* goes through the royal inscriptions from Babylon from 1157 BC and continuing throughout the Assyrian Domination in 688 BC. Within these records the primary reference to women is when various kings made sacrifices and dedications to various goddesses. Other than that, there are two references to women. There is a potential reference to "the installation of Nebuchadnezzar's daughter as *entu*-priestess" (a high priestess) which would

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12. Richardson, "Goodbye, Princess," 67.

13. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 89.

14. i.e., named after her.

15. Richardson, "Goodbye, Princess," 89.

have been for Nebuchadnezzar I (reigned 1125-1104 BC).<sup>16</sup> The other mention comes from Nabu-Suma-iskun (760-748 BC), when the text references “his palace women.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Specific Assyrian Women Appearances**

The rest of Frame’s record shows that the Assyrian King chronicles hold true to the Babylonian pattern. Women are basically invisible. From 688-612, Frame only records one mention of a woman. Samas-suma-ukin (667-648 BC) used the phrase “in the womb of my mother.”<sup>18</sup> Similar to the Babylonian records, there is a significant number of goddess dedication passages.

In the Babylonian and Assyrian King Lists, women are never mentioned. The text simply narrates from king to king. In Grayson’s *Texts From Cuneiform Sources*, in which he goes through several key Babylonian and Assyrian kingly genealogical texts, female terms appear in the text approximately six times. These chronicles do not list women by name at any point. Six different times throughout the book the word *mother*, *daughter*, or *wife* appears. One of these can be seen in The Esarhaddon Chronicle which says in line 23, “The eighth year: on the sixth day of the month Adar the king’s wife died.”<sup>19</sup> Once again women appear almost completely absent from the narrative of kingly genealogies, they are only mentioned rarely, never identified by their

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16. Grant Frame, *Rulers of Babylonia: from the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of Assyrian Domination (1157-612 BC)* (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 11.

17. *Ibid.*, 117.

18. *Ibid.*, 250.

19. Grayson, *Text from Cuneiform Sources*, 127.

name, simply governed by their status in proximity to the most significant male in their life.

They are listed when their existence severely impacted a powerful man.

### **Specific Egyptian Women Appearances**

Although from an earlier time, the records from the 18th dynasty of Egypt deal with women slightly differently. Women were included in some of the kingly records, not because of their political power, but because of their religious significance:

Although it was not known until after her son had become king, the king's mother played the part of the earthly consort of Amun-Ra when he sired the royal heir. At the time of the future king's birth, she might have been only a king's secondary wife. Nevertheless, on her son's accession, the king's mother would be regarded as having received the divine seed at the time of her son's conception, and her role as Amun-Ra's consort equated her with his divine consort Mut, as in graphically shown in a statue of Amenhotep II's mother Mutemwia.<sup>20</sup>

When a new king ascended to the throne, he was considered divine. This meant that (retroactively) his mother had taken on a divine role of giving birth to him. There is also a story about an Egyptian queen seeking a Hittite prince to marry, which is dealt with later in the section on levirate marriage. Queens were seemingly mentioned when they had religious or political power, or some combination of the two.

### **Appearances of Women in the Old Testament Records**

Comparing the biblical texts to Babylonian and Assyrian records yields similarities and differences. Most of the biblical texts fall into the Kingly Chronicles category. The accounts in first and second Kings narrate the significant events in the various kings' rules, while at the same

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20. Robins, "Problems Concerning Queens," 2.

time giving a genealogical record whenever a new king rose to power. For example, II Kings 8:25-26 (English Standard Version) tells of Ahaziah's rise to the throne of Judah:

In the twelfth year of Joram the son of Ahab, king of Israel, Ahaziah the son of Jehoram, king of Judah, began to reign. Ahaziah was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned one year in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Athaliah; she was a granddaughter of Omri king of Israel.

The books of first and second Chronicles also follow this concept, focusing on the southern kingdom of Judah. However, the beginning of first Chronicles sounds more like a King List than a King Chronicle. The first nine chapters give genealogies of the tribes of Israel, including specific genealogies of David and Saul. David's genealogy specifically became the kingly line; thus, I Chronicles 2 most closely resembles a King List. For example, verses 11-12 (ESV) say, "Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse" which gives a clear progression from father to son.

The biblical texts are full of women, a lot of them with recorded names. It is common to hear about the well-known matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, but there are so many other women in the text as well. Within the first fourteen books of the Bible, there are 85 different genealogical records. Some of them are full genealogies, some of them are simply the succession of one king to another. Of those 85, six have female words without a name (mother, wife, "and daughters", etc.), for example Genesis 5, I Chronicles 4:24-43 or II Chronicles 21:1-7. Thirty-five of the genealogies have no mention of women at all. Many of these are the succession lines of the kings of Israel. And 44 of the 85 genealogies have one or more women listed by name. It is often the name of a wife of someone, particularly if the man had more than one wife. Sometimes a sister is listed, and occasionally daughters are listed as well (full list of passages and names in Appendix A). Examples of this are found all over. Exodus 6:20 (ESV) says,

“Amram took as his wife Jochebed his father's sister, and she bore him Aaron and Moses, the years of the life of Amram being 137 years.” The book of Kings, with the exception of King David, Jehoram, and Ahaz, records the name of every mother of the kings of Judah. To list a few: “His mother's name was Jehoaddin of Jerusalem” (II Kings 14:2b, ESV); “His mother's name was Jecoliah of Jerusalem” (II Kings 15:2b, ESV); “His mother's name was Jerusha the daughter of Zadok” (II Kings 15:33b, ESV); etc. II Chronicles 22:10-12 even narrates when Athaliah, the mother of King Ahaziah, took over the throne for six years after her son died.

In the Kingly List in II Chronicles 2, which gives David's genealogy, only one woman is mentioned by name between Israel and David: Tamar. I Chronicles 2:3-5 (ESV) says, “The sons of Judah: Er, Onan and Shelah; these three Bath-shua the Canaanite bore to him. Now Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death. His daughter-in-law Tamar also bore him Perez and Zerah. Judah had five sons in all. The sons of Perez: Hezron and Hamul.” (Bath-shua is not the name of Judah's first wife, but the transliteration of the words daughter (Bath) and Shua, meaning the daughter of Shua.) In this genealogy Tamar is specifically named to clarify which woman was Perez's mother. Tamar and several other women like her point to an emphasis on matrilineal descent. Of the 85 kingly records found in the Old Testament, over half of them include women. This is not a few exceptions, but a consistent pattern. Women are a part of the story. Over and over again, the authors of the texts chose to include women in the narrative, even Gentile women.

### **Levirate Marriage Examples**

Tamar's story deals with the concept of levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was the custom of a widow marrying her husband's brother. This was practiced by the Hittites, Hurrians,

Assyrians, Canaanites, and Israelites; Deuteronomy 25:5-10 gives specific instructions about this process.<sup>21</sup> Verses 5-6 (ESV):

If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

If a man died without having any sons to pass his name onto, his wife was to be married to his brother and the first son from their union would carry on the first husband's name. Examples of this can be seen in the Old Testament (Ruth) and in surrounding cultures. This ability to continue the family line is one of the few tools that women had: "Women are depicted as being actors with the ability to marshal the resources to protect themselves. They are characters of significance. Even levirate marriage, often the subject of scorn in critiques of the Bible, is depicted as desired by women in the Bible."<sup>22</sup> In the case of the levirate marriage, it was more important who the mother of the child was than who the father was. The woman was the connecting link to the family line through her late husband. In ancient Israel, this again points to some form of combined matrilinear/patrilinear descent.

However, this concept is not only found in ancient Israel. An example of levirate marriage might be witnessed in a Hittite record, dealing with the Queen of Egypt. Sometime during the 1300s BC the Queen of Egypt sent a letter to the King of the Hittites, saying that her husband had died, and she is without sons.<sup>23</sup> This made her eligible for the levirate marriage, in

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21. Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 296.

22. Pamela Barmash, "Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Law," *Religion Compass* 12, no. 5-6 (2018): e12262-n/a.

23. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 319.

order to carry on the kingly line (even more so if the kings of Egypt are considered divine). The Queen has heard that the King of the Hittites has a great many sons and requested that he send one to be her king. In the midst of their back and forth and discussions, there is no mention of the kingdom of Egypt coming under Hittite rule. It is clear that this prince would join the Queen's family and that their children would be the Egyptian heirs to the throne. He would enjoy the privileges of being king, and the previous (dead) king would receive heirs to carry on the dynasty. Unfortunately, while the Hittite King eventually agreed to send one of his sons, the prince never became king. After all the debate and headache, he ended up being murdered on the way to his new throne.<sup>24</sup>

Another example of this concept can be seen in the Middle Assyrian Laws, which were found on clay tablets and translated by Theophile J. Meek.<sup>25</sup> The tablets are "from the time of Tiglathpileser in the 12th century BC, but the laws on them may go back to the 15th century."<sup>26</sup> This specific rule spells out Assyrian levirate marriage:

[If], while a woman is still living in her father's house, her husband died and she has sons [she shall live where she chooses in] a house of theirs. [If] she has no [son, her father-in-law shall marry her to the son] of his choice...or if he wishes he may give her in marriage to her father-in-law. If her husband and her father-in-law are both dead and she has no son, she becomes a widow; she may go where she wishes.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 319.

25. *Ibid.*, 180.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 182.

Not only an example of the concept of levirate marriage in surrounding cultures, this rule actually sheds some more light on the story of Tamar and Judah, as it is not her deceased husband's brother she conceives with, but her father-in-law.

### **Tamar's Story**

In Genesis 38, Judah, Jacob's son, has left his family, married an unnamed Canaanite woman, and had three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. He marries his eldest son, Er, to Tamar, who is likely also a Canaanite woman. However, Er was sinful, and God killed him. Following the tradition of levirate marriage, Judah tells his second son, Onan, to marry Tamar and give his dead brother an heir. Selfishly wanting to have more of his father's inheritance, Onan sins by avoiding the fulfillment his duty (through *coitus interruptus* or by spilling his semen on the ground), and God kills him too. Judah sends Tamar back to her family, under the pretense that he will marry her to his youngest son one day, but having lost two sons, he believed she was dangerous and would cause the death of his youngest son as well. Judah does not fulfill his word to Tamar, so she takes matters into her own hands. Her dead husband still does not have an heir. The Hebrew texts switches from Tamar being passively acted upon, to acting herself: "She suddenly races into rapid, purposeful action, expressed in a detonating series of verbs: in verse 14 she quickly takes off, covers, wraps herself, sit down at the strategic location, and after...there is another chain of four verbs to indicate her brisk resumption of her former role and attire."<sup>28</sup> Once Judah's first wife has died, she meets Judah in the city of Enaim; he thinks she is a prostitute; they have sex; and she becomes pregnant. As a promise of payment, Tamar kept

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28. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 8.

Judah's signet, cord, and staff. When her pregnancy is revealed, Judah seeks to have her punished for her prostitution. Tamar shows him his own pledges, and he knows the twins are his own. In verse 26 (ESV), Judah understands what has happened and says, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." The text seems to back this up. God had no hesitation to kill Tamar's sinful husbands when they violated their roles and responsibilities, but Tamar does not meet this same end. The Lord strikes Onan down for his refusal to do his part to continue the family line of God's people. Tamar's sin is forgiven because she does it in order to continue the line. The divine verdict is seen in that Tamar's first-born, Perez, becomes an ancestor of King David.

Often Tamar is seen as an unfortunate biblical character. But the biblical text does not try to conceal or hide this part of the messianic line. Her story is clearly seen as part of the bigger picture of Genesis. The word she uses to ask Judah to identify his symbols is the same word Judah used when convincing his father of Joseph's death. Tamar is calling Judah out for more than just his sin against her. The text also subtly contrasts her to Potiphar's wife, as they are both seen as seducers. But while Tamar is justified, Potiphar's wife is foiled: "Tamar's subversion of the social hierarchy is all the more striking, therefore, when placed in relief by Genesis 39. Tamar is portrayed as a sympathetic character."<sup>29</sup> Tamar is one of several women who did whatever they needed to do to continue to the family line. This one goal seems to excuse a multitude of potential wrong. Tamar fought to continue the family line by any means. And through her relationship with Judah, the messianic line was continued (Genesis 49:10).

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29. Peter Bekins, "Tamar and Joseph in Genesis 38 and 39," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40, no. 4 (June 2016).

**Ruth's Story**

The concept of the levirate marriage is also on full display in the story of Ruth. Ruth herself is another ancestor of David, and while she does not appear in the kingly genealogy in I Chronicles 2, she is listed in the Matthew genealogy. Also, as an ancestor of King David, her story can serve (as will be explained later) as a piece of political propaganda and thus is a part, if somewhat indirectly, of the kingly records.

The story of Ruth begins when Naomi, her husband, and two sons immigrate to Moab to avoid the famine in Bethlehem. Her sons get married (one of them to Ruth). Naomi's husband dies and then so do her two sons. Out of options and without a male protector, Naomi decides to head back to Bethlehem. Her daughter-in-law wins the stubborn contest and convinces Naomi to let her join her and, in the process, delivers an extremely popular commitment speech. There, "fate" leads Ruth to glean in the field of Boaz, a relative of her deceased husband. Upon discovering their good fortune in finding such a godly relative, Ruth and Naomi come up with a plan. After Boaz has returned from celebrating, Ruth goes to him in the darkness and lies at his feet. In contrast to Judah, Boaz knows who she is and takes all the proper steps to secure her as his wife. This simple romance story contains much information about the cultural customs and expectations. Interestingly, their child is considered Naomi's son. Ruth 4:17 (ESV) says, "And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David." The book of Ruth ends with a direct genealogy from Perez (son of Tamar and Judah) to David.

The book of Ruth mentions Tamar and Judah in the blessing said over Boaz. Chapter 4 verse 12 (ESV) says, "and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to

Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman.” The text is making a direct link from Jacob to Tamar and Judah to Perez to Boaz and then to David. This is a very political connection:

One can identify a political motive for leading all the blood lines to David. King David is first male king of Judah (David’s tribe) and then, seven and a half years later, he is accepted as king of northern Israel (Jacob’s legacy), too. Among his conquests are the Aramean states (descendants of Abraham’s brother Nahor), the Edomites (descendants of Jacob’s brother Esau), and the Ammonites and Moabites (the sons of Lot, the son of Abraham’s brother Haran). David in his person, therefore, incorporates the various peoples he governs. Their blood runs in his veins. He is the one person who can legitimately reign over them all...Ruth’s position in David’s genealogy brings the Ammonites and Moabites under his imperial claim.<sup>30</sup>

Ruth’s story is a very political one, giving King David another people group to rule over as part of his bloodline. She also continues the pattern of women stepping forward and out of their traditional roles to continue to the family line.

Ruth and Tamar are both foreign women who entered into this kingly line through the levirate marriage tradition. Their stories are an interesting combination of women using their available cultural power in order to continue their families:

Tamar and Ruth achieve the high status of biblical heroines, thanks to their voluntary and active support of the patriarchal institution of the levirate, which insures the patrilineage of a deceased husband...But the biblical narrative is careful not to establish too close a link between the interests of patriarchy and woman's sacrifice. On the contrary, the heroine's motivation is normally shown to be self-seeking. Both Ruth and Tamar are shown to fight for their own benefit and security.<sup>31</sup>

Ruth and Tamar both show extreme persistence. But as evidenced time and time again throughout the Biblical story, whether with Tamar, Jacob, or Esther, God likes to work with people of resolve. Once again, Ruth seems to fit this pattern of women violating cultural customs

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30. Alice, Bach, *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 216.

31. *Ibid.*, 135.

and/or moral laws in order to fulfill the higher calling of continuing the family line. There's one last example to examine.

### **Bathsheba's Story**

Bathsheba was another queen within this Davidic line. From David's perspective, her pregnancy and subsequently becoming a widow, is a great sin and the child dies for it. It also is somehow linked with the raping of ten of David's concubines (II Samuel 12:11 and 16:22). But Bathsheba seems to escape this condemnation that David receives. Now whether that is because she had very little say in the manner, or she manipulated the circumstances in order to fulfill her main cultural role (having children), the text does not say:

But Bathsheba avoids the sexual autonomy forbidden women. She acts in deference and submission to male authority. Bathsheba's purification before— and especially after— the act reinforces the ethical aspect of the encounter for her. Female-initiated seduction (viz. Ruth) or adultery (see Tamar [Gen. 38.13-26]) may be textually regarded as righteous if the action answers to a good cause— and for a biblical woman, that cause is procreation.<sup>32</sup>

And from this continued union, the David Kingly line is continued to Solomon. The text tells us that David had many wives, but Bathsheba mothered the successor to the throne. Solomon became king not only by being the son of David, but also by being the son of Bathsheba.

### **Matrilinear Descent**

So why are these women and so many like them, listed in the genealogies and kingly records? Some of them had political power. Bathsheba is definitely seen to be exercising her political power in Solomon's ascension to the throne. And several of the other mentions of

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32. Lillian R. Klein, "Bathsheba Revealed," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 53.

women can be explained in this way. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah (the daughters of Zelophehad) are certainly mentioned because of the political impact of their request to receive their deceased father's inheritance: "The nature of their request emphasizes their father's posterity, not personal advantage. Moses takes the matter before YHWH and YHWH sides with the daughters, granting their request. A law is formulated stipulating that in the event of a man having no son his daughter is to inherit."<sup>33</sup> Like many other cases, this is because the Lord is kind and just. He takes care of the widow and the orphan and instructs His people to do the same. But political power alone does not seem to be enough of a reason for the patterned narrative of including women. Women like Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, and others were recorded because of the impact of matrilineal descent on the kingdom of Israel. According to tradition, Ancient Israel was a patriarchal society, and this is reflected in the genealogies, but there are too many examples of female influence to support a strictly patrilineal society. The evidence points to the importance of matrilineal descent.

The only similar occurrence of non-strictly patrilineal descent is potentially seen in the nation of Elam, with very limited documentation:

the succession hierarchy of power in Elam was not based on a simple patriarchal lineage, nor was it based on a simple matrilineal or simple brother-brother line. A brother-sister relationship was also strong, firm, and important. We cannot find an exact term to categorize this order of succession. What is clear, however, is that daughters and sisters held an important position in Elamite society.<sup>34</sup>

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33. Johanna Stiebert, *Fathers and Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29.

34. Eiko Matsuchima, "Women in Elamite Royal Inscriptions: Some observations," in *The Role of Women in Work and Society in the Ancient Near East*, ed. by Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel, (Boston, Massachusetts: De Gruyter, 2016), 425.

So, while not common, the possibility of Israel utilizing some form of matrilinear descent is not a ridiculous claim.

Matrilinear descent within Ancient Israel does not take away from the patriarchal lineage but adds another layer to the family of God. Matrilinear descent, in this case, means that within a family where a man had multiple wives, those wives started separate mini-clans under the larger group of their husband. The significance of the mother's identity goes back before Tamar and Judah. Culturally, children who were from the same father, but different mothers were not considered siblings. Only those who had come from the same mother were true siblings. Examples of this can be seen throughout the text: in Sarah and Abraham being related but still married, in the inheritance fight between Isaac and Ishmael, in Lot's family, in Jacob's children being divided by mother, in Tamar and Amnon.

Isaac and Ishmael were both children of Abraham, but Isaac, Sarah's son, inherited God's promises. Hagar's son, Ishmael, does not. In fact, these two sons of the same man started completely different people groups. The determining factor in these clans was not their father, but their mother. God made it very clear that the children of promise must come from Abraham and Sarah. Sarah was an essential character in this line. God chose to show His miraculous power through her. No other woman could be the mother of this society. With Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, the text is always clear about the identity of each son's mother. It mattered. While their sons stayed within the same people group, they bunched together as descendants of their various mothers. Simeon and Levi, the full brothers of Dinah, are the ones who avenge her after she was raped. Later, David's daughter Tamar was raped by her own half-brother Amnon. In II Samuel 13, there is clearly a distinction between full and half siblings, which was very

political in the fight for the throne. Matrilineal descent impacted who one could marry and who one was related to. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, Lot's two unnamed daughters get their father drunk and rape him to continue the family line. According to a matrilineal society, while Lot's daughters would have considered Lot to be technically their father, their primary identity was tied to their mother.<sup>35</sup> If this was their viewpoint, their relationship with their mother was the more culturally significant one. The child born to the oldest one started the Moabites, while the son born to the other started the Ammonites. Once again, children from one man and two different women started completely separate people groups. They were separate from God's people because of their rebellion but separate from one another because of their mothers. If there was a clear distinction between children from the same father but from different mothers, then some significant part of a person's identity was in who their mother was.

Even Eve can add another piece to this puzzle. In Genesis 3, God is talking to the serpent, and He gives the well-known prophecy of the coming One. Saying in verse 15 (ESV), "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This enmity and fighting is between Eve and the serpent, but also between the serpent's offspring and Eve's offspring. The Hebrew utilizes a feminine ending on the word offspring. These descendants were not simply from Adam. They were Eve's. If this passage is prophesying about the coming of Christ, then one of the first ways Christ is ever described is as an offspring of Eve. The first conversation in the Bible dealing with

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35. Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984), 54.

descent deals with matriarchal descent. This is because God is happy to bring about the salvation of His people through both men and women.

### **Implications of Matrilinear Descent**

The theory that multiple women of the same husband started separate family lines can help explain all the mothers listed for the kings of Judah and several other times women are listed in the kingly records. Many of the times when women are named it is because a man had more than one wife (Genesis 36:2-3; I Chronicles 8; II Chronicles 11, etc.). The text is always clear about which children came from each woman. With the kings of Judah, it is likely that each king took more than one wife. This practice was forbidden by the Torah in Deuteronomy 17:17, but was commonly observed as many alliances with other nations included marrying one of their princesses. Since each king had more than one wife, the kingly line needed to remain clear. Establishing the mother of each subsequent king clarified the continuation of the Davidic line. This is seen not only in the line of David, but in genealogies throughout the Old Testament that reference women. The primary way a woman was listed was as a wife, in most cases of a man who had many wives. And in these cases, the text lays out which children came from which woman. All this points back to Tamar's inclusion in David's genealogy. She is listed because, as a different woman than Judah's wife, she started a new family line, the line that would be the Davidic one. God used her actions and fulfillment of the law to bring about the greatest king of Israel and all his descendants. She influenced not only the Davidic line, but the Messianic line. God's use of women and His individual care for them created a society that was fundamentally different from the surrounding cultures.

A society that utilizes matrilinear descent is not a patriarchal society. As previously discussed, in order to be truly patriarchal, a society must follow a strict patriarchal descent. Ancient Israel did not do this. Family lines and descendants were determined by both parents. In the case of levirate marriage, the mom was the distinguishing factor in terms of family line and descent. Ancient Israel was different from the cultures around them not simply because of their religion, but because their society was structured differently. Because of this, Ancient Israel was not a patriarchal society. Now, the next question is to what degree. Ancient Israel certainly had many elements of a patriarchal society and there is more discussion and research to be done. The conclusion of this research is that it cannot be by definition a complete patriarchal society, simply based on the presence of matrilinear descent.

The reason for this separation from the surrounding cultures can be traced back to the beginning of the nation of Israel. God called Abraham and Sarah out from their people and their country to be set apart, to be different. He then gave them the promise of descendants, descendants who would bless the nations. This promise continues to Judah. To David, God gave the promise that his descendant would reign on the throne forever. The Messiah was to be of this family line. As keepers of this promise, God's people became keepers of their family lines. And within that, they recorded women. Because if this Messiah was to come through God's people, then they needed to keep track. Focusing on both parents for genealogical identity was born out of the promise of salvation.

The two earliest examples of this society are the Genesis 3 passage with Eve and the requirement of Sarah for the child of promise. Both of these were specifically from God. The promise about "her descendant" was spoken by God. The Lord was very clear that He was

continuing the family of promise through Sarah. Even the levirate marriage custom was given by God through Moses. This element of Israeli society, this matrilinear focus, was instituted by God. It was then continued through His people in the King lists.

Tamar's inclusion in David's ancestry affected more than the kingly records. Christian theology also claims Tamar as an ancestor of Jesus, listing her in Matthew 1 along with Ruth, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Mary. Tamar starts off this list of women, as the first woman included in the Davidic line who came from outside the chosen family. Sarah, Rebekah, and Leah were all from Abraham's tribe. Tamar, who most likely came from the Canaanites, sets up a beautiful pattern of God's people bringing others in, which is reflected in Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba as well.

### **Conclusion**

The biblical texts stand out from the Babylonian and Assyrian texts because of its inclusion and naming of women. It gives a picture into a culture where women had certain rights and responsibilities. A culture where women had the power to start separate family lines and were included in Kingly Chronicles. And a culture where it mattered who your mom was is a culture that utilizes some form of matrilinear descent. Women are present and create this trackable lineage because God uses both men and women as part of His plans. Ancient Israel was different because they had been set apart by God to be a holy people. This is the why behind female inclusion and matrilinear descent. It is there because God loves all of His children. This should impact how genealogies in the Bible are read and viewed. It should also shed light into the cultural customs of these stories and give the reader a deeper comprehension of how God views women and works with them. Tamar's story gives light to an integral part of Ancient

Israel society. Tamar is a mother of the Messianic line, along with Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and so many more (full list in Appendix B).

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**Appendix A:****Genealogies in the Old Testament**

For this research, family records and kingly accounts from one king to the next were counted.

Passage	No female record	Female nouns only	Women's names
Genesis 5		"and daughters" (many times)	
Genesis 10	X		
Genesis 11:10-26		"and daughters" (many times)	
Genesis 11:27-32			Sarai, Milchah, Ischal
Genesis 35:22-29			Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah
Genesis 36:1-42			Adah, Oholibamah, Basemath, Timna, Menetabel
Exodus 6:14-25		"the son of a Canaanite woman", "the daughter of"	Jochebed, Elisheba,
Numbers 3:1-4	X		
Numbers 27:1-11; 36:10-11			Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, Tirzah
Ruth 4:13-21			Ruth
I Kings 14:21			Naamah
I Kings 15:1-2			Maacah
I Kings 15:4-10			Maacah
I Kings 15:25	X		
I Kings 15:33	X		
I Kings 16:8	X		
I Kings 16:15	X		
I Kings 16:22-23	X		
I Kings 16:29-31			Jezebel
I Kings 22:41-42			Azubah
I Kings 22:51	X		
II Kings 3:1-2	X		
II Kings 8:16-18		"daughter of...was his wife"	
II Kings 8:25-26			Athaliah
II Kings 12:1-2			Zibiah
II Kings 13:1	X		
II Kings 13:10	X		
II Kings 14:1-2			Jehoaddin
II Kings 14:23	X		

II Kings 15:1-2			Jecoliah
II Kings 15:8	X		
II Kings 15:13	X		
II Kings 15:17	X		
II Kings 15:23	X		
II Kings 15:27	X		
II Kings 15:32-33			Jerusha
II Kings 16:1-2 (Judah)	X		
II Kings 17:1	X		
II Kings 18:1-2			Abi
II Kings 21:1-2			Hephzibah
II Kings 21:19			Meshullemeth
II Kings 22:1-2			Jedidah
II Kings 23:31			Hamatal
II Kings 23:36			Zebidah
II Kings 24:8			Nehushta
II Kings 24:18			Hamutal
I Chronicles 1:1-24 (Adam to Abraham)	X		
I Chronicles 1:28-54 (Abraham to Jacob: Esau)			Timna, Mehetabel, Matred
I Chronicles 2:1-55 (David)		“Bath-shua” “his daughter”, “wife” (many times)	Tamar, Zeruiah, Abigail, Azahah, Jerioth, Ephrath, Ephrathah, Atarah, Abihail, Maacah, Achsah
I Chronicles 3 (David’s descendants)			Abigail, Ahinoam, Maacah, Haggith, Abital, Eglah, Bathsheba, Tamar
I Chronicles 4:1-23 (Judah’s descendants)		“daughter of”, “wife”, “sister”	Hazzelelponi, Heleh, Naarah, Bilhiah,
I Chronicles 4:24-43 (Simeon)		“six daughters”	
I Chronicles 5:1-10 (Reuben)	X		
I Chronicles 5:11-22 (Gad)	X		
I Chronicles 5:23-26 (Manasseh)	X		
I Chronicles 6 (Levi)	X		
I Chronicles 7:1-5 (Issachar)	X		

I Chronicles 7:6-12 (Benjamin)	X		
I Chronicles 7:13			Bilhah
I Chronicles 7:14-19 (Manasseh)		“concubine”, “wife”, “daughters”	Maacah
I Chronicles 7:20-29 (Ephraim)		“wife”, “daughter”	Sheerah
I Chronicles 7:30-40 (Asher)			Serah, Shua
I Chronicles 8 (Saul)			Hushimad, Baara, Hodesh, Hushim, Maacah
I Chronicles 9:1-34 (Returned exiles)	X		
I Chronicles 9:35-44 (Saul, again)			Maacah
I Chronicles 23-27 (Levites)		“only daughters”	
II Chronicles 11:18-23			Mahalath, Abihail, Maacah
II Chronicles 13:1-2		“mom”	Micaiah
II Chronicles 14:1	X		
II Chronicles 20:31			Azubah
II Chronicles 21:1-7		“daughter of...was wife”	
II Chronicles 22:1-5			Athaliah
II Chronicles 24:1-3		“the wives”, “daughters”	Zibiah
II Chronicles 25:1-2			Jehoaddan
II Chronicles 26:1-5			Jecoliah
II Chronicles 27:1-2			Jerushah
II Chronicles 28:1-2	X		
II Chronicles 29:1-2			Abijah
II Chronicles 33:1-2	X		
II Chronicles 33:21-25	X		
II Chronicles 34:1-2	X		
II Chronicles 36:1-5	X		
II Chronicles 36:9-10	X		
II Chronicles 36:11-21	X		

**Appendix B:**  
**the Messianic Genealogy<sup>36</sup>**

Now Sarah married Abraham and bore Isaac.

And Rebekah married Isaac and bore Jacob.

And Leah married Jacob and bore Judah.

And Tamar bore to Judah, Perez. Perez was the father of Hezron, the father of Ram, the father of Amminadab, the father of Nahshon, the father of Salmon.

And Rahab married Salmon and bore Boaz.

And Ruth married Boaz and bore Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

And Bathsheba married David and bore Solomon.

And Naamah the Amonite married Solomon and bore Rehoboam.

And Maacah the daughter of Abishalom married Rehoboam and bore Abijam.

And Maacah the descendant of Abishalom married Abijam and bore Asa.

And Azubah the daughter of Shilhi married Asa and bore Jehoshaphat, who was the father of Jehoram.

And Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab, married Jehoram and bore Ahaziah.

And Zibiah of Beersheba married Ahaziah and bore Joash.

And Jehoaddin of Jerusalem married Joash and bore Amaziah.

And Jecoliah of Jerusalem married Amaziah and bore Amaziah.

And Jerusha the daughter of Zadok married Amaziah and bore Jotham, who was the father of Ahaz.

And Abi the daughter of Zechariah married Ahaz and bore Hezekiah.

And Hephzibah married Hezekiah and bore Manasseh.

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36. Compiled from I and II Kings and Matthew 1.

And Meshullemeth the daughter of Haruz of Jotbah married Manasseh and bore Amon.

And Jedidah the daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath married Amon and bore Josiah.

And Hamutal the daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah married Josiah and bore Jehoahaz.

And Zebidah the daughter of Pedaiah of Rumah married Jehoahaz and bore Jehoiakim.

And Nehushta the daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem married Jehoiakim and bore Jehoiachin.

And Hamutal the descendent of Jeremiah of Libnah married Jehoiachin and bore Zedekiah. And Jehoiachin was the father of Shealtiel, the father of Zerbbabel, the father of Abiud, the father of Eliakim, the father of Azor, the father of Zadok, the father of Achim, the father of Eliud, the father of Eleazer, the father of Matthan, the father of Jacob, the father of Joseph.

And Mary married Joseph. And Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit and bore Jesus.