



Tamar—Genesis 38

The story of Tamar reads more like a story out of a daytime TV soap opera than a biblical story from the lineage of Jesus. Yet, here we find Tamar listed among the ancestors of the Messiah in Matthew 1:3 “and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram.”

Following the sale of Joseph into slavery, Judah leaves his brothers and begins to establish his own family. His firstborn son (Er) is given Tamar to be his wife, but as Genesis 38:7 points out, Er “was wicked in the sight of the Lord” so “the Lord put him to death.” We are not told specifically in what way Er was wicked, but we know from the text that his wickedness was enough that God set out removing him from the genealogy of Jesus.

Per the Levirate marriage tradition, Tamar was to be given to Onan, Judah’s second son, but Onan wanted nothing to do with this as any child he would have with Tamar would be his brother’s instead of his own. Judah then sends Tamar home to her father to remain a widow in mourning until his younger son has grown up and can give her children. After a long time passes, Tamar no longer believes Judah will fulfill this promise, and with good reason. So Tamar presents herself as a prostitute in order to entrap Judah while he is traveling to shear his sheep. The trap works and Judah not only sleeps with Tamar but gives her twin sons.

When Judah learns that Tamar is pregnant, not knowing that she was the prostitute, he is enraged and seeks to have her killed for failing to respect the memory of Er. But Tamar had demanded Judah’s signet ring, cord, and staff as collateral for payment for her services, which Judah never returned to claim. So when confronted by Judah, Tamar produced these items, turning the confrontation back on him. Thus the line of Judah continues through Perez and on through until the birth of Jesus.

Thoughts for Reflection

Read Genesis 38. Consider each of the main characters in this chapter. What is driving their decision making, both good and bad?

What can we learn about God’s use of Tamar in bringing forth the Messiah and Matthew’s inclusion of her in his genealogy of Jesus?

6 And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. 7 But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death...

26 Then Judah identified them and said, “She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he did not know her again.

Genesis 38:6-7 & 26