

STRANGE WOMEN INCLUDED IN JESUS' ANCESTRY

Jesus' ancestry includes a handful of strange women. If you can pick through the long list of names in Mathew 1:1-17, you'll find them sandwiched in among the forty-plus men in his genealogy.

That alone makes the opening paragraphs of the first book in the Christian scriptures somewhat unusual. For women were routinely left out of most ancient pedigrees. But in this case there's something more surprising. For the women mentioned here are all somewhat out of the ordinary.

Take Tamar, for example (Matthew 1:3). Her story is told in the Jewish scripture at Genesis 38. She was the daughter-in-law of Judah, the founder of an Israelite clan. Her claim to fame is the fact that she got herself pregnant by her father-in-law!

Her first two husbands, both sons of Judah, died without leaving any heirs. So in order to carry on the family name, she disguised herself as a roadside prostitute and conned her father-in-law into siring her twin sons.

Second in the list of unusual women is Rahab (Matthew 1:5). Rahab was a genuine prostitute, no pretending about it. But according to Joshua 2, she was hospitable in more ways than one. She's the one who protected the Israelite spies when they were scouting the land of Canaan.

In preparation for their invasion of the Promised Land, Joshua had sent undercover agents to check out the fortifications of Jericho. When their cover was blown, Rahab hid them under a pile of flax stalks on the roof of her house of questionable repute.

Later, when Joshua marched on the city and the walls came tumbling down, Rahab' family was escorted to safety.

Ruth, the third of the women mentioned in Jesus' lineage (in the same verse with Rahab), was no prostitute, not by a long shot. On the other hand, she wasn't your average girl next door either. She, too, was an outsider, a native of the country of Moab.

She had married an Israelite émigré. Then both she and her mother-in-law were widowed. Instead of remaining with her own family in Moab, she relocated with her mother-in-law back in the territory of Judah.

The upshot of it all was that she eventually remarried, this time to a prosperous Judean farmer. According to Ruth 3, she got her man by sleeping with him after a late-night harvest time party.

The fourth woman is Bathsheba, of David-and-Bathsheba fame (Matthew 1:6). Except that her name is not even mediated here! Rather, she is referred to as "the wife of Uriah." That's a reminder of one of the most sordid chapters in the Bible, 2 Samuel 11-12.

Splish, splash, she was taking a bath when King David spied her. He took her to the palace, seduced her, and got her pregnant. Then, to make matters worse, he arranged her husband's death in order to marry her and avoid what promised to be an embarrassing scandal.

These four women have a couple of things in common. On the one hand, they are all remembered as foreigners, outsiders, not good Jewish matriarchs. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites; Ruth, a Moabitess; and Bathsheba presumably a Hittite like her husband.

If Matthew was trying to make any points by including them in Jesus' genealogy he may have been suggesting that Jesus did not represent a narrow, ethnically exclusive tradition.

On the other hand, the four women were all involved in some sort of potentially awkward sexual situation. And that brings us to the fifth woman in the list: Jesus' own mother Mary.

According to Matthew, her premarital pregnancy "by the Holy Spirit" needed explaining, especially to her fiancé Joseph. No doubt it also needed explaining to later newcomers to the Christian community.

So Matthew tried to show that God has a surprising way of working, even through sexually unorthodox women.

That's the bottom line. Whatever else you can say about the Christian scriptures you have to admire how they constantly tout the unexpected ways God works through his man Jesus.

You get just a hint of that by noticing the four or five strange women stuck in his family tree.