

WOMEN IN THE MATTHEAN GENEALOGY (cf. 1:1-17): WHY THEIR INCLUSION?

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Abstract

In the ancient world, genealogies served as a vital function, confirming the legal status of important persons. As such, the genealogy of Jesus forms an integral part of his birth narrative. It establishes his credentials as the heir of David and thus as the true King of Israel and the awaited Messiah. Genealogies in the Bible were completely male dominated but ironically, five women are included in the Matthean genealogy of Jesus and most of them were not even Jewish at all. Their presence in Jesus' lineage speaks of other things as well, for they are mostly poor, mostly misfits, widows, unimportant, unknown, and sinful women. They are real women with complex and sometimes messy lives that cannot be reduced to stereotypes and yet who changed the course of salvation history by their simple, obedient lives. In a culture that traced lineage almost exclusively through men, these women would have stood out like beacons in a stream of male names- and they still do. Their presence fairly shouts the questions: who were these women? Why were they single out as ancestors of the Messiah? What is their significance? Or rather, what does their presence imply?

Keywords: Women, Matthean, Genealogy, Inclusion

Introduction

It is very easy to bypass the list of names at the opening of Matthew's gospel, skipping straight to the birth narrative. However, there is more than meets the eye in the list of Jesus' ancestors that opens the gospel account. The Gospel began simply with the words "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham" (1:1), indicating an emphasis on two important characters central to the Old Testament tradition. However, from the statement in the ancient Greek text, it is difficult to tell what the book of the genealogy refers to.

It has been observed by Adamczewski (2017) and rightly so that the allusion to the “Son of David”, signals the royal dimension of Jesus’ ancestry and associates him with the legitimate rulers over Israel. “Son of Abraham”, on the other hand, invokes the founding of the Israelite people in the calling of Abraham and the promises made to him (Gen. 12; 15; 17). As well as honoring Jesus by placing him in a cultural and familial home, the genealogy’s three-part structure – culminating in David, the exile, and Jesus – creates expectations that in Jesus we find a Messiah figure or an agent of liberation.

This write up is geared at a threefold journey. Namely: to look at the implicit intent of the genealogy as is ascribed to the Gospel of Matthew, effort will be made in a lively discussion on the presence of women in the genealogy. This is done in an attempt to understand their inclusion in a time when genealogies did not normally contain even a single female name and from whence a conclusion made. However, it is worth stating in the words of Botha (2003) that the interest of this article is not an explicit liberation hermeneutics-which, it must be emphasized must be practiced not only because it is important, valid and relevant, but because it is right and the researcher is not seeking libratory motifs at all costs in the genealogy narrative but to give it an interpretation. Furthermore, this paper, through the employment of the historical critical interpretations of the New Testament and theological analysis methodology, shall be looking at these women listed in the genealogy of Jesus as narrated in Matthew to demonstrate that his genealogy is not just a list of names, but is the gospel message of redemption, love and acceptance by God for all people throughout history.

Probable Intent of the Matthean Genealogy

In the briefest outline, we have in the genealogy a history of origins that traces the line of God’s promise first through the founding of Israel, then in the emergence of the royal line, and finally in the hopes carried beyond the collapse of the Babylonian exile. This show that genealogies are functional and why Matthew has to begin his gospel with one. On the rhetorical function of genealogies, Nolland (2005), has this to say: “Genealogies established individual’s identity; reflected, established, or legitimated social structures, status and entitlements to office; functioned as modes of praise or delineations of character or even as basis of exhortation.” On a discursive level, the intent of the genealogy is to link Jesus to a wider context and larger narrative. The “book of origin” holds many puzzles as asserted by R.T. France (2007), “both as to its

intended scope and as to how Matthew has arrived at his list of names and its pattern. But its main aim is clear enough: to locate Jesus within the story of God's people, as its intended climax, and to do it with a special focus on the Davidic monarchy as the proper context for a theological understanding of the role of the person to whom Matthew, more than the other gospel writers, will delight to refer not only as 'Messiah' but also more specifically as 'Son of David'. A cursory reading of the genealogy for M. Eloff (2008) shows that Matthew is interested in connecting salvation with history, for the one born as a son of Abraham and son of David at a critical moment in the history of Israel. He went on to claim that the summary statement in 1:17 functions as a vital clue to Matthew's theological intention.

The rich intertexture within the genealogy provides a plethora of interpretive data and possibility. W. Carter (2006), for instance believes that the opening verses of Matthew in the context of Roman imperial theology points to the basic issue of sovereignty; the text asserts that God's purposes and not Rome's, are being worked out in human history. He writes: "The genealogy demonstrates, among other things, that God supervises human history, that God's purposes especially run through Israel (not Rome)... By this he means that the genealogy serves as a prove of God's control of human history. The phrase "deportation to Babylon" is repeated four times in 1:1:17 and is used to divide between two of the three groups of generations; fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile, and fourteen generations from the exile to the Christ.

Women of the Genealogy

A pregnant question to ask here is: What prompted Matthew to include a woman who pretended to be a prostitute, a prostitute, a sexually forward widow, and a woman taken in adultery in his "account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, and the son of Abraham"? The inclusion is in the perspective of this researcher catchy and the question is pertinent because women were rarely mentioned in ancient genealogies and the genealogy under discussion is noted for the unusual presence of four women (with somewhat spotty reputations), with Mary the mother of Jesus as the fifth. In recent decades, the reference to these female figures interwoven into the mostly patriarchal genealogy has commanded the attention of several Scripture scholars. These four women are said to share (with Mary) a certain irregularity with respect to their social roles. Their inclusion ruptures the tradition of only citing male forebears (cf. Gen 5;

11:10-32), and so offers a reading site of resistance against dominant male ideology. Be that as it may, this researcher wants to state here that Matthew does not have the monopoly of adding women in Biblical genealogies. This is because, to mention a mother in the course of a Biblical genealogy is not unprecedented. A case in point is that 14 mothers are mentioned in I Chronicles 2 alone. More so, in that era, some Jewish men prayed every morning thanking God that they were not Gentiles, slaves or women. Despite that, women were regarded more highly among the Jews than they were among the pagans and Matthew's inclusion of the women in his genealogy suggests that he had a special reason to do so. The women in question are:

- i. Tamar (cf. Gen.38): she signifies hope. She is the first of the women to be included in verses 3-6 of the genealogy. She has an unidentified origin but many scholars think she was a Canaanite. Her story unfolds within the context of an ancient law that ensured a man's line continued through childbirth even after death. Hers is a story about hope-or more accurately, desperation born of shattered hope. She was the daughter in-law of Judah, married in turn to his two oldest sons (i.e. Er and Onan), both of whom were evil men who died under God's judgment. Judah then promised to give her to his youngest son (i.e. Shelah), once he came of age-a promise he never intended to keep, hoping instead that she would just go away and die a widow's death.

In a world where women had almost zero prospects outside of marrying well and bearing children, Tamar's plight was desperate. She had no status, no inheritance, no social security would ever come her way because as already observed, her only route to the future was through children and she was not a mother and she was not eligible to remarry since she was 'waiting' for Shelah. Taking matters into her own hands, she disguised herself as a prostitute, though she was not. She slept with her father in-law and bore him twin sons. One of the twins, whom she named Perez, would become an ancestor of Jesus.

Once the entire sordid affair came to light, Judah publicly admitted that Tamar was more righteous than he was (cf. Gen. 38:26) - an accurate assessment given his cruel, callous treatment of her.

This researcher admits that Tamar's actions are not justifiable yet understandable. Tamar (to say nothing of Judah) was a complicated person with a messy life, whose presence in the lineage of Jesus shows precisely the kind of people he came to save. In place of desperate acts and broken hopes, the coming Messiah would bring real hope into the world.

In fact, Matthew acknowledges Tamar's rights by including her in the Messiah's genealogy. The Lion of the tribe of Judah needed this determined woman to form his earthly genealogy. Furthermore, the story of Tamar shows that justice for women matters—they are not just to be cast aside. Rather, they deserve to be fairly treated, and if they are not they are perfectly capable of taking matters into their own hands.

- ii. Rahab (cf. Jos. 2; 6:22-23): she signifies peace and is the second surprising inclusion of the Matthean genealogy. She was a Gentile prostitute, for whom God took extraordinary measures to save from both judgment and her lifestyle of prostitution.

There is an ancient Latin proverb, *si vis pacem, para bellum*, which means, if you want peace, prepare for war. The story of Rahab, gives that ancient adage a unique twist. Unlike Tamar before her, she was an actual prostitute, not pretending to be one. She lived in the doomed city of Jericho, destined to be overrun and destroyed by the armies of Israel.

Despite her occupation, she seems to be a woman with kindness in her heart. She provides financially for her parents and siblings and she is quite willing to hide the Israelite spies who had come to search out a way to attack and defeat Jericho. She has a compassionate heart and hides the spies on her roof. In return for their safety, she negotiated that they would spare her and her family when the city was destroyed. God flattened the walls of Jericho, but left her house alone intact. She and her kin were spared God's wrath and she was welcomed into Israel's fold.

Rahab's actions reveal a woman of character who, although imperfect, had a fervent faith in God and who was willing to stand up to her own culture for what she believed in. Her story reveals that God is looking for faith not perfection. More so, just as Tamar did not choose to disguise herself as a prostitute independent of her circumstance, Rahab's sex work is unlikely to have been a proactive choice made from a place of freedom. In neither case did God wait for the woman to become "respectable" in the eyes of the world, but used them as they were.

To this researcher, everything would have seemed to be against Rahab. Not only was she a prostitute but also a Canaanite, the member of a group marked by God for wholesale judgment. Yet, not only did she save herself and her family, but she joined the faith community of Israel. Later, she marries Salmon, a Jew whom tradition says was one of the spies she hid. They have a son Boaz (cf. Ruth 2:1), who grows up to become a righteous and godly man and a notable ancestor of Jesus. Her place in the Lord's

lineage is a powerful reminder that even in the face of certain judgment, peace with God is available through faith in the coming Christ.

Additionally, the Rahab narrative shows that it was her faith that God was interested in. Despite being a Canaanite, she recognized Yahweh as the “God in heaven above and on earth beneath”. This seed of faith redeemed her. The Rahab we leave at the end of the story is in a completely different situation from when we first met her. We met a woman who was working as a prostitute and cast out by society, but left with a woman who has been redeemed by her faith and a Gentile who became a mother in the line of the Messiah.

- iii. Ruth (cf. Ruth 1ff): she signifies joy and is one of two biblical women with a book named after her. Ruth’s memory is a noble one. However, she was born under a curse- she was a Moabite and in Deuteronomy 23:3, it is said that Moabites were “shut out of the congregation of the Lord”. Yet, through choosing to ally herself with Naomi, and later with Boaz, she chose to ally herself with Yahweh.

In contrast to Tamar and Rahab and their respective shades of grey, Ruth is one of the brightest and most appealing figures in all of Scripture. This is seen in the fact that even though like Tamar, she is a widow, but her sexual purity has not been compromised. In fact, the highest words of praise are spoken by Boaz in identifying her as a woman of virtue, a woman of noble character (cf. Ruth 3:11). She is a woman who from the time she heard the name ‘Yahweh’ has been an earnest follower, thanks to the instructions of her mother-in-law Naomi. Following Naomi’s sound advice, Ruth entreats Boaz to marry her and to provide for her and Naomi in their old age, provision which will come in the form of a precious son, Obed. A son that became the grandfather of King David (cf. Ruth 4:16-22), and therefore in the lineage of Christ.

Ruth’s story is saturated with kindness, expressed by the Hebrew word *hesed* - the kindness of Ruth to Naomi, of Boaz to Ruth, and of God to all of them. But there is also a constant, palpable joy radiating from Ruth herself, driving everything she does, even in the worst of circumstances- a joy born of her faith in the God of Israel, under whose wings she had come to take refuge. Like Boaz’ mother Rahab, she belonged to a race excluded from the commonwealth of God under the Old Testament. Yet, by faith she became a woman of God whose character put most of the men in Israel to shame. As the women of Bethlehem remarked, she was better to Naomi than seven sons. Her place in the Lord’s ancestry speaks volumes about God’s

kindness in redeeming outsiders, and the joy which that redemption brings.

The story of Ruth in the opinion of this researcher demonstrates God's grace to those who choose him. One's choice is powerful and God's mercy is great. Although the law may have excluded Ruth from salvation, God's grace included her. She is both personally saved and contributes to the salvation of all mankind through her offspring.

- iv. "Her who had been the wife of Uriah": she signifies love and even though she is not named, we know her to be Bathsheba (who is mentioned by implication in Matt. 1:6) was an adulteress, infamous for her sin with David (cf. II Sm. 11).

If Ruth's is the most heartwarming romance recorded in Scripture, then Bathsheba's is surely the most heartbreaking. Szterszky (2007), opine that the narrative, "instead of being built on kindness and respect, it is more like a modern cable TV love story, rooted in lust, rape and infidelity".

Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of King David's most trusted military officers. But then one day, David spotted her bathing from the roof of his palace, slept with her, got her pregnant and had her husband murdered to cover up the affair. The baby born of their union died as a consequence of God's judgment on their illicit relationship.

The text makes no suggestion that Bathsheba was doing anything wrong or unusual in bathing the way she was. Rather it appears that David was where he should not have been, allowing his eyes to linger and his heart to follow. Moreover, the Scripture is silent about any supposed complicity on her part and lays the blame squarely on David. Given the times and the culture in which she lived, she almost certainly had no power to refuse the advances of an absolute monarch.

The entire incident is unsavory and troubling on several levels. After the affair, she became one of David's wives and gave birth to Solomon; David's chosen heir and a precursor of the Christ to come. In later life, she reappeared as queen mother whose influential voice secured the succession of her son. While David is the most significant name in the genealogy of Jesus, the inclusion of Bathsheba prevents him from being put on an unwarranted pedestal. Indeed, her presence insists upon the grace of the coming Messiah, who would redeem people, caught in relationships of unequal power and tainted love and restored them in the true love and freedom offered by God.

It is not in doubt for this researcher that God is a transformer and is capable of bringing hope out of darkness. This came to light when David repented and God redeemed them both. He also grants them a son-Solomon- who was to become King and through whom the line of the Messiah flowed.

- v. Mary: she signifies fulfillment and more than the other four women in Jesus' genealogy, her place would have been obvious and incontestable, even in a culture prone to contest it. She is officially married to Joseph and mother of Jesus who is called the Christ (cf. Matt 1:16). Mary is Jewish and a virgin to whom no taint of sexual scandal had come. More so, both Mary and Joseph were descended from David through different family branches. Luke traces Jesus' biological ancestry through Mary's branch, whereas Matthew traces his legal lineage through Joseph's branch.

Mary is a devout believer in Yahweh. To him she entrusts herself, reputation, future and entire hope. When the angel tells her she will be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, she believed (cf. Lk 1:35-38), and accepts what has never happened before.

Clearly, Mary had a sense of her place in salvation's history as the final step in the fulfillment of God's promise to send his Messiah into the world. Indeed, the angel Gabriel underscored her role in that promise by alluding to her royal ancestry and reassuring her that her son would sit on his father's throne with ultimate authority, ruling over an everlasting kingdom.

One thing stands glaringly clear with these women, though Mary is exempted here. The four (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah [Bathsheba]) been included in the list of the genealogy certainly make a striking unconventional group to find within the pedigree of the Messiah of Israel. This is probably because all four of them were non-Israelite (Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba the wife of a Hittite). Moreover, their stories do not fit comfortably into traditional patterns of sexual morality. Tamar's seduction of her father-in-law, Rahab's prostitution, and Bathsheba's adultery are all explicit in the Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament (and Matthew's phrase "the wife of Uriah" rather than giving Bathsheba's name makes the point rather obvious), and while Ruth 3-4 records without moral censure how her marriage to Boaz was arranged, the euphemistic language recounting the events at the threshing floor leaves many modern interpreters uneasy. Despite all these, Jewish traditions hold these women in high esteem. For instance, Tamar is seen as having been led by the spirit of God to act in accordance with God's will while Rahab is regarded

as a heroine who helped to fulfill God's purpose for Israel and played an important role in David's ancestry.

Function(s) of the Women

Scriptural scholars have given several functional interpretations for the peculiar introduction of women into the Matthean genealogy. Bauckham (2002) argues that all of these women provide "biblical precedent" for the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah of all. In Matthew, through the use of these particular women in the genealogy, "the Messiah is also the descendant of Abraham who will bless the nations, the Jewish Messiah for Gentiles as well as for Jews... All four Gentile women joined the Israelite people of God, becoming themselves foremothers of the Messiah, even though the laws of the Torah enforced to the latter, would seem clearly to prohibit this". Brown (1977) on his part conveniently summarized the function of the women thus:

- a) The women were regarded as sinners, hence their inclusion foreshadows the saving of sinful humanity;
- b) The women were regarded as foreigners and were included to show that Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, was related by ancestry to Gentiles;
- c) These women point to Mary as there is something extra-ordinary in their union with their partners and they played important roles in God's providence.

From the foregone, when we examine each of these women, we can conclude that they are far from what our expectation will be of the family tree of the Messiah. Indeed, the function of the first four women in the genealogy and how and if they relate to Mary the mother of Jesus has been debated. But this piece dare to say that the four women mentioned here are worthy of special note as examples of God's grace. They show how God can take unlikely people and use them in great ways. More so:

- These four women have an important place in the genealogy of Jesus to demonstrate that Jesus was not royalty according to human perception in the sense that he did not come from a pure aristocratic background;
- These four women have an important place in the genealogy of Jesus to demonstrate that Jesus identifies with sinners in his genealogy, even as he will in his birth, baptism, life and death on the cross;
- These four women have an important place in the genealogy of Jesus to show that there is a new place for women under the New Covenant;

- J.C. Anderson (1987), views these four women as models that interpret and present Mary's female difference by celebrating female initiative, faith, and reproductive power, but are also domesticated by patriarchal constraints;
- These four women are also seen as adumbrating the gathering of the Gentiles into the church, the new people of God, which the risen Jesus commands his apostles to undertake (cf. Matt.28:18-20);
- These four women are said to be there perhaps to prepare Matthew's readers for the Messiah's "disreputable" origin in a pregnancy before marriage (cf. 1:18-25);
- These four women paint a picture of tenacity, faith, grace and redemption;
- These four women while not sinless were strong. Their presence in the genealogy speaks of a God who discards social stigmas and hierarchies in place of discerning character and willingness to follow.

In fact, Jewish tradition held that all the women were proselytes who helped fulfill God's purpose through Israel. In a sense the promise of Abraham that he would be a blessing to all nations was already being fulfilled through these women. This made Brown (1977) to argue that: "...God made use of these women who were more active than their partners in very difficult situations where circumstances were stacked against them".

Conclusion

This article studied the five women in the Matthean genealogy. Emphasis is placed on the four of them (i.e. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "Her who had been the wife of Uriah" [i.e. Bathsheba]) and their stories in the Old Testament in view of establishing the evangelist probable purpose for mentioning them. They are a clue to the novelty and import of the Matthean genealogy. Much has been written on the relevance of these four women in the story of Jesus. In establishing this relevance, attentions have been paid primarily to their characters, their status as women, their origin and their trade as attested in this piece.

The genealogy concludes with the introduction of the protagonist, Jesus, through his parents, Mary and Joseph. It reads: "...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah" (cf. 1:16). This verse is seen as the fifth and final gendered rupture in the genealogy of Jesus. To wrap up, we concur with Nolland (2005) that: "With Joseph comes a notable break in the pattern, 'A produced B'. The language created a detour around this pattern in a manner which would normally be considered a

distinction without a difference. But this breaking of the pattern is striking and produces a puzzle for the reader until it is resolved in the narrative of verses 18-25”.

It is obviously clear in this paper that Matthew wanted to establish the royal line of the birth of Jesus as the Messiah for all people and thus the inclusion of the listed women whose appearance has occasioned much discussion. In a patrilineal genealogy of this kind, women have no necessary place. Matthew was a Jewish man but knew that God had a great heart for all people-women and Gentiles included.

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