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# GENESIS 38 THROUGH THE LENS OF MORAL INJURY

ELIZABETH MEHLMAN*

***Abstract:*** *"Moral injury," an interdisciplinary interpretive category, is gradually emerging in the literature of biblical studies. While moral injury is variously defined in terms of human experience and moral consciousness, it broadly refers to the harm caused by witnessing or committing violations of deeply held assumptions of ethical and moral behavior. This study illustrates the use of a more specific moral injury lens as it applies to the actions of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38. I argue that Judah's and Onan's actions are morally injurious to Tamar through a form of "slow violence." Moral injury highlights the increasing personal diminishment and social consequences experienced by a key biblical character that are often overlooked in biblical studies. The ensuing harm, exploitation, and humiliation contribute to Tamar's actions allowing readers to see her wounds in a more nuanced light with potentially less blame and greater empathy.*

***Key words:*** *Genesis 38, Judah, Tamar, moral injury, biblical narrative, slow violence*

The world behind Old Testament texts contains "a series of snapshots of the moral struggles of Israelite communities in their particularity."[1] Numerous texts reveal human conduct falling short of the justice, steadfast love, and humility modeled in the covenant relationship with God. Consequently, biblical characters face traumatic events, as well as subtle acts, that transgress moral codes. Tamar in Genesis 38 has been considered a victim of various ethical lapses.[2] For example, Juliana Claassens examines Genesis 38 in terms of human dignity, human resistance of dehumanization, and "moral complexities."[3] Scholars acknowledge the challenging relationship between Old Testament narrative and Christian ethics, and how Genesis 38 is particularly unresponsive to Old Testament ethical guidelines. Meyers and Pietersen, for example, argue that Genesis 38 "mirror[s] the intricacies of life," and illustrates how biblical criticism can stimulate ethical debate, rather than resolve moral issues or seek ethical guidelines.[4] This study extends the discussion of Gene-

* Elizabeth Mehlman is a PhD student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Rd., Louisville, KY 40280. She may be contacted at emehlman859@students.sbts.edu.

[1] Bruce C. Birch, "Ethical Approaches: The Story of David as Moral Tale," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, SBLRBS 56 (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 371.

[2] Elizabeth Boase, "Constructing Meaning in the Face of Suffering: Theodicy in Lamentations," *VT* 58.4 (2008): 449–68; John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 171; David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Esias Meyer and Leonore Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics: Some Perspectives from the Narrative of Judah and Tamar," *STJ* 2.1 (2016): 241–55.

[3] L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization: Ruth, Tamar, and the Quest for Human Dignity," *CBQ* 74.4 (2012): 671–72.

[4] Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics," 241.

sis 38 to the current discourse on "moral injury" as more recently applied to biblical studies.

Since 2015, biblical studies has joined a number of disciplines interested in moral injury, as a heuristic lens for scriptural interpretation from the perspective of human experience, particularly moral consciousness.[5] Amy Cottrill explains how "moral injury is emerging as an important lens through which to read biblical literature and has become essential to the conversations about the conditions under which the formation, transmission, and early reception of these texts occurred."[6] Moral injury, described more fully below, encompasses a broad range of topics, methodologies, and issues, but for purposes of this essay, moral injury is examined through the narrow lens of "diminishment" of someone betrayed by the commission of a harmful act.[7] It is from the perspective of harming another's self-respect and dehumanization that this essay explores Genesis 38 through the lens of moral injury. I argue that Judah's and Onan's actions are morally injurious to Tamar in a form of "slow violence," despite her resilience. While moral injury as a heuristic lens deepens the reader's understanding of Tamar's individual plight, evangelical communities seeking Scripture for faith and practice may explore moral injury in tandem with God's overarching covenant with Israel as a central message, since moral injury theory may be inconsistent with readers' theological assumptions. This study defines moral injury, summarizes the events in Genesis 38 from a synchronic perspective, explores the moral injury of Tamar, and evaluates the contribution of moral injury as a hermeneutical lens, especially for evangelical communities.

## I. MORAL INJURY DEFINED

While moral injury has been variously defined according to discipline and context, clinical psychologists originally used the term "moral injury" to explain the effect of participating in war violence among soldiers whose experience of emotional distress was otherwise understood within posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[8] Jonathan Shay describes the setting of moral injury as "(1) there has been

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[5] Brad E. Kelle, *The Bible and Moral Injury: Reading Scripture alongside War's Unseen Wounds* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 8–9. "Moral injury" originated as a clinical psychological term describing harm to war veterans but is now broadly applied to the subjective experiences of both victims and perpetrators. See also Larry Kent Graham, *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017); Brad E. Kelle, "Moral Injury and Biblical Studies: An Early Sampling of Research and Emerging Trends," *CurBR* 19.2 (2021): 121–44; Kelle, "Moral Injury, Scripture, and Contemporary Biblical Studies," in *Moral Injury: A Guidebook for Understanding and Engagement*, ed. Brad E. Kelle (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020); Joseph McDonald, ed., *Exploring Moral Injury in Sacred Texts*, Studies in Religion and Theology (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2017). "Moral injury" is a cross-disciplinary term in the social sciences, psychology, medicine, philosophy, classics, and literature that has been used increasingly over the past decade in biblical studies.

[6] Amy C. Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence: Reading Biblical Narratives as Ethical Project* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 57.

[7] Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury: Comparing Discourses of Moral Harm," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 44.2 (2019): 180–81.

[8] See Kent D. Drescher, David W. Foy, Caroline Kelly, Anna Leshner, Kerrie Schutz, and Brett Litz, "An Exploration of the Viability and Usefulness of the Construct of Moral Injury in War Veterans," *Traumatology* 17 (2011): 8–13; Brett Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash,

a betrayal of what's right (2) by someone who holds legitimate authority (3) in a high-stakes situation."[9] Originally, moral injury provided language to help understand how participation in violence that was directed by another breaches a person's sense of personal integrity and justice. Moral injury has been understood to occur when a human being's core moral values and beliefs are compromised by their own actions that were commanded by a superior, causing harm at emotional, mental, and spiritual levels.[10] Across disciplines, different interpretations of moral injury rely on somewhat different assumptions regarding subjects, sources, and the nature and context of moral injury.[11] As a result, by 2021, Brad Kelle admits the lack of a "single, agreed-upon definition of moral injury, or the precise experiences that cause it, the effects from it, and the best strategies to overcome it."[12] In addition, Cottrill significantly expanded the notion of moral injury by arguing that "one need not directly experience or commit an act of violence to feel the effects of moral injury; the effects of witnessing an event that one feels to deeply conflict with one's sense of what is right can create a damaging sense of moral and ethical betrayal, guilt, and shame."[13]

Cottrill explores moral injury in instances of less direct violence in the immediate moment and in terms of "slow violence"—violence that manifests over time.[14] Slow violence is often overlooked as violence because it seems normal at first glance. Yet it "is a type of violence bubbling under the surface of the narrative, influencing the dynamics of the story through its diffuse potential and gradual accretion of threat."[15] This type of slow violence is congruent with a specific kind of moral injury derived from critical theory and philosophy of law. Here moral injury is defined as dehumanization, or "diminishment," resulting from various contexts in daily social interactions where moral injury harms another's self-respect.[16] Such

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Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009): 695–706.

[9] Jonathan Shay, "Casualties," *Daedalus* 140.3 (2011): 183. "Moral injury" was first used by Shay, a psychologist, to understand his work with Vietnam veterans. See Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

[10] Kelle, "Moral Injury and Biblical Studies," 125.

[11] Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 176.

[12] Kelle, "Moral Injury and Biblical Studies," 125.

[13] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence,* 56n30.

[14] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 19–20. See Cottrill's chapter, "The Slow Violence of the Book of Ruth," 93–118; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 10.

[15] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 95.

[16] Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 180. See also J. G. Murphy and J. Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (New York: Cambridge University, 1988), 15–17, 49, 54, who originally recognized diminishment as a significant form of moral injury. Wiinikka-Lydon outlines three current discourses within the moral injury literature: (1) clinical discourse from the fields of psychiatry and psychology, (2) juridical-critical discourse with a focus on philosophy of law, and (3) structural discourse where "everyone in society is a subject of moral injury and the dynamics of society and culture themselves give rise to harm." Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 185. For a discussion of the moral philosophy underlying the definition of moral injury for Murphy and Hampton, see Joseph Christopher Cunliffe, *Joseph Butler's Moral and Religious Thought: Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

diminishment is likely to occur over time without any hint of violence or trauma. Specifically applicable to Genesis 38 and Tamar's experience is a category that Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon labels "Juridical-Critical Discourse." Wiinikka-Lydon derived this category from the moral and legal philosophy scholarship of J. G. Murphy and J. Hampton,[17] who define moral injury in terms of the person on the receiving end of the experience, that is, how he or she interprets the significance of the wrong. This definition differs from early work on moral injury emerging from clinical psychology with war veterans, where moral injury is defined in terms of the person who committed the offense. By understanding moral injury through juridical-critical discourse,

> urgency is in the social interpretation of wrongful actions and how they affect social norms and cohesion. If the value of people in society is worth less, more individuals may conclude they can treat others unjustly or even cruelly, weakening social trust and making society vulnerable through the increase of potential conflict and the vulnerability of its members.[18]

As illustrated in the section below, Tamar experienced diminishment over time without trauma or violence.

## II. PLOT OF GENESIS 38

In Genesis 38, Judah chose a Canaanite woman as his wife, and she conceived three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah (vv. 2–5). Judah selected Tamar as a wife for his firstborn, Er. However, Er was deemed wicked, and God put him to death, leaving Tamar a widow and childless (vv. 6–7). Judah asked his son Onan to perform the duty of levirate marriage to provide offspring for his deceased brother with Tamar (v. 8). However, Onan did not want to produce an heir who would not belong to him, so he practiced *coitus interruptus* "whenever he went into his deceased brother's wife" (v. 9).[19] God deemed this action wicked; and he put Onan to death as well (v. 10). Judah asked Tamar to stay at her father's house until his son Shelah grew up (v. 11). However, when Shelah was of age, Judah, fearing for his son's life, did not give him to Tamar in levirate marriage as he had promised (v. 14b).[20]

Later, Judah's wife died, and Tamar was informed that Judah was traveling to Timnah to sheer sheep. Tamar, still a widow and childless, disguised herself as a prostitute and sat by the road to Timnah, waiting for Judah (vv. 12–14a). Judah, not recognizing Tamar, believed she was a prostitute and asked for her services (vv. 15–16a). Since Judah did not bring payment, Tamar secured a pledge consisting of

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[17] Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 180.

[18] Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 182.

[19] All Bible translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

[20] Esther Marie Menn notes that prostitution was part of the social fabric; men and women were not prohibited by ancient society from prostitution. A woman was not prohibited from prostitution for economic gain "as long as she is not under some form of male familial authority (as, for example, a daughter)." Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, JSJSup 51 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 65. However, Genesis 1:28 and 2:24 imply God's intention for marriage, including sexual relations, and it does not include prostitution.

Judah's signet, cord, and staff (vv. 16b–17). Later when Judah learned that his daughter-in-law Tamar was immorally pregnant, he declared that she should be burned (v. 24). However, Tamar produced Judah's belongings as proof of his paternity, to which Judah responded, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah" (v. 26). Thereafter, Tamar delivered twins, one of whom, Perez, would become an ancestor of King David and Jesus (vv. 27–30; cf. Ruth 4:13, 18–11; Matt 1:1–17).

## III. TAMAR'S MORAL INJURY

Tamar suffered moral injury because of Onan's and Judah's behavior. Moral injury is inferred from the events surrounding ancient moral codes and contemporary knowledge of moral injury.[21] Inferring moral injury from events involves speculation about the inner world of biblical characters. The events recorded in Genesis 38 suggest that Tamar's family history left her vulnerable. Her first husband, Er, is described as wicked to the point that God killed him.[22] Given Tamar's circumstances living with a wicked husband, it is reasonable to assume that she suffered from Er's wicked character in this marriage. Since Tamar was childless, Judah asked his son Onan to dutifully provide offspring for his deceased brother (i.e., levirate marriage; v. 8). The levirate marriage duty of Genesis 38 is also addressed in ancient Hittite laws (14th–13th centuries BCE). When a married man dies, "his brother shall take his wife."[23] The biblical narrator relates that because the offspring would not belong to Onan, he spilled "his semen on the ground whenever he went into his brother's wife so that he would not give offspring to his brother," and Onan's practice was displeasing to God (vv. 9–10). Roy E. Gane explains how the survival of identity and the continuation of descendants in a tribal community was essential during and after a man's life; thus, the institution of levirate marriage protected the

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[21] Nancy R. Bowen, "Moral Injury in Genesis 19 and Moral Repair in the Book of Ruth," in Kelle, *Moral Injury*, 83.

[22] As noted by Waltke and by Hamilton, this text represents the first time it is stated that God put anyone to death, suggesting the severity of Er's wrongdoing. Before Genesis 38:8, God last appeared in Genesis 35:5–13, where a "terror of God fell upon" observers of Jacob's family while traveling and immobilized any enemies—a fear similar to the fear of God that Abraham experienced (15:12) when he received the covenant about giving his descendants the land. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 510; Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis 18–50*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 43.

[23] Martha Tobi Roth, Harry A. Hoffner, and Piotr Michalowski, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 236. See Hittite Law §193: "If a man has a wife, and the man dies, his brother shall take his widow as wife. (If the brother dies,) his father shall take her. When afterwards his father dies, his (i.e., the father's) brother shall take the woman whom he had." As Menn discusses, "Curiously, there is not a single illustration of a straightforward execution of levirate marriage in the entire Hebrew Bible. Each biblical passage alluding to the levirate custom depicts a failure to implement the practice" (Gen 38:26; Deut 25:7; Ruth 4:10–12). Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 56. Eryl W. Davies views Genesis 38 as a primitive form of levirate marriage unlike Deuteronomy 24:5–10. The Latin term *levir* is translated "brother-in-law." Eryl W. Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage, Part I," *VT* 31 (1981): 138–44, 257–68.

tribe by "perpetuat[ing] the name, the remembered identity, of a childless dead man through a surrogate line of descendants."[24]

While the primary purpose of the levirate law is to produce a son for the dead brother,[25] Christopher Wright, shifting focus from the need to continue a name or the notion of "seed (i.e. descendants)," emphasizes Israel's concern for the poor as well as family structure, preventing poverty, and restoring family life through a system such as levirate marriage.[26] Wright's perspective suggests that levirate marriage is designed to protect the rights of the widow. Tamar's childlessness was considered a "major problem for Israelites."[27] However, Ayelet Seidler argues that the law offers no proof that its primary concern is for the widow.[28] Seidler discusses how levirate marriage creates tension by espousing two contradictory values—raising the name of the deceased and a man's right to choose a woman he desires.[29] Seidler argues that levirate marriage runs counter to the biblical laws of marriage that predicate marriage on a man's will. This argument potentially explains the reluctance to perform this duty on the part of Onan, directly, and on the part of Judah, by offering Shelah to Tamar.

The levirate marriage law in Genesis 38 is slightly different from the requirements in Deuteronomy 25:5–10, because Genesis 38 does not require marriage but only what amounts to marriage by a man having intercourse with his dead brother's spouse and raising the resulting offspring (v. 8). While Onan performed sexual relations, he was reluctant to produce an heir other than his own (v. 9). Dvora E. Weisberg examines the reactions of biblical characters to levirate marriage, highlighting concern about the institution and anxiety about its implications—notably expressed by the reluctant actions of Onan and Judah.[30] Tamar, presumably aware that she was legally entitled to her husband's brother given the cultural custom, was treated unfairly by Onan as he destroyed his seed that she needed for flourishing and survival in society. However, she was also morally injured by his actions because they diminished her socially.[31] That is, Onan's deceptive practice did not allow Tamar to publicly seek a remedy without damaging her reputation by discuss-

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[24] Roy E. Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians: Original Context and Enduring Application* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 96.

[25] Ayelet Seidler, "The Law of Levirate and Forced Marriage—Widow vs. Levir in Deuteronomy 25.5–10," *JSOT* 42.4 (2018): 438.

[26] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 173. See also Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 142–44.

[27] Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 96.

[28] Seidler, "The Law of Levirate and Forced Marriage," 440n17. See also Gen 15:2–3; 30:1–2; 1 Sam 1:5–11.

[29] Seidler, "The Law of Levirate and Forced Marriage," 435.

[30] Weisberg notes that Elimelech's kinsman would not agree to marry the widow of a childless man in Ruth 4, and Boaz's decision may merely reflect his "positive view" of interactions with Ruth. Dvora E. Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent: Levirate Marriage in the Bible and Ancient Israel," *JSOT* 28.4 (2004): 405.

[31] Susan Niditch explains how the levirate duty of a male "helps society avoid a sociological misfit, the young childless widow," and that "the social fabric as a whole is weakened by her problem." Susan Niditch, "The Wrong Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," *HTR* 72.1–2 (1979): 146.

ing her sexual experience with Onan.[32] While Onan had sex as required, he was concerned with his own self-interests rather than the needs of the community.[33] Thus, by practicing *coitus interruptus* he subverted the spirit of the law since the letter of law did not require that the seed remain in Tamar—only that he enter her and raise the resulting offspring. After Onan's death, Tamar, twice widowed, found herself with no husband or children, a precarious situation for any woman living within a patriarchal society.[34] Tamar's only hope of maintaining a good name for herself and obtaining financial security depended on marriage to the next younger brother, Shelah.

Hence, Tamar was also injured by Judah, who was morally obligated to treat her according to the custom by giving her his youngest son, Shelah, for marriage.[35] Without marriage, Tamar's social standing remained hopeless, and she would be seen as diminished by a third party.[36] Tamar's dignity was degraded in society by being treated as worth less than Judah because her rights had not been honored.[37] Tamar's experience is consistent with Joseph McDonald's explanation of "moral injury [as] characterized by 'dissonance and inner conflict' that can come only from an internal recognition of the disparity between one's actions or experiences and one's moral code."[38] It is reasonable to infer that Tamar experienced dissonance and inner conflict because of her subsequent risky actions posing as a prostitute and intentionally deceiving Judah via her veiled identity that nearly led to her death by public burning (v. 24).

In the case of Tamar, readers can discern Tamar's vulnerable position and the deleterious impact that widowhood and childlessness posed for economic survival in ancient society. Claassens, appreciating the "moral complexities" of Genesis 38 and seeking a space for moral reflection by readers, argues that to be human means to resist forces that violate one's dignity and to recognize the plight of the other.[39] She defines dehumanization as "a situation in which the human ability to flourish is severely restricted and impaired," where "people are not treated as equals, as subjects whose needs matter."[40] However, Claassens illustrates Tamar's resistance to

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[32] Aaron Wildavsky, "Survival Must Not Be Gained through Sin: The Moral of the Joseph Stories Prefigured through Judah and Tamar," *JSOT* 62 (1994): 39.

[33] Onan stood to inherit as a first-born, since Er was dead, but if Tamar had a son, that child would inherit the first-born inheritance of his legal father, Er, and Onan would have a second-son inheritance that he would pass on to his children.

[34] Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 308. See also Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 293–94; Nidtich, "The Wrong Woman Righted," 144–46.

[35] Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics," 249.

[36] Murphy and Hampton aver that moral injury is not defined by subjective feelings but an objective response concerning how a third party would interpret the significance of the wrong. Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 51–52, quoted in Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 182.

[37] Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 182.

[38] McDonald, introduction to *Exploring Moral Injury in Sacred Texts*, 16, in contrast to Murphy and Hampton, states "subjectivity is key" since moral injury is characterized by "dissonance and inner conflict."

[39] Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization," 661, 673.

[40] Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization," 661.

dehumanization, thereby encouraging contemporary readers to contemplate the injustice of societal structures and the need to protect the well-being and dignity of societies' vulnerable members.[41]

Tamar's "fundamental assumptions of what [is] right" and "how things should work in the world" were violated, along with engendering the risk of psychological and emotional pain.[42] Though Tamar resisted dehumanization by her own initiative over time, the acts against her were dehumanizing to women in general. Her resolve did not lessen the moral injury that had been committed but rather highlights her tragic circumstances. Diminishment to Tamar's self-esteem is evident by the risky measures she took to violate social norms, thereby jeopardizing her life. In other words, Tamar assumed significant risk "by taking the project of procreation into her own hands," since she was bound to Judah's third son Shelah by the laws of levirate marriage.[43] When Judah learned that Tamar was pregnant, he and his informant assumed it was by prostitution, and Judah declared that she should be burned. Evidence of her pregnancy was considered adultery because she was seen as bound to Shelah, even though Judah was refusing to give Shelah to her. The term זָנָה "denotes any sexual activity inappropriate for a widow awaiting an arranged levirate marriage."[44]

Viewing Tamar through the lens of moral injury illuminates her humanity. Her decision to act as a prostitute with Judah is far more understandable, given the suffering and injured character this lens reveals. She had been deceptively used by Onan, and she used deception to accomplish what the law required (offspring from a male family member) even though she had to involve her father-in-law instead of his son. Her actions allowed her to confront Judah as she must have known that the discovery of her pregnancy while unmarried would not bring her honor or provision—unless she could expose the man who had long wronged her.

## IV. MORAL INJURY'S CONTRIBUTION

Biblical narratives have provided general moral guidelines for Jews and Christians over the centuries, and more recently biblical scholars have applied Old Testament narrative and law to modern life.[45] Nevertheless, Esias Meyer and Leonore

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[41] Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization," 660–61.

[42] Kelly Denton-Borhaug, "'Like Acid Seeping into Your Soul': Religio-Cultural Violence in Moral Injury," in McDonald, *Engaging Moral Injury and Sacred Texts*, 121–22.

[43] Rachel Adelman, "Ethical Epiphany in the Story of Judah and Tamar," in *Recognition and Modes of Knowledge: Anagnorisis from Antiquity to Contemporary Theory*, ed. Teresa G. Russo (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2013), 56.

[44] Menn, *Judah and Tamar,* 68.

[45] Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 1. See also Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values," in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. William P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 3–5; Robert L. Brawley, ed., *Character Ethics and the New Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); Bruce C. Birch, "Ethical Approaches: The Story of David as Moral Tale," in LeMon and Richards, *Method Matters*, 369–85; Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 76; Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest:*

Pietersen note how few biblical scholars use narratives to focus on contemporary ethics.[46] One reason is that when the moral or spiritual meaning of a narrative character's experience has been reduced to a single idea or example, the story risks becoming a powerless platitude or a "simple moral fable."[47] Contrary to such simplification, Meyers and Pietersen consider biblical narratives, particularly Genesis 38, as a moral reflection on the meaning and complications of everyday life.[48] Moral injury, increasingly explored within biblical studies, is heuristically designed to "bring new meanings out of biblical texts" with the intent that such critical study "can contribute to the attempts to understand, identify, and heal moral injury."[49] Similarly, but apart from a moral injury analysis *per se,* Meyers and Pietersen argue that the ultimate value of the Genesis 38 narrative is how it highlights the priority of family and interprets morally good behavior in terms of duty toward family members.[50] Meyer and Pietersen interpret Judah's exclamation of "[Tamar] is more right than I" as referring to relational responsibilities as a moral obligation in a legalistic sense rather than a theologically driven agenda.[51] In other words, Judah was not implying that Tamar was more in conformance with God's character and or in a right relationship with God, but that Tamar was more in line with the intentions of the social customs that Judah violated. Tamar's actions demonstrated that Judah had been ignoring important customs, and by doing so, he harmed Tamar.

As we saw above, moral injury also encompasses a person's consequential diminishment (e.g., isolation, self-harm, aggression). For example, a moral injury led Tamar to choose risky behaviors that could have led to her death if she had not produced Judah's pledge. Leland Ryken recognizes that "[a] story can communicate truth or reality of knowledge simply by picturing some aspect of human experience" rather than an abstraction or ideal, as the "literary hero incarnates a society's views of reality, morality, and values."[52] Accordingly, the literature on moral injury seeks to understand a person's experience of moral harm, including violence, subjectivity, identity formation, and recognitive theory.[53] Wiinikka-Lydon defines recognitive theory as the recognition of one's humanity by other humans that constitutes an "intersubjective good" such that if "dignity is understood as a status that one's community cognitively bestows on an individual, then moral injury results

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*Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 97 (see the section titled "The Moral Life and the Hebrew Scriptures" in chapter 3); Stanley Hauerwas, "The Moral Authority of Scripture," in *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, ed. Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 33–50; Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 204; Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics," 247, citing the approach of J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 1–2.

[46] Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics," 247.

[47] Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 77.

[48] Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics," 247.

[49] Kelle, "Moral Injury and Biblical Studies," 121.

[50] Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics," 251.

[51] Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories and Christian Ethics," 247.

[52] Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 77–78.

[53] Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 183.

when one's dignity is deracinated through subject-devastating violence."[54] Such violence destroys faith in the foundations or moral coherence in the world and leads an individual to experience the loss of morals and virtues. However, Wiinikka-Lydon's work is embedded in virtue discourse drawing from political and metaphysical assumptions about individual moral development, that is, how one is to become and be virtuous.[55] Biblical scholars of varying backgrounds can examine whether these metaphysical assumptions are consistent with one's adopted worldview.

Similarly, Cottrill's "ethical project" to uncover violence captured under the rubric of moral injury follows Adam Zachary Newton's approach that offers an "embodied" method of reading where the reader is "claimed and transformed" through encounter with others.[56] Cottrill describes how Newton was influenced by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who was concerned about the violence committed under "totalizing, absolutist perceptions of truth and reality," where "universal moral truths necessarily destroy the particularity of individuals and ignore true otherness by positing one correct truth and order."[57] Thus, Cottrill would concur with Newton that "ethics is about what one becomes, and not training in moral and ethical sensibilities," and applies this understanding to her own set of principles for biblical interpretation. For example, Cottrill explains,

> I seek to interact with the violence of the biblical texts more than understanding it in a final way, recognizing that I am staging a certain kind of interpretive process in the context. The ethical significance of this way of reading is in the process of interacting with the texts and not in the lessons I derive, recognizing the alterity of the biblical world and the biblical texts as well as their force and infectious potential. The reading process itself, marked by a refusal to use the texts instrumentally in the service of learning concrete moral lessons, is where ethics happens.… Narrative ethics does not result in a set of lessons for life that can be extracted and applied as a set of values for today.[58]

Cotrill's perception of "what one becomes" is often out of one's control, especially outside a biblical perspective. Comparatively, the philosophy of moral luck is loosely tied to the concept of moral injury, as it describes how continuing life events shape how one pursues virtue. Virtue ethics explores how human fragility and life's contingent circumstances impact choices.[59] Moral injury represents another category to view morality through circumstance, combining features of "inci-

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[54] Wiinikka-Lydon, "Mapping Moral Injury," 183.

[55] Joseph Wiinikka-Lydon, *Moral Injury and the Promise of Virtue* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillian, 2019), 37.

[56] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 34.

[57] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 35.

[58] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 39. Birch would agree that "no single pattern of moral address will emerge from the texts of the Hebrew Bible—not in their formation, nor in their collection into canon, nor in the reading and appropriation of that canon by historic or contemporary communities." Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 373.

[59] Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 33.

dent and constitutive moral luck."[60] Moral luck describes how obstacles inhibit virtuous behavior in certain circumstances of society; it can refer to one life incident, or it can impact the moral development of a person.[61] As Kate Ward explains,

> It is an important service to Christian virtue ethics to have these terms [moral injury and moral luck] that allow us to describe and acknowledge the reality of virtue's fragility. Still, moral luck and moral injury are only useful in the Christian ethical context to the extent that they accomplish two things: (1) to remind us of the limited nature of our control over our own virtue, and (2) point to the promise of God's assistance for our perseverance and progress in virtue, including our work to change the social structures that cause moral luck and moral injury.[62]

Ward's discussion incorporates the work of Wiinikka-Lydon to illustrate how the "fragility of virtue shifts our understanding back to social structures," leading to social fragility. In other words, moral injury moves away from purely individualistic ethics, in which each person is completely responsible for his or her actions, to social ethics. This shift to social structures also illustrates the connection between virtue and social ethics.

Concerning the Genesis 38 narrative, in Judah's defense, he suffered from extreme loss since he had two wicked sons killed by God (the text does not state why Judah's eldest son was killed) and then his Canaanite wife died, leaving him alone.[63] One could say that Judah did not have good "moral luck." By this line of reasoning, Judah was set up to fail, given his traumatic circumstances. Moral injury appears to incorporate the philosophy behind moral luck in cases where behavior is interpreted through a situational framework where humans are not fully to blame for their failings when contributing circumstances are outside their control.[64] J. Barton concludes that the Tamar and Judah story is "the interplay of moral choice with luck or divinely engineered fate."[65] In a sense, both Tamar and Judah were set up to fail morally: Judah's situation was bad luck, and Tamar's bad luck was exacerbated by the patriarchal system. Together, they exemplify these two different influences on moral luck: situation and society.

Brian S. Powers contextualizes experiences, similar to "moral luck," where circumstances beyond one's control impact how one is conditioned to act in situations calling for moral choices.[66] Powers, noting how several psychological studies suggest that external forces condition one's capacity for critical moral decisions, adopts an Augustinian framework limiting moral choices to account for systemic,

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[60] Kate Ward, "Virtue and Human Fragility," *TS* 81.1 (2020): 159.

[61] Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," in *Moral Contexts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 21–34.

[62] Ward, "Virtue and Human Fragility," 162.

[63] Meyer and Pietersen, "Old Testament Stories," 251.

[64] Brian S. Powers, "Christian Theology and Moral Injury," in Kelle, *Moral Injury*, 189–200.

[65] Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel*, 171; Cf. Ward, "Virtue and Human Fragility," 157; See also Ward, "Toward a Christian Virtue Account of Moral Luck," *JSCE* 38.1 (2018): 131–45.

[66] Powers, "Christian Theology and Moral Injury," 189–200.

widespread societal and cultural problems in order to ameliorate guilt.[67] For example, Powers argues that for Augustine, humans make choices determined by forces outside their control, and this "produces a complex moral psychology."[68] Hence, humans are not exhaustively responsible for our actions, "as the larger forces that shaped our particular situation and bound us within certain psychological and cultural conditions were responsible as well."[69] Moreover, sin occurs even when someone is righteously pursuing what they think is good. Powers explains that values are formed within a cultural context, and while "we could be responsible for our actions (as our willing was exercised) yet simultaneously bound by factors beyond our control that exerted considerable influence on our available choices and trajectories."[70] Thus, Powers, using a classic continental ethical approach, contends that this view of sin "resists simple answers" by denying fault but allows one "to explore their own responsibility within the grip of other forces…, which distort one's sense of goodness."[71] Judah may have felt traumatized by God killing his two sons and losing his wife, and these forces may have influenced his reluctance to turn over his third son, Shelah, to Tamar, whom he feared as a *femme fatale*.[72] Hence, Judah may have believed he was making a morally good decision at the time because of the circumstances and pressure to protect his son. However, the way Judah weighed his choices impacted Tamar. Electing to see Tamar as a *femme fatale*, rather than a co-sufferer in their shared loss, suggests he mishandled the responsibilities and legitimate authority laid upon him. His actions also hint at his own "victimization" within a social structure that encouraged him to see a younger female in his household as both less important and potentially dangerous.

## V. MORAL INJURY AND EVANGELICAL COMMUNITIES

Contemporary readers may find Genesis 38 a strange text about which to discuss morality, except for its notorious lack of it—which is why the lens of moral injury is especially relevant to this passage. Indeed, Genesis 38 presents a snapshot of a sordid moral struggle within a particular ancient community. As a contemporary lens, moral injury illumines the injustice and harm experienced by characters, such as Tamar, explaining behavior in ways that are not usually recognized or discussed. It allows contemporary communities of faith to identify with Tamar and perhaps recognize their own individual moral wounds with some degree of empathy. However, while the lens of moral injury enriches our understanding of Genesis

[67] Powers, "Christian Theology and Moral Injury," 191.

[68] Powers, "Christian Theology and Moral Injury," 191.

[69] Powers, "Christian Theology and Moral Injury," 192.

[70] Powers, "Christian Theology and Moral Injury," 192.

[71] Powers, "Christian Theology and Moral Injury," 192–93.

[72] Wildavsky notes how "Rashi reasonably construes Judah's comment to mean he feared that any man Tamar married would die (*Rashi on the Pentateuch: Genesis* [trans. and ann. J. H. Howe (London: Hebrew Compendium Publishing, 1928)] p. 406). Thus, Judah's fear was not only for a particular son, but for the survival of his family, which required male heirs." Wildavsky, "Survival Must Not Be Gained through Sin," 40n14.

38, Birch cautions that despite the wide array of methodologies drawn from the social sciences to describe moral concerns from a particular biblical text, it "is not acceptable to operate as if this is the only meaningful level to attempt to describe the moral dimensions and meanings of the text."[73] For communities of faith who use Scripture to foster an experience of divine reality, Birch affirms:

> The OT assumes that all persons are moral agents. Who we are and how we act is considered to be a matter of moral accountability…. The Hebrew canon is not just the fortunately preserved literature of interesting ancient communities. It seeks to form communities for moral agency within which individuals are brought into relationship with the character, activity, and the will of God as witnesses by these collected testimonies from ancient Israel. Such communities are then to understand themselves and to act. Individually or corporately, as moral agents in the world. Furthermore, the formation, preservation and transmission of this literature as canon imply that its intention is to form communities of moral agency in relationship to God through succeeding generations.[74]

Birch explains how "texts take on new meanings, [both] morally and theologically, as they are handed on to subsequent communities that have preserved them in the formation of an authoritative canon."[75] Texts describing people who fall short of God's desire for justice and compassion are nevertheless resources for deliberation and shaping agents to live morally in the world.[76] Consequently, when we violate the law of God written on our hearts, it will likely cause us a moral wound, even if we are ordered to do so by a superior.

While moral injury illuminates a person's psychological and social diminishment and injury, evangelically inclined communities are likely to consider also (1) whether the situation reveals a failure to obey God and (2) whether there is a violation of biblical norms based on God's character. Additionally, faith communities can assess commitment to universal moral truths as well as metaphysical understanding of moral development that is beyond the scope of this study.

Birch provides a helpful explanation of the relationship between Old Testament ethics and morality, and his outlined approach is applied here in the context of Genesis 38. Overall, Birch recognizes that a single pattern of moral address will not emerge from multifaceted biblical texts functioning on multiple levels, such as character, conduct, and witness.[77] However, Birch's criteria illustrate how a narrative, in this case Genesis 38, functions as a moral resource because it (1) parallels life's difficult moral circumstances in both faithful and unfaithful actions, (2) reveals God's presence in the midst of moral dilemmas, and (3) illustrates a partnership between God and Israel around issues of promise, righteousness, commitment,

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[73] Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 372–73.

[74] Bruce C. Birch, "Ethics in the Old Testament," in *New International Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 2:340.

[75] Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 372.

[76] Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 373.

[77] Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 373.

sin, judgment, compassion, forgiveness, renewal, and redemption.[78] Despite the moral failures in a text such as Genesis 38, Birch explains how "God reach[es] beyond the narrow enforcement of moral law for the sake of renewal and redemption."[79] Some readers may question God's presence in Genesis 38; however, God kills Judah's sons Er and Onan for their wicked behavior, and he shows God's ability to make the divine plan work even though everyone else is trying to destroy it (including Tamar).

Moral injury offers one lens through which to view Tamar and her experience. However, communities of faith must ultimately decide how to read Genesis 38 as a biblical text. As a moral injury exponent, Cottrill describes her approach to narrative ethics not as ethical formation, but as "ethical encounter" reliant on "facing the other" without "generalizations that squelch particularity, but faces the mystery and transcendence of a singular person."[80] Cottrill's approach, eschewing "universal moral truths," is marked "by a refusal to use texts instrumentally in the service of learning concrete moral lessons" and is "not the decisive assessment of character or the extraction of moral values."[81] While Cottrill's anti-foundationalist ethical approach helps to recognize overlooked suffering and understand complex ethical situations, not all biblical scholars would embrace this brand of ethics without qualifications. Moral injury as applied to biblical narrative will be used by theologians through different assumptions about hermeneutics, canonicity, inspiration, etc. Therefore, readers should be aware that theological assumptions that accompany the use of moral injury theory may not be consistent from writer to writer or in line with readers' own theological assumptions. Alternatively, holding a foundationalist worldview, one can read Genesis 38 as holding authoritative status—a response to the reality of God, and living life in covenant with God.[82] Here morality and ethics depend on a lived relationship with God so that the text is not a mere moral guide where morality is abstracted—apart from individual choice to align with God's character in light of an ongoing divine covenant.

Some scholars suggest that any reference to "Old Testament ethics" is a misnomer because "there is no abstract, comprehensive concept in the Old Testament that parallels our modern term ethics," and "we do not have in the Old Testament abstract, philosophical discourses on morality or codified theoretical systems of ethics."[83] However, Leviticus 19:18 ("Love your neighbor as yourself") is quoted in the New Testament as a general ethical principle (Matt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8). This principle could be used today to avoid moral injury to others.

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[78] Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 380.

[79] Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 381.

[80] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 35.

[81] Cottrill, *Uncovering Violence*, 35, 39.

[82] Birch, "Ethical Approaches," 373–74.

[83] Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, 97, quoting Walter Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 2, and Bruce Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 40.

In addition, the levirate law is one of a number of laws that reflect God's character, particularly his respect for family life to protect against harmful behavior.[84] While protection of the weak is not unique to the Old Testament, F. Charles Fensham considers it "one of the important ethical doctrines of the Old Testament."[85] The law of levirate marriage does not directly apply today; it is not part of our society that "the name/identity of a deceased brother 'will be blotted out of Israel' unless levirate marriage is performed."[86] However, the morals accompanying levirate marriage can be valued today, as Gane suggests, by the "respectful preservation of memory of the dead (cf. Rev 14:13) and care for widows (1 Tim 5:3–16; Jas 1:27)—that flow from the higher value of love for one's neighbor (Lev 19:18)."[87]

## VI. CONCLUSION

Moral injury, a relatively new lens for biblical studies, is applied to Genesis 38 and illustrates how Onan's and Judah's actions are morally injurious to Tamar over a period of time (i.e., slow violence) in spite of what her initiative ultimately accomplished in response to moral injury. Though the Tamar narrative does not offer clear-cut answers from a moral perspective, this study explores a specific facet of moral injury, particularly diminishment of someone through betrayal and the commission of a harmful act. The use of moral injury as an interpretive lens can offer communities of faith a heightened awareness of social, emotional, and spiritual harm to characters in biblical texts. Moreover, awareness of moral injury opens discussion of contemporary issues facing church communities previously unaddressed regarding morally deficient choices, behavior, and overlooked consequences. The general biblical principle to love one's neighbor as oneself is a guide to avoiding moral injury of others, recognizing that lapses in love often result in deep moral wounds. Current work on moral injury in biblical studies provides an opportunity for all communities of faith to explore the existence of moral wounds in the church and beyond.

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[84] Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 41.

[85] Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor," 137.

[86] Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 211.

[87] Gane, *Old Testament Law for Christians*, 210–13; see especially chapter 9, "Progressive Moral Wisdom," 197–235.