

Tamar and Judah

Who has heard this story before? That will be one of my markers of success in finding obscure Bible stories. If everyone knows them, they're not as obscure as I thought.

This is an odd story that sort of interrupts the flow of the Joseph story. The author of my Genesis commentary, Walter Brueggemann, is a Bible interpretation giant. Even he called the story enigmatic and said it was hard to know what its value is for theological exploration. He nonetheless managed to write 4 ½ really good pages on it.

The value turns out to be in its vision of community and its upending of conventional morality.

The ancient Israelites practiced levirate marriage. In that system, if the husband of a woman dies before any sons are born, his brother is to take her in marriage. The sons that are born to that marriage would in essence be the sons of the deceased brother.

Judah is one of Jacob's 12 sons...Joseph's brother. Tamar was married to Judah's oldest son. When the first son died, the second son married Tamar. But instead of risking a pregnancy with her, according to the story he spilled his seed on the ground. Withdrawal as a birth control method isn't the most effective, but it worked for him. Then he died too.

Judah has one more son, Shelah. He's too young yet to marry, but Judah promises him to Tamar when he's old enough. She returns to her father's home for support until that day.

But Judah doesn't follow through...he's afraid his last son will die too.

Women in that time and place were very dependent on either a father, a husband, or a son for support. She would never inherit anything from her father – it didn't work that way. So when her father died, if she wasn't married, she'd have nothing. So she disguises herself as a prostitute and tricks Judah into having sex with her. She becomes pregnant. I mean, who said the Bible was boring, right?

So, what is the point of this story. Why is it even in the Bible?

Some people point right away to the genealogy of Jesus and the fact that Tamar and Judah are ancestors of Jesus. There's something to say about that and I'll get there in a minute.

But let's look at the story in its own right first.

The reader is invited first to be appalled at Tamar's action. Polite society is always drawn to condemning sexual sins – especially those of women. That's who the messengers to Judah

want to condemn. Your daughter in law has been out whoring and is pregnant! Judah is ready to stone her.

But then Tamar pulls a surprise – she has Judah’s staff, and his personal seal which he would have worn on a cord around his neck. Judah is the father. Suddenly, Judah gets it. He knows that he’s the one who has done the greater wrong.

Tamar had limited options. Her action is a demand for justice.

Judah realizes that he has denied her justice...he has put her in a potentially deadly position outside the community’s system for caring for widows. Care for the poor and for the widow and orphan were always a vital part of being God’s covenant people. It’s part of what was to make God’s beloved community a light to the nations.

The sin of leaving a vulnerable person without means of support turns out to be the primary sin here, not what Tamar did.

Tamar gave birth to twin sons, Perez and Zerah. We don’t know really what happened after that or if Tamar ever did marry. I don’t know how the relationship between Tamar and Judah would have been characterized, other than that he was the father of her sons. But it seems quite likely that she no longer had to worry about being taken care of after this.

So let’s move forward 1400 or so years. One of those twins born to Tamar, Perez, is an ancestor of Jesus. The entire genealogy is fascinating. Mostly only Jesus’ male ancestors are listed. But there are five female ancestors listed...Tamar is the first one . The others are Rahab who was a prostitute, Ruth who wasn’t even Hebrew, and although Bathsheba isn’t named, she’s listed as the wife of Uriah, reminding us of David’s crime. Then of course there’s Mary.

With the exception of Mary, these women wouldn’t have had to be named in the genealogy. As a patriarchal society the family’s lineage passed through the male ancestors. Yet here’s Tamar and her later sisters.

So what does it say to us that Tamar and the others are here in this list of ancestors?

All of their stories have at least a hint of scandal...and for some way more than a hint. I used to think the genealogy was written as it was primarily to show that God could take that scandalous past and transform it to good...that a scandalous past didn’t disqualify Tamar and the others from being ancestors of God’s Messiah. I still think that is one layer to the story. If you have something scandalous or shameful in your past and think God can’t possibly accept you, let alone use you for the work of the kingdom, remember Tamar and Judah.

The story says to us that no matter what your past has been, no matter what you might be ashamed of, you are still God's beloved. And God will still draw you into the beloved community and call you to the ongoing work of the kingdom of God.

But as I thought this time about Tamar's insistence on justice for herself, I see there is yet another layer.

Tamar is unwilling to accept the injustice perpetrated against her by her father-in-law. Judah's refusal to give his youngest son in marriage to Tamar not only went against the covenant he had with Tamar. It went against the covenant relationship with God...a covenant that prioritized care for the poor and the widow and the orphan as a key part of being God's people.

I think it's really cool that Tamar's story is lifted up as a part of Jesus' family history. If Jesus is the bearer and model of God's new creation, a new kind of community where justice for the poor and vulnerable is key, of course Tamar needs to be there.

And finally, there's a sort of cosmic layer to Jesus' genealogy. This list is sort of a stand in for all of human history...past, present, and future. Many of the characters listed were deeply flawed. Ruth represents a non-Jewish ethnic background. The women all represent the vulnerable and even outcast.

It all gets taken up in Jesus...all the history good and bad. All of humanity is taken up, crucified, and risen with Christ.

And by virtue of our union with Christ, we get taken up into that too...all of us, not just the shiny parts we want the world...and God...to see.

Today, we are baptizing Brinley Kate Taylor (at Bethlehem.) Today this will happen for her. In our baptisms, we are united with Christ.

Everything we ever have been or ever will be gets taken up in Christ. As we daily walk in our baptisms, the flaws, the shame, the pain...all of it gets taken up in Christ for our own healing and for the healing of the world.

Daily we, like Judah, are given opportunities to see the injustices that we perpetrate, and daily we are given new opportunities to set those right.

Daily, we like Tamar, are assured of our own dignity and worth, no matter what we have done or what's been done to us.

Daily, we are made new.