

Reflection Questions: Tamar

Tamar is the first women of the New Testament! Tamar's story is difficult for us because she posed as a prostitute and slept with her father-in-law, Judah. But, unexpectedly, none of this posed a difficulty for the Biblical writers. Tamar is known as the mother of a dynasty through her son Perez, in the book of Ruth (Ruth 4: 11-12). And both King David and his son Absalom name their baby daughters after their great-great-grandmother Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1; 14:27), also evidence that she was well-regarded. And, even though Tamar's story is treated later by other Jewish literature outside the Bible, these things are not what pose a difficulty for them either.

So, it is clear that we are running up some cultural disconnect when we deal with Tamar's story. And that might be the first thing to remember when we consider her story.

- 1) How did you initially respond to Tamar's story? What was your initial evaluation of her actions? Were you surprised to learn that in the Bible Tamar is viewed positively? Why or why not?
- 2) When you heard Tamar's story and learned some of the background information, did you feel any differently about Tamar's story? Did your evaluation change when you got more in-depth into the story?
- 3) Do you still have questions that you would like to ask Tamar? Is there things about the story that is still difficult to understand?

Tamar is considered to be the hero of this story. Bruce Waltke writes: "Tamar is a heroine in Israel because she risks her life for family fidelity. Judah is also being prepared for his own restoration." (*Genesis*, 513-514). Tamar's actions save Judah from his own destruction. As David Lamb writes: "After his encounter with Tamar the pious prostitute, Judah morphs from being a prostitute-frequenting, slave-trading brother into a self-sacrificing, volunteer-to-be-enslaved brother. Tamar's significance in the Biblical narrative cannot be overstated." (*Polygamists and Prostitutes*, 100). After the incident with Tamar, when we next see Judah, he is offering to take the place of his brother Benjamin in jail (Gen. 44:18-34). And it is through the line of one of the twins born to Tamar and Judah (not any of Judah's sons with his first wife) that the great king David comes. Jacob passes by Reuben, and even his favorite son Joseph, and instead bestows the promise of a royal dynasty on Judah (Gen. 49:10).

- 4) Do you see the heroic aspect of Tamar's story? In what way is she a hero?
- 5) Why do you think Tamar earned the honor of being the first woman named in the New Testament?

She is evaluated in her own story by Judah, one of the patriarchs of Israel, as “righteous” (Gen. 38:26).^{*} Righteousness is an important term in the Bible. Righteousness is an attribute of God (i.e. Psalm 145:17). Judah would not use this word carelessly; neither would the other Bible writers. And yet, this is what Judah says about Tamar when everything comes out about what has happened to her.

And this might be what Matthew was trying to get at when he included Tamar in his list of Jesus’ grandmothers. The story of Tamar shows us what it means to live righteously, and, contrary to what we might expect, Tamar is the example of the righteous one.

In the Bible, righteousness has been defined as “faithfulness to a relationship. The righteous person is loyal to the claims of all personal relationships.” (Lasor, et. al; *Old Testament Survey*, 49). Anne Clements says that the story of Tamar “in an unforgettable way, defines righteousness in the context of relationships. To be righteous is to behave in a way that is appropriate to others, to fulfill the requirements and obligations of a particular relationship.” (*Mothers on the Margin?* Loc. 1562).

Seen in this light, Tamar’s story reflects fits well with Joseph, betrothed to Mary the mother of Jesus. We read in Matt. 1:19: “Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” For Joseph, being righteous (or faithful to the law) “is defined in terms of his relationship to Mary and his concern for her. As one obedient to the commands of the law Joseph decided to sidestep the letter of the law in order not to humiliate Mary.” (Clements, Loc. 1599-1600).

- 6) In what way are Tamar’s actions a demonstration of righteousness? Does this change the way that you saw the word righteousness? What might righteousness look like in your life?
- 7) Is there anything from Tamar’s story that you would identify with? Is there anything that you learn from Tamar that you can apply to your life?

Putting it together

The individual stories in the Bible were not like the uniform beads on a string, but instead each was unique and different. Choose one bead out of the assortment that to you represents Tamar’s story. Why did you choose the bead you did? What about it represents Tamar’s story to you?

^{*}Bruce Waltke writes in his commentary on Gen 38:26: “**She is more righteous than I.** This is better translated, “She is righteous, not I” (Waltke, *Genesis*, 513).