

The Bible, culture and ethics: Trickery in the narrative of Judah and Tamar

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Using the Bible in Christian ethics is often not as simple as many would expect it to be. This is particularly the case for the use of the Old Testament. Part of the challenge is the complexity of grasping the customs and norms that are reflected in the Old Testament. They are often at odds with what is acceptable in contemporary thinking. In this article, we examine the difficulty of using the Old Testament in Christian ethics by using the narrative of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 as case study. We show that this particular text alerts us to the complex relationship between ethics and culture, not only in the world of the text, but also the world of the interpreter. Based on our analysis of the text we argue for its meta-ethical contribution to the practice of Christian ethics. We do not endeavour to resolve the perceived tension between the implied ethics of the text and that of contemporary interpreters, but view the unresolved tension as one of the text's key contributions to the practice of Christian ethics.

Introduction

Classical approaches to Christian ethics view the Bible as an authoritative source of Christian ethics. In this article we show that the use of the Bible not only contributes to the content of Christian ethics, but also has meta-ethical implications. We use the narrative of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 to show how the Bible sensitises practitioners of Christian ethics to the complex relationship between ethics and culture, both in the world of the text and the world of the interpreter. The role of the ethically ambiguous notion of trickery is used as illustration. The narrative of Judah and Tamar is chosen because of its clear tensions with contemporary approaches in Christian ethics. However, instead of focusing on ways in which to harmonise these tensions, we argue that they constitute a contribution to the practice of Christian ethics.

A secondary aim of the article is to argue in favour of the use of the Old Testament in Christian ethics. Discussions often stress that ethicists steer clear of biblical texts in the Old Testament, because using these texts is often a strenuous process that few ethicists are equipped to take on (Cahill 2002:13–17). When it comes to using the Pentateuch, ethical interpretation is difficult, as it contains a large amount of a variety of material and much effort is required to examine the texts methodically and in detail (Davies 2006:732–753). We argue, if implicitly, that extensive exegetical and interpretive undertaking is integral to using the Bible in Christian ethics and will also assist in unlocking meta-ethical uses of the Bible.

In order to clarify the contribution of this article to the debate on ethics, we need to clarify our use of the concept of culture. Loewen (2000:7) describes culture as that which permits a person to know how to live. People do not have a natural predisposition to survive in their social environment; they have to learn how to stay alive. They do so through the progress and on-going processes in their society. Culture nurtures people's thinking and behaviour in society and is such a part of people that elements of it can be identified in everyday practices and customs (Akangbe 2012:26–27). As culture is transmitted from one generation to another, the preceding generation has the responsibility to determine the contextual implications of events and to establish their life-sustaining properties in order for them to be re-used (Huebner 2012:4).

Culture also gives people a way in which to ascertain how social reality has changed and what difference it has made for the moral identity of society in general and for the individual specifically (Huebner 2012:173–174). Put differently, one can say that people do not have a natural predisposition to endure in their social environment; they have to learn how to survive (Loewen 2000:7).

Interpreting the narrative of Judah and Tamar

Genesis 38 tells the story of the family of Judah. Judah and his family have to face the repercussions of the death of his son and he is left with a widow in the family (Gn 38:2–8). As the head of the family, Judah has to ensure that the levirate duty is upheld. The levirate duty was a customary



practice that would serve to preserve the name of his son Er in the community (Davies 1981b:257). The situation becomes more complicated when his second eldest son tries to fulfil the duty, but he also dies (Gn 38:9). It appears that the execution of the levirate duty turns into a predicament. Ironically, this cultural practice that is supposedly intended to continue life, ends it. Instead of perpetuating the family, it seems that Judah's family is dying out. As an alternative to instructing his last son Shelah to perform the levirate duty, Judah instead requests that Tamar return to the house of her father (Gn 38:10).

These circumstances and subsequent events lead Tamar to become a trickster. She later deceives Judah into thinking that she is a prostitute (Gn 38:13–14). Judah sleeps with her and she falls pregnant. This is all the more confusing in view of the fact that she is considered to adhere to what is expected from members of the community. Both Judah and Tamar use unconventional means either to perform their duty or to find a way out of it. Yet the impression is created that the levirate law served a necessary function within this community. Even though most biblical scholars argue that it served mainly to ensure that the deceased husband was perpetuated in the community, some argue that it could have served a dual purpose (Davies 1981a:142–144). The narrative deals with the plight of Tamar as a childless widow in her community, because the family of her deceased husband do not fulfil their responsibility in terms of family relations towards her. Furthermore, it can be argued that the levirate law might also have served to ensure the survival of Tamar within her community. If one considers the concept of the levirate duty in the text, it is clear that this duty plays a significant role in the trickery and deception that take place in the narrative.

There is no clear explanation for the inclusion of the narrative within the larger narrative about Joseph (Clifford 2012:213). The narrative may have been inserted in the Joseph narrative because both deal with the sons of Jacob. Chapter 38 causes some kind of delay – which allows the reader to sense the passing of time after Joseph was taken to Egypt (Eveson 2001:475–476). Others point out that it is also aimed at portraying the transformation of Judah. This connection is made based on the assumption that Judah developed as a person. Whilst Judah previously sold Joseph into slavery, in Genesis 43:3–10 and 44:14–34, he is a changed man who promises to protect his younger brother (Brodie 2001:351).

Nevertheless, in chapter 37 Jacob is still a young man, whereas in chapter 46 he is older and takes his relatives to Egypt. In chapter 46 Jacob takes the sons of Tamar to Egypt as part of his family. This might explain the placement of the account of Judah and Tamar in chapter 38 (Ross 1988:611). Therefore, Genesis 38 seems to shed some light on the problem of chronology. If the narrative was placed elsewhere, it may have caused some difficulty in structuring the patriarchal narratives. It thus seems that Genesis 38 was included in the book of Genesis because it forms part of a genealogical tale

(Collins 2004:100). It would appear that the material describes the strange lineage of David, who was a descendant of Judah (Collins 2004:101). Hence the narrative is included in Genesis, because it informs the reader about events that happened in an earlier period as it is remembered by the storyteller from the early history of the tribe (Hanson 2001:47–48). Another point to note is that the element of trickery in the story has led to arguments that link the narrative with other tales of trickery in the book of Genesis. Incidentally, the narrative of the daughters of Lot in Genesis 19:30–38 is regarded as one of these tales as it also contains a form of deception (Wickes 2008:45).

Despite the reasons given as justification for the trickery and deception, the way in which the events depict morality may be a cause of concern for the contemporary interpreter, especially if one attempts to use the narrative as a source in Christian ethics. Firstly, it appears as if Judah and Tamar pay little attention to the biblical laws (Menn 1997:41–43). In Exodus 34 it is clearly stipulated that the Israelites should not marry Canaanite women; however, Judah not only marries a Canaanite woman, but also gives one to his son Er to marry (Bridge 2009:67–70). Secondly, the situation is aggravated by the fact that Judah comes across as a man who fails his family and community by not being obedient and faithful to the cultural practice of the levirate duty (Brueggemann 1982:307–312). Marriage referred not only to the union of a man and a woman, but also to the union of two households (Gravett *et al.* 2008:95–96). It served to establish descent in Israel, which means that its main purpose was to extend the family line. It also had an economic function in that it ensured the transmission of property and also determined inheritance rights (Steinberg 1993:5, 6). With regard to customs, it satisfied the divine criterion to which every member of the family had to adhere – although the weaker person at the time could appeal to the adherence to custom (Gerstenberger 2002:30–31). Marriage served as a premise for social connections, to reinforce control over property and to ensure economic growth for the families involved (Matthews 2005:520–521). Considering this, the levirate¹ marriage refers to the duty of a brother-in-law towards his deceased brother's wife (Alter 1996:217–223). Here the closest surviving brother becomes a replacement of the dead one in that he had to provide the widow of his brother with an heir. If a man therefore died childless, his brother (or any close relative) had the responsibility to provide his widow with a child. Nonetheless, the unruliness of Judah puts Tamar and the whole district under threat. This leads Tamar, thirdly, to commit adultery through prostitution, which results into her, fourthly misleading Judah. However, despite this unacceptable conduct, Tamar is perceived as a poor, childless widow who has suffered a grave injustice from an authority figure. Both Judah and Tamar remain guilty of deception. The narrative later reveals the fact that, deception or not, Tamar is the one who is in the right.

1. The term 'levirate marriage' has its origin in the Latin *levir*, which refers to a brother-in-law (Gravett *et al.* 2008:95–96). A full description of the custom is found in Deuteronomy 25:5–10.

These are issues that the interpreter has to consider in the interpretation of the text. But interpreters address their own issues in the attempt to understand the narrative. They can choose to take into account the explanations of biblical scholars when they make judgements about the narrative (Menn 1997:1–2). This reason is that the narrative best makes sense within its sociocultural and historical context (Roop 1987:248–254). In other words, a look at the social world of the narrative can inform one's interpretation of the events that occur and can help in understanding the deceptive nature of the characters in the narrative. It is clear from the above that, in order to use the text in discussions on ethics, it is important to think about the society to which Judah and Tamar belonged. Accordingly, it could be argued that the narrative only makes sense if it is considered within its own community.

The social world of Judah and Tamar

There are numerous methods in biblical Criticism, but we made use of the social world of the Bible. Studying Genesis 38 in terms of the social world of the Bible is a good alternative to interpret the narrative of Judah and Tamar. In this method, models and theories from sociology and anthropology have been used to determine the social world of the Bible (Whitelam 1998:35–38). The purpose in using this approach is to try to uncover the social setting of the patriarchs. One of the appealing factors of this method is that we could recover various aspects of the society of Judah and Tamar that are not mentioned within the text, but which formed an integral part of the social world from which the text emerged (Whitelam 1998:38–41). Recovering the different aspects of the society helps us gain some clarity and understanding on essential ideas within the text, for example the concepts of family, marriage and religion. The text had a particular meaning for the original audience. Understanding the theological significance of the text is connected to understanding the social setting within which the narratives originated.

Morality can be determined in terms of cultural practices. Israelite society had certain duties and responsibilities that a person who belonged to the community had to comply with. Custom and law played an important role in the life of the Israelite and it can be described in terms of the extended family, as it was the responsibility of the family to ensure justice (Matthews 2005:520). Moreover, family law can be regarded as a subcategory of customary law. Law also plays an important role in the story of Judah and Tamar. In the narrative of Judah and Tamar, law refers to the divine will of God (Alt 1989:81). Most biblical material on the law has various stages and tendencies in development. The law in the Pentateuch is evident as a collection of books (Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus). In this sense the focus is on the law as implemented by the family (Knauth 2005:520). In effect, the law is considered as the officially permitted rulings and moral restrictions in the Pentateuch that were administered by the family (Wenham 2006:351). The focus is on levirate law and how it controlled the functioning of the

family in biblical times and the reason why fulfilling this duty was important. It is important to look at the principles of the law in the Old Testament. Israel was a covenant people who pledged to be loyal to God (Ex 19:4–6), and for this reason the law was central in their relationship with YHWH (Wenham 2006:351). If they did not adhere to the law, there would be punishment. The relationship between the law and ethics was to control and oversee the rules in order to represent the ethical standard of the person who drafted it. Thus, to ensure that family matters were run according to the will of God, laws were implemented. However, and as indicated in Deuteronomy 25:5–10, the courts had no jurisdiction over legal matters concerning the family (Phillips 2002:111–126). The system was governed by the people to ensure that actions stemmed from honour and would not lead to shame in the community. Israel had to fulfil the law (Matthews 2005:520) or be punished by God. In the biblical narratives, communities evaluate their experience of God by constantly weighing up their traditions (Birch 1991:29). These urge attention to every level of witness preserved within the text, as well as attention to the final form as the ultimate shape given to the text by the biblical communities.

Patriarchy

In focusing on the Bible, feminists examine a biblical text to look at how it has been affected by patriarchy. The aim is to highlight that women do not have worth merely because they are able to bear children. Women participated differently than men in the social conditions of their time and place (Brenner 1985:78–83). Feminists try to point out how women have been marginalised in the narratives of the Pentateuch (Goldingay 2011:283–286). Feminist biblical interpretation emphasises the patriarchal nature of the Bible and the material captured in it (Soulén & Soulén 2001:58–61). In addition, feminists try to uncover how women experienced their world by focusing on the insights and knowledge of women as presented in the events of biblical texts. In patriarchy the relationships of people are considered in terms of a hierarchy where men are looked upon as the authority figures. In biblical times men occupied positions of authority, such as the leader of the household, whereas women were mainly wives and mothers, although some also had the opportunity to be judges or prophets (Camp 2007:532–534). In Israel, women were under the legal authority of the male head of their households and when they married, this could be the father of the household of their husband (Greengus 2011:11–20). Hence it can be argued that gender roles in Israel were determined in terms of family or community (McDonald 1995:75–80). Presumably, the most important role for both men and women was to coproduce children, since it was important that the man's name and inheritance be carried over to his offspring. Phyllis Bird gave meaningful insight into the connection between 'historical and constructive tasks' (Cahill 1985:45–58). Bird questioned whether the determinant role for men and women was to perpetuate humanity, and to what degree we should continue to establish the social roles of men and women in terms of their biological make-up (Cahill 1985:83–90). But

the social context of a person determines what it means to be masculine or feminine; thus it is important to look at the role of culture and society (Farley 2006:109–110).

The feminist challenge

The feminist tradition has the capacity to enable one to gain an accurate and deeply intuitive understanding of patriarchy within the text. The feminist approach is used in this study to gain the necessary insight into gender issues within the narrative. By using the feminist approach, the aim is not to contend that there is power abuse within the narrative of Genesis 38, but rather to understand gender relationships within the text. The social context of Judah and Tamar is situated within a patriarchal society.

Furthermore, a feminist approach raises awareness of how the roles of men and women have changed in present society (Rogerson 2001:38). Therefore a challenge may be to use the text as a model for sexual relations to focus on matters that people are currently facing.

Genesis 38 is based on a familial context in which offspring was the pivotal focus (Cahill 1985:83–104). Whilst feminists may alert us to the issues of injustice and oppression within the text, it is important to consider the historical background of the narrative: the levirate law served to protect the deceased Er and not principally Tamar (Wenham 2000:2).

A danger with the feminist approach is that one should not only interpret the text from a gender perspective (Van Wolde 1997:1–2). The narrative is about the levirate duty, which is a male-protecting law (Niditch 2012:45). Therefore, the narrative mainly served this purpose. Tamar acts (Gn 38:13–19) as the devoted wife of her deceased husband, which is the behaviour expected of her. The aim of the levirate law was to perpetuate the name of the dead husband in order to ensure that he had descendants in the afterlife. In the process, the widow was also protected by the law, as it ensured that she did not suffer economic deprivation because she would have a son to fend for her (Niditch 2012:45). Although the narrative can be used to address the notion of power abuse, we are cautious not to make this a focus in finding ethical meaning in the text.

Trickery in the narrative of Judah and Tamar

The role of trickery is central to understanding the narrative of Judah and Tamar, and illustrates the tension between ethics and culture in the world of the text and the world of the interpreter. The importance of trickery in this narrative sensitises us not simply to the close relationship between ethics and culture in the narrative itself, but to the close relationship between ethics and culture as such. In this sense the role of trickery in the narrative serves as helpful illustration to show the contribution of the Bible – particularly the Old Testament – to the meta-ethical dimensions of Christian ethics.

Trickery can have various functions. Although trickery has a negative connotation in current ethical thinking, within this text it seems to be condoned. In Genesis it seems that trickery served as a means to implement the legitimate rights and achieve the destiny of a person (Dershowitz 2000:174–177). In Genesis 12 and 20:1–13 Abraham deceived the Pharaoh by pretending that Sarah was his sister instead of his wife. Isaac also deceived (in Gn 26:12) by telling the men in Gerar that his wife was his sister. However, Jacob is considered the ultimate trickster – as can be seen in the stories about his extensive deceptions, such as in Genesis 25:29–34; 27:5–29; 30:35–43; 29:22–28 and 32:24–31. Together with his mother, Jacob deceived his father Isaac to gain the birth right of his brother Esau in Genesis 27. He also tricked his father by obtaining the blessing due to Esau as the first-born. Trickery occurs within a number of these narratives. It also surfaces in the narrative of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, with Judah and his sons tricking Tamar out of an heir; however, in retaliation, she also deceives Judah. It is therefore important to consider how trickery functioned within the narratives in Genesis.

We can also connect it to the ancestral promise² (Anderson 2011:48). Deception helps to fulfil the promise. Anderson (2011:48) considers whether there is a link between the ancestral promise and trickery. He writes that deception helps to fulfil the promise. In some of the narratives in Genesis there is some form of tension between people because of deception. Characters are therefore motivated by their own agendas, which may come across as disrespect towards one another. Their motives and behaviour are portrayed as self-seeking (Anderson 2011:48–49). Anderson goes further and argues that trickery can be considered as the fulfilment of the divine plan. In his view, 'just as the trickster oracle reaches fulfilment through deception ... so also the ancestral promise continues towards fulfilment through deception' (Anderson 2011:129). Zakovitch (2010:100–101) argues that in Genesis 27 there is a tension between the justification of the actions of Jacob and the arguments to condemn his behaviour. There are thus two forces at work in the Jacob cycle, namely those of Jacob the man of justice and those of Jacob the deceiver. Furthermore, he presupposes that these forces portray the theological nature of the texts, as they reflect the place of God in trickery. Trickery also served as a model which the biblical writers used in the narratives (Niditch 2012:27).

For the most part, trickery narratives show the weak defeating the strong; however, the trickster also changes his or her condition by cheating and deceiving people. We define a trickster (as presented in the book of Genesis) as a person or character that uses a condition or circumstance presented by his or her foes to put them in a favourable position (Matthews & Moyer 1997:55–57). Moreover, trickery is regarded as a model of behaviour that the biblical writers used

2. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are considered the ancestors of Israel. In Genesis 12 Abraham is called blessed in Haran and is promised offspring and land – which leads him to build an altar to the Lord (Gn 12:7). Numerous events follow, but lead to a covenant relationship between Abraham and God (Gn 15). The covenant relationship is an important feature of the will of God towards Israel (Collins 2004:65).

in the narratives (Niditch 2012:27). In Genesis the Israelites who resorted to trickery were normally particularly vulnerable people, for example those in foreign countries, young male heirs and women. Therefore, a trickster (as presented in the book of Genesis) is a person of low standards who attained success contrary to a rule. To trick or deceive someone means to deliberately mislead or misrepresent the truth. Also, a trickster can be defined as a cunning person who acts in a skilful manner to outwit someone (Jackson 2002:31–32).

Both Judah and Tamar are guilty of deception. The narrative reveals that Tamar tricks her father-in-law into sleeping with her whilst pretending to be a prostitute. She falls pregnant. Judah, on the other hand, is moderately unruly and his behaviour is not in line with custom (Brueggemann 1982:307). His unruliness triggers the deception of Tamar; therefore, no moral judgement should be passed on her. Tamar's deceiving character is tolerable in her own context, since it guarantees a favourable outcome in the narrative (Fretheim 1994:321). What all this means is that it is only when the actions of Tamar as well as all the surrounding factors of the narrative are taken into consideration that one can make a moral judgement (Macguire 1994:284).

Narrative criticism explains trickery in terms of social conditions (Niditch 2012:35). Tamar tricks because of her social condition. The narrative depicts the ordeal of a person who has low status within her society. Tamar occupies a lowly position but is allowed to improve her social conditions (so to speak) through trickery. Also, trickery in the patriarchal narratives serves as a means for a person to achieve a goal in social relationships (Steinberg 1988:9–13). In this instance, trickery serves as a means to emancipate characters of a lowly position. The challenge with this narrative is that the attitudes surrounding the concept of trickery are unclear. Scholars have various explanations for the role of trickery, but it is difficult to grasp the stance of the community in the text on the matter. Consequently, it is difficult to determine the kind of people portrayed in the patriarchal narratives because of their various delinquencies (Esau 2006:4–7).

The ethical ambiguity of trickery

Many contemporary readers might intuitively view the role of trickery in the narrative as ethically problematic. However, within the discipline of ethics, intuition alone is not sufficient in identifying the ethical ambiguity of a practice such as trickery. The difficulty already starts with the ways in which we attempt to identify and interpret trickery. In fact, our attempts at interpreting it alert us to the impossibility of placing ourselves within the world of the text and compel us to make use of culturally infused ethical approaches to interpret it. In this section we attempt to understand the ethical ambiguity of trickery. In order to get access to the ambiguity of trickery in the text, and in order to stay within the confines of an article in an academic journal, we employ one set of ethical approaches. We read the text in terms of ethical approaches that emphasise the importance of character to get access to elements of its ambiguity. This provides us

with access to the ethical ambiguity of trickery in the text by both enabling critical and appreciatory interpretations of the behaviour of Tamar in the text.

In discussions on character most scholars draw on Aristotle, Aquinas and MacIntyre. Stanley Hauerwas continues to be one of the most prominent figures in this regard. Hauerwas (1974:48–67) describes 'character' as of having character and character traits or to be character. He defines character firstly as the traits that refer to the way of conveying certain activities, whilst having character refers to the way in which one manages and shows consistency in the means by which one expresses these traits. He questions whether the actions of a person are a direct reflection of the kind of person they are, or whether his or her character depends on the kind of action in which they participate (Hauerwas 1974:50–51). He devotes some consideration to how the outlook, purpose and behaviour of the person are reflected in terms of the Christian life (Hauerwas 1974:50).

Christian ethicists who emphasise character often view biblical texts as sources that shape the morality of people. This is based on the view that the kind of person that an individual ought to be is for the most part formed by the values and ideas of his or her (faith) community (Cahill 2002:10). The faith community, in turn, is to a large extent formed by the core narratives of its authoritative texts. In this sense, moral identity is produced and perceived in Scripture with regard to the role of the community in the shaping process (Richardson 2007:102–104). Telling narratives plays a fundamental part for people in considering their history, and in making sense of their present and directing their future (Cunningham 2008:31–40). Narratives give one a better understanding of a society and what is considered as your own (Wells & Quash 2010:180–206). For that reason narratives are significant in that it present the opportunity of partaking in the life of the character that the story presents. It becomes a replica for spectators or the person who reads it to live by or to identify with. Within their community, people tell stories, which later become what is lived by (Van der Ven 1998:339–386).

For many proponents of ethics of character, virtue plays a central role in the formation of character (Hauerwas 1974:48–67). Virtue is the result of good practices, which can only be sustained in community, which in turn leads to the development of persons of character (see Van der Ven 1998:384–386). In this regard, it is difficult to overlook the influence of Aristotle's definition of virtue in his *Nicomachean Ethics* as 'a settled disposition' that 'determines the choice of actions and emotions'. Writing from the perspective of virtue ethics, Harrington and Keenan (2002:23–24) argue that character is built on virtue and 'being'. A virtuous person is one who embodies certain attributes that guide him or her in making ethical decisions. Here a virtuous being suggests a process of communal shaping of the identity of the person (Cahill 2002:3–17). Van der Ven (1998:384–386) argues that, if one can only embody good by practising good and virtue through habits, then Christians can only be moral if they take

heed of the narratives and are actively involved in activities. He relates character to features such as desires, 'the good', and reason. He further asserts that there is a linkage between the suggestion of a good life subjugated by the notion of classic character and character formed by storytelling.

In a characteristically controversial move Hauerwas (1974) problematises the relationship between a person and his or her actions by posing the question as to how the actions should be understood. In some of his works he points out that the notion of vision plays an important part in the life of the Christian, and argues that the behaviour of a person can be measured in terms of their viewpoint on life. Also here the connection between a virtuous person and a community of character is clear: the outlook that a person has on life is influenced by his or her community and the customs of the group he or she belongs to (Hauerwas 1974:48–67).

To approach the text from an ethics of character perspective is not without its challenges. How, for example, can this narrative be used to shape the character-formation processes of a faith community if the characters of the main figures in the text are at odds with what is regarded as virtuous in many contemporary faith communities? We make use of three concepts that are central to the ethics of character to illustrate the ethical ambiguity of the text, namely narrative, character and community.

The first possibility, in accordance with the importance of narrative in ethical approaches that focus on the formation of character, is to start with the nature of narratives in the Old Testament. It is important, for example, to note the proposal by Brueggemann (1982:307–312) for appreciating the close connection between family, community and the well-being of the person, especially in the narratives of the Pentateuch. It is possible to interpret this narrative, partly at least, as an attempt to address right relations between members of its society (Phillips 2002:201–210). This in turn explains the levirate as a custom that served to ensure the prosperity of the group in that the deceased husband continued to live through offspring (Alter 1996:217–223; Frymer-Kensky 2000:161–163; Wenham 1994:366–368). But how should this narrative be used to form communities in which trickery by means of the levirate duty is not only irrelevant but, if it were to be implemented, destructive?

A further possibility is to investigate the implied content of virtuous character in the text. This is, admittedly, an approach that can at best provide partial answers, but certainly provides access to the ethical ambiguity of the text. Wright (2003:224–225), for example, proposes that in much of the Pentateuch, and in this narrative too, the notion of duty is helpful in interpreting the behaviour of characters in the texts. In this sense, the individual's character is developed to direct ethical behaviour so that he or she may act with a sense of responsibility. Applied to the behaviour of Tamar, this makes possible to argue that her behaviour is an ideal example that a sense of duty has been instilled in her to uphold cultural practices within the family and the community (Wright

2003:229–230). Her sole obligation is to provide her deceased husband with an heir and she does everything possible to ensure that this happens. Consequently her behaviour might even be construed as the fulfilment of her responsibility towards her deceased husband as an obligatory custom. Hence, her virtuous character and identity are linked to the community of which she is part and she remains true, in actions and behaviour, to this community. But is the fact that this particular duty constituted sound character in Tamar's community good enough reason to dissolve the tension with contemporary understandings of character?

A last possibility is to apply the concept community, as used in the ethics of character, to the text. Community, used in this sense, can be understood as the way in which the whole relates to individual members. It is clear that neither Judah nor Tamar is condemned in the narrative. The assumption seems to be that their behaviour was not perceived to be in tension with the moral formation process in their community. Tamar can be seen as a loyal family member, or so it seems, willing to do whatever it takes to ensure the preservation of the family (Janzen 1994:9–15). Subsequently, the narrative does not draw the attention of the interpreter to the situation, but rather to the kind of person Tamar ought to be in the situation of forming part of a particular society (Hauerwas 1981:9–13). Expressed even stronger, it seems as if Tamar is portrayed as a person who is dedicated to her family and custom, and therefore fulfils the purpose of God, because she risks her own life to obey. The contemporary reader may view Judah as a father attempting to protect his last son. In the text he is portrayed as a man who misuses his authority. Although injustice plays an important role in the narrative, this may not be the message that the author is trying to convey (Jeansonne 1990:98). But does the possibility of explaining what is perceived as ethically ambiguous elements of Tamar's behaviour cause these elements to cease to be ambiguous?

Ethics, culture and Christian ethics: A meta-ethical contribution

We argue that the close and complex relation between ethics and culture, as is particularly evident in numerous narratives in the Old Testament, makes using the Bible as a source in Christian ethics quite challenging at times. This is illustrated by the ambiguity of trickery in the narrative of Judah and Tamar, as identified by reading the narrative through the lens of the ethics of character. Does this mean that we should seek ways in which to resolve the ambiguity, or even consider not using the text?

If culture is indeed that which permits a person to know how to live in changing circumstances, conceptions of community, character and the ways in which community and character are built and maintained are central to culture. In fact, viewed from the perspective of culture, the very notions of community, character, and to a certain extent even narrative, are expressions of culture. To expect of the narrative of Judah and Tamar to conform to current understandings of

these concepts not only disregards the particularity of the narrative, but also the particularity of the position from which contemporary readers seek to interpret the text. And this we regard as a key meta-ethical contribution of this narrative: the ethical ambiguity of the text alerts us to the cultural situatedness, not only of the text, but of its readers. It serves to relativise a form of Christian ethics that presents absolutes in current cultural expressions as neutral, or more developed than those we find in biblical narratives.

The difficulty of using the narrative of Judah and Tamar in Christian ethics need not disable its use altogether. It contributes to a refined and deepened understanding of a core meta-ethical dimension of the practice of Christian ethics: the relation of ethics and culture in both the world of the text and the world of the interpreter. The Bible is not only authoritative with regard to ethical issues, but might also be viewed in terms of its potential meta-ethical contributions.

The story of Judah and Tamar shows us the close relation between ethics and culture in the world of the text and the world of the interpreter. It helps us to understand that even our own interpretations of the text are influenced by a host of shifting factors. This complexity might help us to use the text of the Bible in more considered ways and, ideally, might encourage constructive self-criticism of contemporary concepts of ethics.

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Authors' contributions

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