

Trouble in the Family Tree¹

There are parts of the Christmas story that we tend to ignore—and we miss out because of it. Today, I'd like to examine one of these—the genealogy of Jesus. Now, let's be honest. When we read the Bible we skip the genealogies. Just wait till our through the Bible in one year readers get to the huge genealogical record in the beginning of First Chronicles. It runs eight chapters—or three days of reading on our chart. Now, you know there's going to be some skipping—speed reading on those days. You know, if you wanted to hide something in the Bible's text, you might sneak it into a genealogy. Because nobody would notice it.

Curiously enough, this is almost what Matthew seems to be up to in this list of ancestors of Jesus. There's a very subtle factor here—Matthew includes four women in an otherwise all male family tree. The gospel writer Luke—who is a big advocate of women—gives us a more conventional Middle Eastern genealogy. All men.

So, what are we to make of the inclusion of the ladies in baby Jesus' background? Well, for one thing, some people might question whether they could rightly be called "ladies."

Take Tamar. Tamar's husband died and according to ancient custom, the husband's brother was to marry her. He did so.

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Then he died. His little brother was too young to take a wife. The boy's father, who was Tamar's father-in-law, Judah, promised that the marriage would eventually happen—but it never did.

Here's where the story gets weird. Tamar pretends to be a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law, Judah. She ends up pregnant. Now, I'm skipping a number of details, not only for the sake of brevity, but also because there might be children in the congregation and this is one of the PG-13 rated sections of the Bible.

Actually, this is the kind of ancestor you want to take out of the family tree. Matthew is intent on putting Tamar in.

And it gets worse. There's Rahab, who really was a prostitute and a foreign one at that. She was the one who lived in the walled city of Jericho. The Sunday school kids sing the old spiritual "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came a tumbling down." There's no verse in that song about Rahab, the friendly neighborhood prostitute, who actually helped the Hebrew people conquer her city. For her efforts, she and her family were spared. More PG-13 stuff. Suddenly, ten more people have decided to read the whole Bible. Rahab's memory is forever preserved in the New Testament and in Christianity by Matthew reminding us that she was in the bloodline of Jesus.

Then there's Ruth. Now, Ruth is rated G—general audiences. Some scholars might insist on a PG rating but let's not be overly interested in scandal—we've already got plenty without dragging Ruth in. Ruth's story is warm, peaceful, and feminine. The thing about Ruth that is interesting is that she is a Moabitess. The people of Moab were unfriendly to Israel. But Ruth, as we'd say in the South, happened to be a foreigner but was sweet as she could be, and ended up married to King David's great-grandfather. So Ruth is in the family tree.

Then there was Bathsheba. Bathsheba's name gives us all we need to know about her. She took a bath in full view of the Palace and, I'm sorry to say, King David. Again, we've got PG-13 narrative on our hands, including Bathsheba getting pregnant with no less than the baby who grew up to be King Solomon, David's son and successor.

Now, I don't want to paint these four women with too broad a brush. It is true that there is some sexual scandal that hovers around them. But Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba are not simply bad girls. They are foreigners as well who have become the mothers and grandmothers of other crucial figures in Israel's history. And they were just plain smart. All were survivors. It is as if God put his arm around each of them and drew them into the great story of his work in the world. The

message to me is that God is more flexible than we often give him credit for being in working with and through the lives of women and men whose resumes may not commend them for big parts in the redemption of the world.

In recent weeks, this church has gone through its annual ritual of recruiting for committees and offices in the church. First Presbyterian Church is very sensible and well-organized about its leadership. We recruit solid people to teach in our Sunday school, handle our money, and make decisions. My sense about God is that he spots leaders and pivotal figures not only inside the church, but also outside what we'd think was the conventional pool. People with troubles, bad reputations, rough around the edges, no church background and so on. And we see this in Matthew's genealogy.

I feel that about myself. I was no big deal around any church as I grew up. I'm an outsider. Some of us here may have a similar thought. You may think, "How in the world is it that a person like me is caught up in the Christian life?" You might know³ of some specific reasons why you really don't belong here or at the Lord's Table, or on the Deacons, or teaching kids. Yet, by the quirkiness of God who does marvelous things with unqualified people, here you are.

Some of you may know that as I work with a young couple getting ready to be married, I like to spend time drawing the groom and bride's genogram. A genogram is a family tree chart that focuses on the personalities—not the relatives who fought in the Civil War—but who are still alive. Anyway, whenever, I propose drawing a genogram, the bride and groom invariably say, "My family is totally weird."

So, on the glorious occasion of the birth of the savior of the world, we are reminded of Jesus' kin. And it's no sanitized, perfectionistic clan. It's got some foreigners, some fallen women, some kings, some paupers, some saints, and lots of sinners.

That's the crowd God works with! Abraham's there. David's there. So is old Rahab and beautiful bathing Bathsheba. Sweet Ruth and her wonderful daughter, Mary, separated, of course, by generations. Joseph's there. And, I dare say, so are you and I. This is a clan we can and just might belong to. Spunky ones. Sinners to be sure, outsiders, the least likely. And we dare to think—in us too and through us, God's work of redemption is coming to birth.