

Bite Size Bible Study

Christmas Story – 2 Four Women #218

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This is the second in a series of studies that are part of the Christmas Story.

4 Women Included in Matthew's Genealogy

Middle Eastern societies were patriarchal, and it was considered that only through the male line could any meaningful lineage be traced. (The reasoning is for this is for another study.) The Hebrew culture adhered to that line of thinking as well. But Matthew breaks the rules and deliberately includes four women within his genealogy.

Tamar {Heb. *Tamar* Meaning 'date'} circa. 16th Century BCE
Tamar was the wife of Judah's elder sons, Er and Onan. She was seen in pre-Christian literature as an Aramean (Jubilees 41:1). According to Genesis 38:1-30, Tamar was married to Er, the eldest of three brothers, but her husband died childless.

The custom at the time was that when a woman's husband died without leaving an heir, and the deceased had a brother, the family was expected to marry the widow to that brother.

The practice was called "Levirate marriage" and is described in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. The first-born male child born to the widow would be raised to inherit the estate of the deceased first husband. This form of marriage was also concerned with the support and protection of the widow. Tamar was duly married to the second brother Onan, who also died. As the third brother was too young to get married, the father-in-law, Judah, promised Tamar that the family would marry her to the third brother Shelah, as soon as he became a man.

Tamar waited and waited. The third brother grew up, but the promise was not kept. Then Tamar devised a daring plan. Having heard that her father-in-law would be traveling along a certain road at a certain time of day, she dressed like a prostitute, but covered her face, and sat beside the road which Judah, her father-in-law, was expected to pass.

He duly appeared, approached her and said, "Come, let me come in to you" (v. 16). She then asked what he was willing to pay, and he offered her a goat. Indicating acceptance, she asked for his staff and signet ring as a guarantee that he would not default on his promise. He agreed, slept with her, left the designated pledges and went on his way, never guessing who she was.

On returning home he sent the goat, but no one could find the "prostitute" on the road. In time, Tamar was found to be pregnant, and word of her condition reached the ear of her guilty father-in-law. Judah was furious and demanded that she be burned. As Tamar was being dragged to her death, she sent a message to her father-in-law along with the signet ring and the staff. The message was, "By the man to whom these belong, I am

with child" (v. 25). Judah immediately recognized his signet ring and staff, and declared, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (v. 26). She eventually had two sons Perez (the first born) and Zerah.

Tamar's rights were upheld by a bold and daring plan. Sadly, it appears that she had no other method of securing those rights that should have been available to her. By the Leviticus laws both Judah and Tamar were engaged in incest and should have been stoned (Lev 20:12). The story presents a bold Gentile woman determined to acquire her rights, even if she is obliged to use an irregular method. Amazingly she is listed as an ancestor of Jesus.

Rahab Heb. *Rachav* Meaning 'wide'} circa. 13th Century BCE

Rahab is known throughout the Bible as a harlot. She was a citizen of the city of Jericho when the Israelites, under Joshua's leadership, conquered the city. Joshua sent two spies prior to the siege of the city (Josh 2). Rahab had the courage to save the spies when their lives were threatened by her countrymen. In return, they promised that she would be spared when the city fell. She was a Gentile and known to be a prostitute. Yet she somehow discovered that the God of the Israelites was the one true God and decided to serve him alone. That discovery led her to make an incredible decision of faith that required the risk of her life and family.

Based on her new faith, she acted against her community, its gods and its leaders. In this case the story presents a reformed immoral Gentile woman with a courageous faith.

Ruth {Heb. *Rut* Meaning 'beloved'} circa. 11th Century BCE
The story of the love between the Israelite widow Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law is set in the time of the judges. This Moabite is an ancestress of King David.

During a period of famine, Naomi with her husband Elimelech and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, left their hometown of Bethlehem and moved eastwards, beyond the Dead Sea to the mountain plateau of Moab.

There Elimelech died. The sons married Moabite girls, Orpah and Ruth. Ten years later, both sons also died, and Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, but she urged her two widowed daughters-in-law to remain with their own families in Moab. Orpah went back to her family, but Ruth refused to be parted from Naomi saying, *'for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.'* (Ruth 1:16)

The two destitute women reached Bethlehem at the beginning of the wheat and barley harvest. Ruth went

into the fields to glean the ears of corn left by the reapers, hoping that a farmer would be kind to her. By chance, her gleaning brought her into a barley patch belonging to Boaz, a well-to-do relative of Naomi's late husband, Elimelech. Naomi told her that Boaz was one of her husband's relatives who might have a right of redemption over them both as they were widows.

On Naomi's advice Ruth went to the threshing floor and waited until Boaz had laid himself down to sleep next to the barley heap. She quietly turned back the edge of his cloak and lay down at his feet. In the middle of the night Boaz awoke and was surprised to find her there. She told him who she was and explained that he was her next of kin. (Ruth 3:9)

Then Boaz in the presence of the witnesses declared that he would, under the Levirate Marriage custom, secure the property of Elimelech, and Ruth would become his wife so *'that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brethren'*. (Ruth 4:10) All those present called down the blessings of the Lord upon the union.

Ruth gave birth to a son, Obed. The other women congratulated Naomi and expressed their admiration *"for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons."* (Ruth 4:15) In the course of time Obed had a son Jesse, who was the father of David. Ruth, the Moabite girl, was the great-grandmother of King David, Israel's most revered king.

Bathsheba {Heb. *Bat-šēba* ' Meaning 'daughter of the oath'} circa. 10th Century BCE

In the Middle East, men and women are exceptionally modest about exposing their bodies. In this story (2 Sam 11:1 to 12:25), Bathsheba, was the wife of Uriah, a Hittite soldier. While her husband was away fighting for Israel, she decided to take a bath after her monthly period. The rest of the town cannot observe their private spaces within the home.

David's Jerusalem was small (twelve to fifteen acres), and all of it crowded. The king noticed her from his roof, and within a short time David arranged to have her taken to the palace. She went, slept with him and got pregnant.

David then went into "damage control mode" and arranged to have her husband killed in battle at the front. After committing that despicable act, he added her to his collection of wives.

The prophet Nathan called the king to account for this profound violation of the law of God; David repented, and the tradition says that he wrote Psalm 51 in response. The child died, but a second was born, whom they named Solomon.

Mary {Heb. *Miryam* Meaning 'drop of the sea, bitter, or beloved'}, circa. 1st Century CE

The list concludes with Mary, a bright, but lowly peasant girl. She was willing to accept the costly discipleship of being the mother of Jesus. We will take a closer look at Mary in a later study.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the inclusion of these women in Matthew's genealogy shows that women made an important contribution in the development of the lineage of Jesus. We cannot be absolutely sure why Matthew included the four women in Jesus' ancestry, but several reasons seem reasonable.

He includes men and women. This is major departure from the norm. Jesus included women into his band of disciples (Lk 8:1-3) and women have a prominent place in his ministry. His teachings are often geared for both men and women listeners. Matthew may have included women in his genealogy as a sign of the new kingdom of God, where *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Gal 3:28 NIV). Furthermore, he includes Jews and Gentiles in his genealogy. By including Gentiles at the beginning of his Gospel, he sets the stage for "The Great Commission" at its end (Mt 28:18-20).

Ruth and Rahab were Gentiles, and Tamar was probably a Gentile, and Bathsheba was originally married to a Gentile.

Among the women selected, Matthew included "saints and sinners". Tamar struggled for justice and was called "righteous." Yet she slept with her father-in-law. Rahab appears on stage as a prostitute. Bathsheba commits adultery. Ruth, by contrast, is a "saint" throughout the book that carries her name, but not perfect either.

All four women demonstrate intelligence, boldness and courage. All these women showed initiative or played an important role in God's plan and so came to be considered the instrument of God's overarching plan.

With such a list, Matthew gives us clues about the kinds of people that the Messiah came to save. He was to be a Savior for women and men, Jews and Gentiles who were each "saints and sinners" in their lifetimes. This genealogy is truly comprehensive and worthy of Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Most people can look at the life stories of the men and women in this genealogy and find some reflection of themselves. To whom do you most relate? Jesus has already included you and them in His plan for eternity.