

Jesus' Grandmothers and Messy Stories

Matthew 1:1-6

Introduction

In setting the stage for his account of the birth of Christ (and the whole gospel account), Matthew draws out some of the messiness of Jesus' heritage by highlighting four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. There are a number of similarities between them, as their stories will show. They are all Gentiles. They are all involved in scandal of some kind.

Tamar (Gen. 38)

The first woman mentioned in the genealogy is Tamar, who bore to Judah the twins Perez and Zerah. At the birth of the twins, the midwife identifies the firstborn with a scarlet thread around his outstretched hand. But, he draws it back in, and his brother, Perez, pushes out past him. So Zerah (with the scarlet thread) was in a way supplanted by his brother Perez, as we see happen a few generations later.

Rahab (Josh. 2, 6)

The second woman mentioned is Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute from Jericho who hid the two spies sent by Joshua from the king of Jericho. She professes faith in Yahweh and marks her house with a scarlet cord (like the blood over the doorposts at the Passover in Egypt). When the Lord brings down the walls, Rahab and her family are spared and brought into the people of Israel. Matthew indicates that Rahab was given to Salmon (Heb., *Salma*). Salmon is the great-great-grandson of Perez (1 Chron. 2, Ruth 4), the son of Tamar. Salmon's father, Nahshon, had been the commander of the army of Judah (Num. 1:7), showing already that Perez's line was being given some prominence. But then, Rahab, identified with a scarlet cord, is given to Perez's descendant. Also, the entire family of Zerah's descendant Achan is wiped out after the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 7). The scarlet thread of Zerah was now transferred to the line of Perez through Salmon and Rahab. We also know from 1 Chron. 2 that Salmon is the father of the town of Bethlehem.

Ruth (the book of...)

Speaking of Bethlehem, we come to the story of Ruth. When Ruth leaves behind her family and gods to join with Naomi and Yahweh, there would still have been a bit of a stigma about her. The Moabites were a people sprung from the desperate and incestuous design of Lot's daughters after they fled from Sodom (Gen. 19). They also were the people who seduced the Israelites to such immorality that the Lord sent a plague which killed 24,000 (Num. 25). With these things in mind, Moabites were forbidden from entering into the congregation of Israel (Deut. 23:3). Yet, Ruth clings to God, and God provides a kinsman redeemer for her. Boaz, in fact, is the son of Salmon and Rahab, a son of Perez, a son of Judah. And at the very end, the author of Ruth highlights the genealogy from Perez through to Salmon and Boaz and then to David, showing Ruth to be David's great-grandmother.

Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-12)

Bathsheba is the fourth woman in Matthew's list, though not named. King David, instead of leading the armies of Israel, stays at home and commits adultery with Bathsheba, and then has her husband killed to cover it up. It's worth noting the possibility that Bathsheba was no stranger to David: she lived near the palace, her husband and father were among David's thirty mighty men (2 Sam. 23:34,39), and her grandfather was David's counselor (2 Sam. 15:12, 23:34). David had disgraced Bathsheba, killed her husband, and was responsible for

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the death of her child. And yet, it is through Bathsheba that God establishes the kingly Davidic line, for another of her children would later become king after David's death: Solomon (1 Kings 1).

Conclusion

There are many things to be said about how all these stories relate together in the story of Jesus, but let me highlight three. First, even in Israel's earliest history, the Gentiles were being brought in to the family of Jesus. And remember that Matthew's gospel ends with the Jesus' command to disciple the nations. Second, Matthew sets the stage so that it comes as no surprise that God would work through what at least appears to be scandalous circumstances surrounding Mary and the birth of the Messiah. God does not despise to work through messy situations, let alone appearances. Jesus took on this family history. Christ, the Son of God, did not despise taking on flesh like yours (Phil. 2:5-8).

And third, the gospel is the good news of salvation to all nations in Christ, and that good news shines out against a black and often bleak backdrop. This Christmas, remember Who Jesus was and why He came. He was God, but took on a sordid family history; and He came to deliver His people from their sins. He came to turn harlots into wives and mothers, bastards into sons, adulterers into faithful spouses, liars to truth-lovers, murderers to life-givers. He came to turn His prostituting Church into a beautiful, spotless Bride. And, He came for you. Christmas is a season of grace because of the gospel of grace—"while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

