

Tricksters, Duplicity and Righteousness: Reading Tales of the Folk in Scripture

Introduction: Michelle Ami Reyes is church planter, pastor's wife, author, speaker, and activist in Austin, TX. In 2014, Michelle and her husband co-planted [Hope Community Church](#), a minority-led multicultural church that serves low-income and disadvantaged communities in East Austin. She is also the vice president of the Asian American Christian Collaborative and serves as the local CCDA Austin Networker. But before pursuing full-time vocational ministry, Michelle used to teach college courses on folklore. Her Ph.D. is in 18th-Century German Literature and her research focused on empowerment and narrative justice through folklore -- a topic that she now uses and applies in her local E. Austin community by elevating the stories of immigrants and the poor. Finally, Michelle has a forthcoming book with Zondervan on cross-cultural relationships called *Becoming All Things: How Small Changes Lead To Lasting Connections Across Cultures*, due to release March 2021.

Welcome

How do the powerless make their way through the world?

Around the world and in countries where there are no such things as equality and rights for all; where things like educational access, benefactors and social mobility are impossible; and when the powerful are cruel and oppression abounds, what do the powerless have at their disposal to protect themselves?

The genre of folklore explores this very question. Consider, for example, the story of Hansel and Gretel. Many of you probably know the tale, although in modern times we've reduced this story to nothing more than the idea of cute gingerbread houses in the woods. This tale, however, is quite dark. It speaks to one of the most basic and dire struggles of the poor, namely starvation, and the unthinkable choices that families end up making when you've run out of options.

"Next to a great forest there lived a poor woodcutter with his wife and his two children. The boy's name was Hansel and the girl's name was Gretel. He had but little to eat, and once, when a great famine came to the land, he could no longer provide even their daily bread.

One evening as he was lying in bed worrying about his problems, he sighed and said to his wife, "What is to become of us? How can we feed our children when we have nothing for ourselves?"

"Man, do you know what?" answered the woman. "Early tomorrow morning we will take the two children out into the thickest part of the woods, make a fire for them, and give each of them a little piece of bread, then leave them by themselves and go off to our work. They will not find their way back home, and we will be rid of them."

The children are thenceforth abandoned in the woods, a metaphor for being abandoned in the world and left vulnerable to its great evils. The inevitability of danger for orphaned homeless children is immediately found in their encounter with a witch, who kidnaps them and plans to eat them. This is what poverty has inflicted: helpless, vulnerable children at the margins of society with no one coming to rescue them from abuse.

But when the moment comes for the witch to throw the children into the oven to bake and eat them - a clear act of dehumanization in which the witch treats these little humans as nothing more than animal meat - what does Gretel do? Gretel uses trickery to overcome the old woman. She pretends to be stupid and not understand the woman's instructions. This leads the old woman to open the oven door and lean inside in an attempt to show Gretel how it is done, providing the opportunity for Gretel to shove her captor inside, lock the oven door, and murder the witch.

Gretel is a trickster, and her ability to survive is dependent on her ability to outwit her oppressor. There is also a bit of irony here as Gretel learned the art of trickery from the old woman herself, who tricked Hansel and Gretel into entering her house. It is this exact duplicity and cunning that Gretel uses to commit murder in order to save herself and her brother.

What are we to do with such a tale?

Many Christians wholesale reject these types of stories. They're full of duplicity, cunning, immorality even. "These tales are not a model for the Christian life," I've heard more than one person say.

But what many don't realize is we see these exact types of tales in Scripture.

There's a whole subset of stories within biblical narrative that would be considered tales of the folk, and in them tricksters abound. It's time we revisited these tales and take another look at what they're trying to tell us about our world today, the powerless among us, and what righteousness for them actually looks like.

Survival Tales

If I asked you to think of a trickster, who comes to mind? Perhaps Loki, Thor's brother, who constantly uses his silver tongue to grab power, or Maui, the demi-god from *Moana*? Modern folklorists have also heralded Lisbeth Salandar from *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* and Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* as modern-day female

tricksters, or trickstars, who transgress societal norms in different ways to outwit their oppressors. But what about tricksters in Scripture?

Think of Jacob, lying to his father to steal his brother's birthright, or Rahab, tricking Jericho's soldiers so they wouldn't find the Israelite spies. These sorts of stories in the Bible are what I would call tales of the folk. Now, granted, there is no category of folklore in the Bible as we understand the genre in modern times. But we do have the genre of biblical narrative, and tales of the folk fall under this.

Folklore at its basic definition are tales of the folks. They are stories that center the lives of the peasants, i.e., the powerless, their struggles and also their resilience. It's an oral tradition passed among workers in the fields and around fires in the evenings with clever ideas for how to survive, how to outwit the perpetrator or the oppressor, and come out alive at the end. These were never intended to be merely nursery tales for children. These stories have everything to do with starvation, hunger, murder, abuse, rape, stolen property, sexual predators, and more, and they were meant to be powerful tools for the powerless to wield in order to survive.

Much of Scripture was written by and for oppressed peoples, and folklore specifically are the stories and tales of how oppressed peoples can survive in sinful systems. Folklore is the site of resistance for marginalized people and communities, and this genre gives us examples and stirs our imagination for how we might live faithfully even when faced with broken systems and institutions. The protagonists are all underdogs, who learn to become tricksters in order to make their way in the world. For them, it was never about becoming wealthy and famous. It was simply about still being alive at the end of the tale.

Trickery is the Tool of the Powerless

But what exactly are tricksters and trickstars?

These figures, men or women, can rescue themselves through tricks, pursue what they need or desire through tricks, transform what they find unworkable or unworthy through tricks (Marilyn Jurich, *Sheherezade's Sisters* xvii). They have to use their wits, things like riddles and lies, to gain advantages in their communities - an unsettling situation because it repeatedly emphasizes deceit and duplicity

But what folklore in Scripture makes clear is that deceit is often the only strategy available to the powerless. At the same time, it also points to the nimble and creative

intelligence of the folk. The powerless are like sleuths, delving into the lives of others and unearthing their secrets.

The work of tricksters and trickstars are both subversive and transformative. Yes, oftentimes, they're just trying to find their next meal, but they're also learning their own way to construct their own identities, effect social change, and ultimately achieve spiritual satisfaction.

Example of Tamar in Genesis 38

[**Scripture Slide 1**] Interestingly, research has shown that it's easier to embrace the deeds of male tricksters over female trickstars. Female acts of deception and disruptive deeds usually fall short of the elaborated career of deceit that marks the lies of male cultural heroes (think Loki: most people think he's a likable character).

Female duplicity, on the other hand, is categorized as seductive, unfaithful, treacherous, and many Christians interpret Tamar in Genesis 38 in this light.

Here we read (v. 6-11): “Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the Lord’s sight; so the Lord put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, “Sleep with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to raise up offspring for your brother.” But Onan knew that the child would not be his; so whenever he slept with his brother’s wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from providing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord’s sight; so the Lord put him to death also. Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Live as a widow in your father’s household until my son Shelah grows up.” For he thought, “He may die too, just like his brothers.” So Tamar went to live in her father’s household. – Genesis 38:6-11

I want to walk through her story, highlight some of the key elements folklore in this passage and consider what application a tale like this has for us today:

1) Tales of the folk open with a problem and end with a solution: The problem in this story is that Tamar, like so many vulnerable women, suffers from the gender biased restrictions of social custom. And let me explain: this story demonstrates the levirate law, which stipulated that if a man died without leaving an heir, his brother was to take his widow as a wife. The first child born of that second union was considered the legal heir of the dead man. This practice ensured that the property of the deceased man would remain within the family or clan. It also ensured the widow a secure place within her deceased husband’s kinship structure.

However, in Genesis 38, Judah doesn't fulfill this law. Instead, he sends Tamar home and forgets all about her, rendering her virtually abandoned and helpless in society. This is a problem in a patriarchal society because Judah's actions leave a woman like Tamar legally defenseless. She literally can't 'take him to court' (or the ancient equivalent) because as a woman attached to no man, she had no personhood with regard to the laws. This is an issue of who the law privileges and who the law excludes - and we see similar kinds of problems today.

So, what does Tamar do in the face of this injustice? She decides to defy this confinement and achieve her rights. She takes matters into her own hands and changes the course of history. And it's her unorthodox method that centers this story as distinctly folklore. She transforms herself into a sexually transgressive trickster, tricks Judah into thinking she is a prostitute, and gets pregnant by him. She also makes sure to have proof that it was Judah that did this by keeping his seal, cord, and staff as promised payment. These actions secure a familial line for Tamar. In fact, it is because of this duplicity that she becomes part of Jesus' family tree!

2) Let's look at the patterns in this tale: What idea or topic is repeated in the narrative, e.g. a repeated design, color, word etc.? Here: it's a story about sex and progeny. Men refusing to sleep with Tamar and Tamar's trickery is enacted of the same kind: she dupes Judah into sleeping with him and the story ends with her giving birth to twins.

3) Study the language: It's not just what the powerless say, but also when they say it. Tamar, for example, speaks after she's taken action; after her trick is in motion. When Judah comes to her in verse 16 and treats her like a prostitute (which she cleverly planned), she replies to him: "And what will you give me to sleep with you?" Tamar's trick actually gives agency to her voice. Though Tamar begins as a victim, the arc of her story takes her to a position enabling her to speak for herself and to change her future.

The power dynamics are still there. Though Tamar is figuring out a way to survive, Judah is still in charge. This is still a patriarchal society. He still has the ability to ruin her. But he doesn't. The point, however, is Tamar, seeking her own salvation and protection. She volunteers to put herself in a vulnerable and dangerous situation. She chooses prostitution and sleeps with a man, which feels like the worst possible option. And she does so to face her monster head on, full knowing that things could go horribly wrong.

But after all of this, it is Judah himself who declares, “*She is more righteous than I...*” – *Genesis 38:26*. Incredibly, Tamar’s duplicity is praised as righteousness! Because her deception forces Judah to do the right thing. If she had not, the very line of the Messiah would be threatened. One of Tamar’s sons is in Jesus’ line, and this action gets her a place in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus! In other words, her efforts secure her a place in the family of Judah and in the line of God’s promise.

Trickery - and specifically sexual trickery - is Tamar’s only option, a tool that not only secures her physical and social security in her cultural location, but also promises spiritual satisfaction as well. Tamar embodies a biblical trickstar, a vulnerable and powerless woman with nothing but her wits to effect social and spiritual change and nobody condemns her for her actions.

Conclusion

So, what do Christians learn from tricksters (and trickstars) in the Bible? How do tales like Tamar and Judah force us to reconsider things like lying, sexual transgressions even, and duplicity?

It is quite possible that the moral of this tale is that the end justifies the means...as long as the end is a righteous end! There is nothing selfish in what Tamar is doing. As Dianne Bergant, the Old Testament scholar, explains:

*“Tamar is not a woman who tricks a man with sex in order to get what she wants; she is a woman who willingly places herself at risk in order to overcome whatever obstacles might prevent her from achieving her legitimate goal. This goal is not merely personal; she is not set on simply having a child of her own. She seeks to secure justice for her deceased husband and to ensure that his inheritance will be passed down to his descendants. She has gone to great lengths for the sake of justice” – Dianne Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning**

Tamar later delivers twins (v. 27), and her son, Perez, becomes an ancestor of David (Ruth 4:18-20), who is the ancestor of Jesus. Of all the ancestors who might have been memorialized in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus, Tamar is one of the few women included (Matt 1:3). This inclusion elevates her life and, undoubtedly, dignifies, dare I even say justify, her actions.

Think also of Rahab, who lies for the righteous cause of concealing the Israelites and we see God commend her, both in the book of Hebrews as well as through her inclusion in Jesus’ genealogy.

Speaking of lying: St. Augustine, the 5th century theologian, talks about degrees of sin. Lying, he says, is permitted in some instances if it results in good. For the powerless in the world, Scripture seems to empower them to trust God and use their wits. And, if this is true, then it is not our job to condemn them for the great lengths to which they must go to survive.

We have Tamars in our midst today. The poor, the vulnerable, men and women in dire situations. If you find yourself in a situation where your livelihood is in danger, look to the model of Tamar: when it comes to your personal well being and the well being of your family, trust God and use your wits. Matthew 10:16 says, “I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” Strategy, resistance, subversion: these are all tools that God provides to the destitute, so that they may live.

To be honest, though, I think many of us are the Judahs in this tale, the ones with power, and who fear being tricked. Isn’t that how we see homeless people? We don’t want to give them money for fear of them lying to us? We don’t trust people on the streets, those who are destitute, hungry, bankrupt, or “illegal” because they might “take advantage of us.” We need to hold up another person’s story as a mirror into your own life and ask ourselves: Are you a Judah in someone else’s life? This question is applicable for us on both an individual and systemic level. Part of our ability to be Judahs in the first place is born from broken systems and institutions, in which the law favors certain people over others, and in which our actions may, by default, disprivilege someone else. We are called to not simply not abuse someone, but to also actively work to deconstruct the systems in our society that permit such types of abuse to go unchecked in the first place. It’s a both/and.

Let us never forget that God humbles the rich and the powerful through people like Tamar. When we feel we have been tricked or taken advantage of or insulted in some way, maybe it’s time to listen up, see our own sin and confess it, and learn how to better care for the vulnerable in our midst. When you are on the cusp of losing power and status, do not lash out at the agents of change. Instead, we need to consider the callousness of our own hearts and how we can better love all of our neighbors and do what is right.

This is the powerful formative value that stories like Genesis 38 and other tales of the folk in Scripture offer us: they speak to both the oppressed and the oppressor; they empower and subvert; and they challenge us to reconsider what is normal and right. More than that, tales of the folk in Scripture offer us hope. Another way is possible.

Oppressors can undergo a change of heart. The marginalized can receive what is their rightful due. In a world that is terribly dark and unjust, these tales remind us to press on, to trust God and choose to survive.

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