

Saints and Sinners in Jesus' Family Tree

Matthew 1:18-25 by Patty Friesen (Dec. 15/24)

Matthew 1 is an extremely unusual genealogy. Typically Jewish patriarchal societies are only patrilineal, or only fathers mentioned but this genealogy highlights 5 matriarchs; thereby signaling that something new is beginning with the birth of the Messiah that includes women as well as men, Jews and Gentiles, saints and sinners. A new age has dawned.

The first matriarch in verse 3 is **Tamar**, a Canaanite, who was the daughter-in-law of Judah - one of Jacob and Leah's sons. A whole chapter in Genesis 38 is dedicated to her strange story. Tamar's husband, Judah's firstborn died and in that time, the father was supposed to give her another brother to marry to secure her future and the brother's blood line. Judah gave her the next brother who died and Judah didn't give her his youngest - worried that she was a bit of a black widow. After several years of waiting - Tamar disguised herself as a street worker and sat by the city gate where she knew Judah would pass. He blindly contracted her services and in pledge of payment, she demanded his signet ring and staff until he would send a kid goat later.

Later he found out that Tamar was pregnant and called for her to be burned at the stake according the punishment of adultery. She sent word that the owner of the signet ring and staff were the father of her children. Then Judah acknowledged that "she is more in the right than I. I did not fulfill my duty to protect her." And so begins the weird family tree of Jesus and the weird birth narrative of Jesus himself.

Verse 5 includes **Rahab**, the Hittite street worker in Jericho who also has a whole chapter in Joshua 2 dedicated to her as she hosted the Israelite spies spying out the

Promised Land and hid them on her roof and let them escape over the wall of Jericho in a basket. Like Tamar, she negotiates a deal in good faith that her family will be spared. Rahab is named in Hebrews 11 as one of the heroines of faith. Later she marries Salmon the Israelite from which comes Boaz.

Boaz marries the Moabite, **Ruth**, a Gentile saint who has a whole book of 4 chapters named for her. She cares for her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi as they journey from Moab to back to Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem - which is a masculine Hebrew word meaning House of Bread. From Ruth comes Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David.

In verse 6 - we have King David's son Solomon by the wife of Uriah. **Bathsheba** isn't named - but reminds the whole genealogical clan that Bathsheba was Uriah the Hittite's wife before she became King David's wife. Bathsheba was likely wealthy as she lived in King David's neighbourhood - in fact so close to the palace that when taking a bath on her balcony, King David who should have been at the warfront with Uriah, could see her from his balcony and took her for himself. When he found out Bathsheba was pregnant, King David had Uriah sent into battle and killed - an abomination that the prophet Nathan condemned in 2 Samuel 12. The first child of their union died and Solomon was born in their grief.

Bathsheba's name is also interesting because just like Be't-lehem is masculine Hebrew for house of bread. Bat' is the feminine Hebrew word for house of Sheba. Sheba is the kingdom in southern Arabia and Ethiopia from which the Queen of Sheba comes later to test Solomon. Bathsheba was likely a very dark-skinned Israelite but as she married a Hittite, Uriah, she is now considered a Gentile - outside the chosen

people and yet the beloved wife of their most famous king. Not only do we have olive-skinned Gentiles but now we have dark-skinned Gentiles in the family tree as well - lest we think Jesus was white and from a line of properly married matriarchs and patriarchs.

Finally in verse 12, we have **Mary** - the only matriarch ethnically Jewish. The text is careful to describe Joseph as Mary's husband, rather than the one who begat Jesus. Matthew clearly understands Joseph to be the legal adoptive father of Jesus, not his biological father, and gives Joseph's genealogy to Jesus in order to place Jesus in the legal line as the heir to Davidic kingship. Detailed studies of biblical genealogies indicate that their function was not to reflect accurate history but to express and support these 4 religious' points.

1. The identity of Jesus is expressed in this genealogy not by describing Jesus as a spectacular individual. His story is part (the central, definitive part) of the larger story of God's saving activity within a family tree, which began with Abraham and Sarah. By definition, the Messiah does not wander onto the stage of history as an impressive newcomer or a lone ranger to the drama, but in continuity with God's saving history within the context of all families.

2. The messianic story is inclusive, extending to all nations. Inclusiveness is not merely a contemporary buzzword. It is a deep note sounded in the first paragraph of the New Testament, a paragraph that sums up the story of the Old Testament, binding together the two books - Old and New Testament, Hebrew and Greek into one book of the story of God's saving acts in history. God's purpose is to include all - saints and sinners, married and unmarried, Jews and Gentiles, fair and dark-skinned, wealthy and poor, women and men.

3. As the “ Son of David” Jesus is the royal heir to the throne. In the Gospel story, Jesus, “King of the Jews,” will redefine the meaning not only of inclusiveness, but also of kingship itself in the life and death of a suffering servant.

4. God is the hidden actor. God works through the ordinary and flawed lives of Joseph's family tree bring into being Jesus. (New Interpreters)

Matthew 1:18 - Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had fretted and lost sleep over the decision to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and convinced him to do the right thing and marry Mary and become her protector. Joseph is a just man, which in this case does not mean applying the Law of Moses punishing adultery by public execution as in the case of the woman caught in adultery or in the case of Tamar. The just thing in this situation is to break the law of Moses and apply mercy.

The whole coming of the Messiah in Isaiah 42 is an era of bringing justice to the nations, which isn't about judgement and punishment but compassion and concern as is Joseph's justice for Mary. The Greek verb for Joseph fretting and fussing over Mary is the same as Peter puzzling and fuming over Cornelius the Roman Centurion in his dream in Acts 10 where God calls the former unclean things, clean - meaning God's acceptance of Cornelius and the Gentiles as demonstrated by the gift of the Holy Spirit coming upon them. In the same way as Acts 10, Matthew 1 is a new era where

everything is turned upside down - former definitions of who is in and who is out are redefined.

According to Dr. Kenneth Bailey in *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*: Joseph didn't have to take Mary with him to Bethlehem for the census. Jewish men could go alone and take papers on behalf of their wives. When Joseph takes Mary as his wife, he doesn't let her out of his sight, but takes her along. He's personally invested in this drama and is protective of her and the baby even if it is not his. He is a just man who steps up to make justice and protection for her and the baby through marriage and family duty.

Bailey also reminds us of the assumptions we make of the Christmas story that are not culturally or historically accurate like Joseph and Mary's late arrival to Bethlehem where there was no room in the inn. Joseph actually went to Bethlehem early to be registered with Mary and as he was of the royal line of David, he would have been welcomed into any relations home warmly as a long lost relative. Bailey says that Aramaic word for inn - is guest room within a family home. A typical one room Palestinian home was an elevated platform with the animals on the lower part to keep the family warm and keep the animals from being stolen. The family room had a crib in the floor at the one end for hay which is a safe place to put a baby so it isn't rolled on by either humans or animals. There was no room in the guest room attached to the family room so Mary and Joseph were sleeping there during the census when the time came for Jesus to be born, and Mary birthed Jesus in the main family room with her female in-laws in attendance and she swaddled him in cloths as all babies were swaddled at that time.

It is the same house and same crib where the shepherds come to see Mary, Joseph and the baby. That in itself is a big deal that smelly shepherds would be welcomed into a family home to see a new baby that wasn't related to them. Most homes would have turned them out at the door but being invited in made them so happy that they left rejoicing. That wouldn't have been the case if they had been kicked out of the house. It is the same house in Bethlehem where the wise men find them when they come. The birth of Christ isn't a lone ranger-hero story. It is an inclusion story that involves a lot of people on the fringe of society committed to each other who are not blood relatives.

A new era has begun that has turned royal family trees upside down; where women are equally important to men and Gentiles equal to Jews, slaves to free, saints to sinners, wealthy to poor and where mercy and acceptance is the law for all.

Let us pray...We are the people who say yes to the manger, yes to the One incarnate for others, even in very strange ways and yes to the wholeness and newness of God born among us this season. Amen.