TAMAR'S ANCESTRY AND RAHAB'S MARRIAGE: TWO PROBLEMS IN THE MATTHEAN GENEALOGY

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The appearance of four Old Testament women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah) in the Matthean genealogy has occasioned much discussion.¹ Not only must the inclusion of any women in the genealogy be explained, since Jewish genealogies of this kind (tracing someone’s descent through the male line) included women, as wives and mothers, only for definite reasons, but also the inclusion of specifically these four women (and not, for example, the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah and Leah) must be explained. One explanation, which the present writer favours, is that the four women were understood to be Gentiles, and were included in order to show that the Messiah, whose male ancestors in his direct descent from Abraham could not, by definition, be Gentiles, nevertheless had Gentile ancestors, thereby suggesting his suitability to be the Messiah for Gentiles as well as for Jews.² However, one question which supporters of this explanation must answer is whether, in Jewish tradition in the time of Matthew, Tamar was considered a Gentile. A second question which not only this, but any explanation of the inclusion of the four women must answer, is why Rahab is considered the wife of Salma and mother of Boaz, when neither the Old Testament nor any extant Jewish tradition casts her in this role. These two specific problems require a more careful examination of relevant Jewish genealogical speculation then has been undertaken up till now.

I. The Ancestry of Tamar

Genesis 38 says nothing about Tamar’s race or ancestry. A natural assumption would be that she belonged to one of the indigenous peoples of Canaan, like Judah’s first wife (Gen. 38:2). On the other hand, one might infer that, since Tamar is not said to be of Canaanite origin, she was not. As we shall see, both inferences were drawn by Jewish exegetes.

The earliest known Jewish tradition about Tamar’s ancestry occurs in Jubilees 41:1 and in Testament of Judah 10:1, which here, as frequently in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, embodies the same tradition about the patriarchs as the book of Jubilees. (The debated issue of the provenance and date of the Testament of Judah need not concern us here, since in this instance the correspondence with Jubilees guarantees that we are dealing with an old tradition, whenever it was incorporated in the Testament.) In both texts Tamar, who was not a Canaanite, is in this respect strongly contrasted with Judah’s Canaanite wife (Jub. 41:1-2; T. Jud. 10:1-2, 6). According to Jubilees 41:1, ‘Judah took a wife for Er, his firstborn, from the daughters of Aram, and her name was Tamar,’ while Testament of Judah 10:1 says that ‘Er brought from Mesopotamia Tamar, daughter of Aram.’ In the literature about the Matthean genealogy, these statements seem to have been universally understood, without any discussion, to mean that Tamar was an ‘Aramean.’ This is one of those assertions which pass from scholar to scholar without further investigation. But a little study of the context of this tradition in Jubilees easily shows that the meaning of Jubilees 41:1 is not that Tamar was an Aramean.

Two persons called Aram (ארם) were among the descendants of Shem, according to both Genesis and Jubilees (see Table 1). The first, a son of Shem (Gen. 10:22; Jub. 7:18; 9:5), was the eponymous progenitor of the Arameans, just as his brothers Elam, Asshur, Arpachshad and Lud were of the Elamites, Assyrians,

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