

# Matthew 1

**1** An account of the genealogy<sup>[a]</sup> of Jesus the Messiah,<sup>[b]</sup> the son of David, the son of Abraham.

<sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, <sup>3</sup>and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar,

## Genesis 38:13-26

<sup>13</sup>When Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep," <sup>14</sup>she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. <sup>15</sup>When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. <sup>16</sup>He went over to her at the roadside, and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, "What will you give me, that you may come in to me?" <sup>17</sup>He answered, "I will send you a kid from the flock." And she said, "Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it." <sup>18</sup>He said, "What pledge shall I give you?" She replied, "Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand." So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. <sup>19</sup>Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

<sup>20</sup>When Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite, to recover the pledge from the woman, he could not find her. <sup>21</sup>He asked the townspeople, "Where is the temple prostitute who was at Enaim by the wayside?" But they said, "No prostitute has been here." <sup>22</sup>So he returned to Judah, and said, "I have not found her; moreover the townspeople said, 'No prostitute has been here.'" <sup>23</sup>Judah replied, "Let her keep the things as her own, otherwise we will be laughed at; you see, I sent this kid, and you could not find her."

<sup>24</sup>About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." <sup>25</sup>As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "It was the owner of these

who made me pregnant." And she said, "Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." <sup>26</sup>Then Judah acknowledged them and said, "She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not lie with her again.

## The Rape of Dinah

**34** Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region. <sup>2</sup>When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. <sup>3</sup>And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her. <sup>4</sup>So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this girl to be my wife."

<sup>5</sup>Now Jacob heard that Shechem<sup>[a]</sup> had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. <sup>6</sup>And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him, <sup>7</sup>just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.

<sup>8</sup>But Hamor spoke with them, saying, "The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. <sup>9</sup>Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. <sup>10</sup>You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it." <sup>11</sup>Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, "Let me find favor with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. <sup>12</sup>Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife."

<sup>13</sup>The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. <sup>14</sup>They said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. <sup>15</sup>Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised. <sup>16</sup>Then we

will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live among you and become one people. <sup>17</sup>But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone.”

<sup>18</sup>Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem. <sup>19</sup>And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob’s daughter. Now he was the most honored of all his family. <sup>20</sup>So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, <sup>21</sup>“These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage, and let us give them our daughters. <sup>22</sup>Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. <sup>23</sup>Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will live among us.” <sup>24</sup>And all who went out of the city gate heeded Hamor and his son Shechem; and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city.

## Dinah’s Brothers Avenge Their Sister

<sup>25</sup>On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. <sup>26</sup>They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem’s house, and went away. <sup>27</sup>And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. <sup>28</sup>They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. <sup>29</sup>All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey. <sup>30</sup>Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.” <sup>31</sup>But they said, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?”

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**Dinah and Tamar – scripture readings**

**Matriarchs, Handmaids, and the Forgotten Feminine**

**Kerra Becker English**

In college, I had an old curmudgeonly religious studies professor that didn't appreciate having women in his class all that much. His name was Manfred O. Meitzen, and the rumor was that the O stood for "O my God" it's Meitzen. Even with all the warnings, I ended up taking several of his classes, and his first day lecture was almost always the same, so I remember bits and parts of it. Every course, no matter the title or topic, would begin with him talking about the pendulum swing of religion. His theory was that religion, and culture as well, would swing back and forth from movements toward greater freedom and openness and then reactions against those freedoms that would call us back toward more restrictive and sometimes even repressive structures. Being the solid Lutheran that he was, his way of looking at the world was that there would always be time periods of rigidity, reformation, and counter-reformation in religion.

As much as I hate to admit it. He made a good point. Religion has been the source of great pushes for freedom, freedom from slavery – both during the Exodus and the American abolition movement, freedom from ostentatiousness – as the Protestants broke off from the excesses of the Roman church, and freedom from oppression – as liberation movements of a variety of sorts sought the right for marginalized people to be treated equally as human beings. And yet, religion has also been the motivation behind terribly oppressive forces – advocating for slavery as divinely instituted, accruing wealth and power rather than caring about the poor, and establishing hierarchies that set one group of people as better than the rest. Meitzen's

metaphorical pendulum teaches us that religion is not an easy beast to understand. It is full of far more ambiguity than those of us who consider ourselves practitioners of it would care to admit. You can easily, and I mean easily build an argument taking the long view of religion in either direction. Does it help us or hurt us? Does it free us or oppress us? Is it the supreme goal of humanity or the opiate of the masses? Even when it's at its best, religion will be forever tainted with the sins of its violent and repressive past. And even when it's at its worst, religion will continue to draw some closer to God and into a deeper more heartfelt compassion toward humanity.

The silver-lining in this, perhaps, is that you get to decide. You get to determine, in some ways, how you will read the texts of your faith, and more importantly perhaps how you will choose to live them out. The texts we are reading today about these ancestral women in the book of Genesis raise monumental questions without providing any easy answers, and absolutely nothing from this week's readings could easily fit on a motivational poster, and none of it should be taught in a children's Sunday School lesson. This is the hard work, the deep wrestling with unfamiliar narratives, that makes the endeavor to learn about scripture either fascinating or not worth all the trouble.

Alan M. Dershowitz, author of "The Genesis of Justice" likes doing this work, so he puts it this way. He says: *Therein lies both the glory and the danger of morally ambiguous biblical narrative. Because of its open-textured quality, it endures from generation to generation, taking on new meaning as historical experiences change, and inviting continuing reassessment of its implications. By the same token, because it is subject to multiple – often conflicting – interpretations, the biblical narrative can be cited by the devil, or at least his human counterparts, to justify the most evil of deeds.* (Dershowitz, p. 163)

So here we are. I've introduced you to the morally ambiguous, rather adult themed stories of Tamar and Dinah – two of our biblical predecessors, one of whom is even included in Matthew's extensive genealogy leading up to Jesus. Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and entices her father-in-law to impregnate her and finally bless her with progeny in the Abrahamic line. And Dinah, the only daughter of Jacob mentioned in the list of his offspring will be raped by Prince Shechem, son of Hamor, and due to the offense against, not Dinah, but their father, his sons will avenge this action by killing all the men then plundering Hamor's entire Kingdom. Discerning any moral guidance or freedom narratives from these stories leaves much to be desired. How do we incorporate these stories into our religious framework? How do we read these women? Of all the things that happened to all the people throughout history, why do these texts appear in our sacred cannon? And where exactly is God for Tamar, for Dinah, or for that matter for the wives, and handmaids, and other unnamed but certainly present women in this "nothing-held-back"ancestry.

Reading back into these texts, it's hard to extricate them from the hardened gender roles we associate with more fundamentalist or what is often called the more "literal" readings of scripture. The men come across as holding all familial power and possessions, including ownership of their women. And the women seem to only be discussed in the context of their procreative abilities or sexuality. The men coerce with anger and violence, the women get their way because they have the generative power to produce an heir. Telling stories like these in the sacred text, for some, means that it gives permission from heaven for us to follow suit. See, they say, how God has always justified men who seek violent revenge. See, women who are most interested in their role as wives and mothers, choosing life at great cost, are the ones to be admired.

But that's just one way to come at these readings, and when they are read this way, some of the implications come out sideways – particularly in the narrative about Dinah – or rather about what happened TO Dinah. It's rather sad, but telling, that our understanding and interpretation of what to do in the case of rape has not changed all that much. The argument Dershowitz makes in his book about justice, is that these early stories are told to get us thinking about human justice. How do we understand right and wrong? How do we react when things do take a turn for the worse? The biblical language here does not shy away from saying that Prince Shechem raped Dinah. There is also some language about how much he loved her and how he was willing to pay to keep her, but it's rather clear that the feeling wasn't mutual. And so the speculation begins – even with the biblical story. Was it a cover up for a love affair that wasn't permitted? Was it an excuse to go after and plunder Hamor's Kingdom? Why is it rape when it's the patriarch's daughter, but not when the patriarch takes his wife's handmaid? And - What does Dinah get to say about this? Not much – because her father and brothers do all the talking and acting for her. The idea that the offense was against Jacob and his tribe – for ruining the marriageability of his daughter – rather than against Dinah herself is troubling. For all our human advances, it's still the case that victims of rape are often silenced in all the talk about trying to justify what the rapist did or how it affects all these other people. And it's also still the case that the revenge idea is still with us. One man rapes; all men in the Kingdom are considered guilty. This is a prevalent justice issue – still. And how we as people of faith address both the victims and perpetrators of rape has a lot to do with our pendulum position. Does religion help us or hurt us here? There's no clear cut response – or when the Bible's most clear cut response is to pay for the damages done and marry the victim – we get a little nauseated. Dershowitz is quick to point

out that as late as 1992, an Ohio court cited a 1707 case describing adultery as the “highest invasion of a husband’s property.” (p. 158)

So how do we begin to tell Dinah’s story – when we know so little about how she felt, about how she reacted, or what she wanted to come of it? We do that in part by listening to her side of the story through victims today. We allow her experience to be a cautionary tale for how a man of great power and means might be so inclined to take a woman forcibly and feel justified in doing so. We empower Dinah to give voice to her own story. We also listen to the extreme revenge side of the story as a reason to pause in our accusation of ALL in the process. Not all men are violent. Not all men are rapists.

There is freedom to be found in this story of oppression. Sometimes it’s hard to look for that. Tamar’s story is similar. I often wonder if those who claim to want a “biblical understanding of marriage” have any idea what they are asking for. This story is the case in point. The practice was that Tamar’s husband had died – therefore it was his brother’s duty to have sex with her to produce heirs for his brother. Two brothers failed at this expectation. Judah promised his next son in line to perform this function when he got old enough. So when that obviously wasn’t going to happen, Tamar took matters into her own power, and conceived twins with her father-in-law. Again, anyone who would take this biblical story, not only as literally true, but as a model of relationship would be completely thought of as bonkers today. We have long since abandoned these practices. But what can be affirmed in this story is a drive for life, and what also gets confirmed in this story through Matthew’s gospel is that Jesus himself has a rather strange genealogy. One might think it better to hide the skeletons in the closet, but Matthew puts them out there for all the world to see.

Tamar's presence in that ancestry.com report is remarkable. Matthew includes women who broke the rules in the ancestry of the Son of God. That in and of itself tells us that freedom is possible.

Who is the God of Dinah and Tamar? Well, if we believe that scripture is divinely inspired, maybe it means that God gives voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. Of these matriarchs and handmaids – we get a sense for their rough relationships and desires to raise children, but also be known for more than just raising children. The feminine in scripture may be a bit harder to uncover, but the feminine is not forgotten. As the religious pendulum swings back and forth, the old stories get uncovered, but we need to remember that when the tale has a great deal of ambiguity, most likely it will be told from the perspective of the teller. Rather than taking it literally – which is actually hard to do – listen to the characters. How have they been wounded? And how is God healing them? That's where I think we find Jesus. That's where we find the Spirit at work. Because I am one who believes in the best religion has to offer – even though I know how it can be the worst. Amen.