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Sinful or Sacred?

Women in the Genealogy of the Gospel According to Matthew

Genealogies typical for the literature of Biblical times can be found in diverse passages throughout the Old and New Testaments. The purpose of conserving these documents could be that the writer of the Biblical books is intending to be “historical”—in other words, to write a document which presents what has really happened in history.

GENEALOGY OF THE MESSIAH

Conserving the records of various families to prove a relationship also can be seen as an attempt to be historical. One of the most famous of these is at the beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew, which contains a genealogy from Abraham to Jesus. Most probably the eventual plan of the writer, ‘Matthew’, was to prove Jesus to be the descendant of David, which would make him qualified to be the Messiah.

According to Jewish tradition the saviour, the Messiah, would be a descendant of the royal family. For ‘Matthew’ it seems to be important to prove Jesus’ family relation both to David and also to Abraham. These links verify that Jesus belongs to Israel and justify his remarkable role in the country’s history.

Generally the genealogies in the Bible trace the lineage via male line by mentioning only the men’s names. The man was considered to be the head of the family and he ‘gave’ the name for the whole family. People actually could be called by the name of a male member of their family (e.g. Jacob and John, sons of Sebedeus, Matthew 4,21; Mary, mother of Jacob, Mark 16,1).

Hence the genealogy in the beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew is unusual, as it clearly names four women who belong to Joseph’s family tree. No other biblical genealogy uses the same practice. The women mentioned are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba.

At first glance these women seem quite unlikely representatives for the family. Why are women with a bit of scandalous reputation mentioned? What is their purpose in this context? What can they tell us?

TAMAR: SWEET REVENGE

Tamar is a daughter-in-law of Judah who appears in the book of Genesis, chapter 38. After her husband dies she becomes the wife of the husband’s brother, according to the laws of that time. Then her second husband dies too. Now Judah should make her marry a third son. But he refuses to do so, forcing Tamar to live in her father’s house as a widow instead of being a member of his family.

One day Tamar dresses up like a prostitute and, hiding her real identity from her father-in-law, she sleeps with him and gets pregnant. When the community finds out about her pregnancy, not knowing who the father of the unborn child is, they want to kill her as punishment for her adultery. Only in the last moment before she is to be burned does Judah hear that the child she carries is his own.

Genesis 38 gives us important information on the status of women in ancient Israel. Once a woman got married, she had to stay with the husband’s family. It was the responsibility of the family to make her marry another member in the instance of the death of her first husband. If this was not possible, she could return to her own house, but this would

mean living as a widow in exile from the husband’s family.

Women who had no male relatives had few possibilities to maintain themselves economically, and various studies of ancient prostitution show that widows were the women who were in the greatest danger to become ‘public women,’ unless they were wealthy. For example, the women who belonged to the group of Jesus’ disciples were most likely widows with good economic status. Luke states that these women supported the disciples with their own money (Luke 8:3).

Tamar isn’t a rich woman, though. What is notable here, in my opinion, is the independence and determination she demonstrates. While women appear to play the role of the audience many times in Bible stories, Tamar takes an active role in changing her own future, even at the risk of being killed. She shows real self-determination by deciding to make her father-in-law bear his duties.

The Bible doesn’t moralize Tamar’s behavior; nor does it consider sleeping with one’s father-in-law incest. Sexual relations with members of the same family appear also in other Bible stories, and in Tamar’s case the incest is an intelligent tool to prove that Judah has not treated her in an appropriate or just way. She makes him nearly ridiculous when he understands that he made her pregnant and then gave the community permission to burn her for committing adultery.

RAHAB: PROSTITUTE HEROINE

The story of Rahab the prostitute appears in Joshua 2. From today’s perspective the story raises many questions related to the institution of prostitution and what kind of position prostitutes had in society. The reader is not told why this woman is prostitute—is she a widow? Anyway, her ‘profession’ is clearly underlined.

It seems that prostitutes in Old Testament literature have a special function. They are women who are very shameful in society, but at the same time they have qualities that can be considered admirable. They can be described as ‘brave,’ ‘faithful,’ and ‘loving.’ These qualities are even more evident since, because of their position, the reader doesn’t have high expectations of their actions.

Rahab is a good example of this kind of prostitute. She could be considered a prototype for the image of heroine whore, later widely quoted in art—especially in cinema and in theater. This is the prostitute who is always very smart and good-hearted and who makes selling sex look acceptable and nearly appealing.

In art these ‘pretty women’ are never under the domination of anyone else, but they have rather ‘chosen’ the lifestyle on their own. Also in this context Rahab the prostitute is clever. She recognizes the Israelite men and declares them to be God’s chosen people.

In the context of Joshua and the famous battle of Jericho, Rahab’s presence has a special purpose. The spying men, planning the conquest, stay at her place. The Biblical passage doesn’t report that sex takes place in her dwellings, but that the men sleep on the roof of the house. The purpose of Rahab here is to underline the cleverness of the hiding men. Who could expect the soldiers to stay overnight in a whore’s house?



Even if the women were expected to hold high moral standards, prostitution itself doesn't cause a moral dilemma in the Biblical context. Prostitution seems to exist as part of the culture and probably most men visited prostitutes. The practice was not considered particularly harmful if it didn't harm individual men's rights. Therefore young men are warned in different books to not to touch other men's wives. "Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her" (Leviticus 18:20).

An interesting remark related to this talk about prostitution is that the Hebrew word, which is used for 'whores', is in other passages used to describe religious adultery—e.g. Israel or Judah worshiping other gods than Yahweh. This is typical especially in prophetic books such as Ezekiel and Isaiah. And in that context, prostitution is obviously considered as something quite negative.

RUTH: FAITHFUL DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

The book of Ruth is one of the few books in the Bible titled after a woman. In the centre of the story aren't the patriarchs or the prophets, but a simple foreign female and her personal struggle. This book has something in common with the genealogy, which is the motivation of the writer.

It seems clear that one reason why this book finds itself in the Biblical canon is the genealogy at the end, which proves Ruth to be the grandmother of King David. However, Ruth has a more significant task than being just the birth-giver. After Ruth gives birth, local women approach her mother-in-law, Naomi, saying: "...because he is born from your daughter-in-law Ruth who loves you and is worth more than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15).

If this is considered more than just an exaggeration of the extremely good relations that the two women had, it is a strong statement. The son, as a future head of the family, was considered to be a security for the future of his mother. Could a foreign woman be more worth than economic safety? Could she be considered one of the natives?

This would be very unusual as, despite all the respect towards other peoples, Israelites were commanded to marry amongst themselves and not to mix with others. In Deuteronomy it is written that no Ammonite or Moabite could enter the Assembly of God, or their offspring down to tenth generation (Deut. 23:4).

Another perspective on the book of Ruth is one that liberation theology offers. The genealogy written at the end of the story opens an extraordinary view on how an individual can have a purpose in God's universal plan. Ruth, an unknown poor woman with a pagan background, is to be the grandmother of King David.

Power can be hidden in the weakest creature, and no one can be judged by her or his cover. The book of Ruth also focuses more on the individual than on the future of the nation. God isn't just the God of peoples, war and peace, but also the Creator of the individual who has a place in front of God.

BATHSHEBA: FORBIDDEN FRUIT

"Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her." The practice for the Israelites by 500 B.C. was monogamy. Marriage was a contract between only one man and one woman; as mentioned before, prostitution was something external to that.

But the story of Bathsheba is a story of adultery. It is lust that makes the highly lauded king David act like a coward. With a passion he wants to sleep with Uriah's wife and, after hearing she is pregnant, he wants to get rid of her husband to marry her and to live like a family.

This happens, but unlike the other stories, here the Bible doesn't stay neutral. As stated before, adultery is a sin and David's act is wrong in front of God. The prophet Nathan comes to visit the king and tells him the following story:

The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him" (2 Samuel 12:1-4).

Despite David's position as chosen king, God doesn't approve of his behavior. The law against breaking or interfering in other people's marriages is repeated here, and it includes the king himself. Only after David truly regrets his actions he can be forgiven.

Nevertheless the son, who is the unfortunate fruit of the forbidden relationship, had to die anyway. The punishment was severe, but it could have been even heavier if the person breaking the marriage had been someone else. Men were largely free to have sexual relations, whereas for women something similar could never happen.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The Bible reader is often challenged by the fact that the holy book is a book written by men and that therefore it conserves, most usually, the history of men. It can seem quite a task to look behind the façade of the texts, to find the historical women. What kind of people were they? What was their role in salvation history? Do women have any role at all? And finally a female reader can ask herself: Who are *my* Biblical role models?

After studying these passages, one can certainly admit that yes, women do have a role. They don't, however, give a very simple answer for the question of *what* the purpose of these specific women is in this context. According to some conservative voices, these were all sinful women, all women who committed adultery. I would like to explore some other suggestions.

Some interpretations claim that an outstanding fact is that all these women were foreign, but yet they had a purpose in God's plan. The Old Testament suggests in several passages that God is the God of Israel and foreigners are excluded from salvation.

Both stories, the one of Ruth and the one of David and Bathsheba, tend to suggest that actually this rule isn't totally exclusive, or as strict as it is earlier claimed, but that individual foreigners could actually have a place in God's universal plan. Rahab was also most probably a foreigner since Jericho was a state of its own by that time and the Israelites aimed to conquer the land.

I think one reason why these specific women are underlined in the genealogy is that they were not originally the wives of the Israelite men, for whom they bore descendants. Actually all of them belonged to someone else—'belong', because that really was the idea of 'owning' a wife, quite different from our modern ideas of an equal partnership. The wife was the property of her husband or another male family member. Their stories therefore aren't very typical ones, but they interfered in the family tree through some strange and maybe unexpected turn in people's lives.





Reading the Bible and studying different passages can be eye-opening. Our idea and impression of the book is, I dare say, more conservative than what the book itself is. To bring the most extreme examples of the family into the genealogy, even if they are women, and even if they were wives of other

men, shows surprising tolerance and includes everyone.

Some scholars also suggest that this is the way Matthew shows how people marginalized because of their gender, reputation or race, are included in the Gospel. In fact they not only appear in the genealogy, but they are part of the divine plan aimed at salvation. Therefore Matthew's

gospel seems also to have other tendencies, further than trying to conserve the 'history.' It really involves all people, despite their race, gender or status, in Jesus' family. What can we, today's followers of the Christ, learn from this?

Suggested Reading

DE BEAUVOIR Simone, *The Second Sex*. London, 1972.

The Gospel according to Matthew.

FOUCAULT Michel, *The History of Sexuality I-III*. New York, 1986.

BIRD Phyllis, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities. Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*. Minneapolis, 1997.

ARCHER Léonie, *Her Price Is Beyond Rubies. Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*. Sheffield, 1990.

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Facing God – Facing One Another

This liturgy is adapted from the closing worship of the WSCF conference in Vilnius in April 2005. The theme of the conference was Respecting Human Dignity and Integrity - Theological and Gender Perspectives on Human Rights, with a focus on trafficking. This theme is reflected in the liturgy, recognising each other as dignified beings created in God's image and reflecting on the suffering of Trafficked women and children and praying for them.

LEADER 1 We gather in the name of God, the Creator, the Liberator and the Sustainer.

ALL Amen.

LEADER 2 As we come before God in worship we bring all that we are and all the concerns of our hearts. In this time we come before our loving God with the victims of trafficking on our minds, realising that their mistreatment is a violation of God's image. Remembering that all women and men are created equally in the image of God, let us affirm the image of God in each other.

CHANT *Veni Creator Spiritus*

(Sung 3 times through; then hummed as each person in turn repeats the following, addressing it to the assembled group)

ALL God created humankind. They were created, male and female, in the image of God

LEADER 1

Creator God, you created us in your image
Created us equal, dignified beings
You weep at your people in pain
And despair at the violation of your people

1st READING 2 Samuel 15:1-20

LEADER 1

Creator God, you created us in your image
Created us equal, dignified beings
Created us as your representatives
Created us with responsibilities

2nd READING Matthew 25: 41-45

SONG Suggestion: "Enemy of Apathy"

LEADER 2 Let us pray:

As they face this day, O God,
Find those who are lost, separated from those they love, crossing unknown borders, a long way from

home, not knowing where to turn.

ALL Find them, God who always seeks for the lost, and cover them safely as a hen covers her chickens.

LEADER 1 As they face this day, O God, Be with the victims of trafficking, in the hunger and the despair, in the crowds and in the emptiness, in the violence and the rape.

ALL Be their hope and their strength in crying out and breaking free and open the ears of the world to hear their cries.

LEADER 2 As they face this day, O God, Give them hope of a future, where they are respected, where their gifts and graces are celebrated and where they have no need to live in fear.

ALL Give us the courage to speak out for the victims of trafficking, to use our gifts and graces to bring an end to their oppression.

LEADER 1 As we face this day, O God, Help us to see all your people as being in your image and as our sisters and brothers and let us then cry out with Dinah's brothers: "Why should our sister be treated like a prostitute?"

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ who counted victims of prostitution among his friends and respected them.(1)

ALL Amen

SONG Suggestion: "Here I Am" (I the Lord of Sea and Sky)

LEADER 2 All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

LEADER 1 Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honour everyone and love and serve the Lord. (2)

(1) Adapted from Share Together by Christian Conference Asia, Hong Kong, Uniting Church in Australia, in DUNCAN Geoffrey (ed.), *Wisdom is Calling*. Norwich, 1999, pp. 219-220.

(2) From *Common Worship Further Blessings*, number 15.

<http://cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/texts/hc/presed/furtherblessings.html>

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