

The stories of women in the Bible sometimes reveal sexually improper histories. Yet the Bible does not conceal these histories. *Why?*

Several weeks ago, we tested the idea of alternating between Old and New Testament women. But the first women mentioned in the New Testament are actually figures from the Old Testament who are referenced in the genealogy of Jesus.

No better illustration of these sexual and relational irregularities can be found than the lineage which Matthew's Gospel traces from Abraham to Jesus. He names the father in each generation, but only a few times up until King Solomon does he mention the mother. These mothers are notable – but they are not saints!

Now, we will do a bit of “jumping around” in order to see what's really going on.

In Matthew 1:3 we read: “... **and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, ...**”

**Tamar's story:** (Genesis 38:6-11, 13-30. Cf. 4:12 and 1Chronicles 2:3–4), here is M. L de Mastro's summary (*All the Women of the Bible*):

She was the wife of Judah's firstborn, Er, who offended the Lord God and so died; on Er's death, she was given to his brother Onan who refused to beget children for Er on her and for this offense also died at the Lord God's hand; she was then sent back to her father as a widow by Judah, to await the maturity of Judah's youngest son, Shelah; she was refused Shelah as a husband by Judah, who was afraid he would lose his third and last son as he had the other two; she disguised herself as a harlot, seduced Judah, and bore him twin sons, Perez and Zerah, whom he acknowledged; she became the grandmother of the sons of Perez, Hezron and Hamul, and of the sons of Zerah, Zimri, Ethan, Heman, Calcol and Dara; through her son Perez she became an ancestress of Joseph, husband of Mary and foster-father of Jesus.

So, Tamar became a prostitute *out of necessity*, but her children were technically illegitimate. Note however that Judah plays the double standard. He had sexual relations with her supposing her to be a harlot, but when it is reported that his widowed daughter-in-law was playing the harlot, he ordered that she should be brought out and burned to death (Gen. 38:24). Tamar then reveals whom the father of the twins really is. Thus, the genealogy of Matthew's Gospel includes two illegitimate sons born from an illicit sexual relationship.

**A general comment:** We must always be cautious in using the narratives of the Bible to try to put together a firm, binding sexual ethic. These stories are fascinating, but none of the characters exhibit what we might think is a high moral standard. In the story above, Judah's sexual act is seen as reprehensible within the story, but his double

standard is unacceptable to us today. Tamar's deceptive seduction was done out of necessity, since Judah had procured her as a wife for his son, and then could not supply a righteous son to father children by her.

Then, in Matthew 1:5 we read: **"... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab."**

**Rahab's story:** (Joshua 2:1–21, 6:16–25. See also Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 for New Testament comments): Again, M. L. De Mastro's summary:

She was a harlot of Jericho who concealed the spies sent by Joshua and bargained with them for the lives of her family; she was rescued with her family when the Israelites captured Jericho; she married Salmon and bore him a son, Boaz, who became an ancestor of Jesus through the House of King David, his great-grandson.

So we have a second harlot in the family tree of King David and of Jesus!! Be mindful that in modern times we look upon prostitution differently than in Old Testament times. Prostitutes were treated as an unavoidable, common part of life, which at least the priests should avoid (does that mean that the use of a prostitute was "shrugged off" for other men?)

For example, Leviticus 21 forbids a priest to marry a prostitute, and a priest's daughter who becomes a prostitute should be burned to death. (Note that this stipulation in the Law of Moses comes late in time. In the time of Judah in the book of Genesis no such law existed!)

But the Old Testament's harshest judgment was not for common prostitutes but for cultic prostitutes whose sex work was closely linked to pagan religious practices.

And in Matthew 1:5 we read: **"... and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David."**

**Ruth story** is longer and more complex. (The entire Old Testament book of Ruth spells this out with some respect and appreciation.)

Ruth's story begins with Naomi, a woman of Bethlehem whose husband Elimelech died, leaving her a widow to raise two sons.

While living in Moab, the sons married local women: Orpah and Ruth. Then the sons both died without leaving heirs. You remember the touching story of the widowed mother-in-law Naomi encouraging her daughters-in-law to return to their own people to find husbands.

<sup>1:11</sup> "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me,

even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, <sup>13</sup> would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying?

Orpah took her advice but Ruth decided to remain loyal to Naomi in a show of fidelity which was uncharacteristic across ethnic lines.

<sup>16</sup> But Ruth said,  
"Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge,  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
<sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die —  
there will I be buried.  
May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!"

But Ruth's story from here on is more fascinating. Because clans and families practiced closed marriage, on arriving in Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Ruth seeks to find a new husband from the same family line. M.L. de Mastro's summary:

Ruth went by chance to the fields of Naomi's kinsman, Boaz, to glean; at Naomi's instruction, Ruth slept at Boaz' feet that night; Boaz then took her to wife and she bore him Obed, who would be the grandfather of King David and ancestor of Jesus; legally the child was credited to Naomi and Elimelech, though the genealogy of Jesus quoted from the Book of Ruth by Matthew does not mention Elimelech's name, but credits Boaz.

So although it was not a sexual indiscretion, it was nevertheless an act of cunning by which Ruth made herself available to Boaz. In an era when all marriages were arranged by the fathers, Ruth "arranged" her own married to Boaz.

<sup>3:1</sup> Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. <sup>2</sup> Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. <sup>3</sup> Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. <sup>4</sup> When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." <sup>5</sup> She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

<sup>6</sup> So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. <sup>7</sup> When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented

mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. <sup>8</sup> At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! <sup>9</sup> He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." <sup>10</sup> He said, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. <sup>11</sup> And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.

However Boaz was not *next in line* as "kinsman" to marry her. Ruth 4 recounts the complicated tale of how this unnamed kinsman declined to take responsibility for Ruth, in the public square with the giving of one sandal. But the conclusion to that story is interesting:

<sup>11</sup> Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; <sup>12</sup> and, through the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

<sup>13</sup> So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife.

### ***Another General Comment:***

Modern Christians may be uncomfortable facing the stories of prostitutes, plural wives and concubines, and illegitimate children in the Old Testament. Or, we just tend to not read about them at all – we only read the pleasant or inspiring parts of the Bible and completely ignore what we don't really understand.

Some of this is due to the Christian preference for monogamy, which was not the standard practice in ancient times. A man might have multiple wives, depending on how many women and children he could feed and support. To us, this is strange like those "back hills" Mormons who continue this practice even though it is not legal.

**Bigamy and Polygamy:** But the New Testament does not "flinch" about the presence of bigamy or polygamy in the culture, although St. Paul admonishes that an overseer or "bishop" should be the husband of *one* wife. He tells his assistant Timothy, in his letter:

Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once [*Greek*, the husband of one wife], temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, <sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way — <sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he

take care of God's church? [1 Timothy 3:2-5, NRSV]

What did Paul mean in verse 2 with “the husband of one wife”? There are actually four possibilities: (1) bishops should be married, not single; (2) bishops should not be a bigamists or polygamists; (3) bishops should not have been divorced and re-married; (4) bishops, if widowed, should not re-marry. Different interpreters down through the centuries have stressed one or the other possible view. To me it seems likely Paul meant that a bishop should not have two or three wives.

**What were concubines?** The ancient world had strict rules about the perpetuation of the family and clan, and therefore about the inheritance of property. Since ancient peoples accepted the idea that a man could have more than one wife simultaneously (and therefore could have a large number of children who would be potential heirs), the practice of concubinage took hold. Beginning with Abraham, we are told that the patriarchs and other well-know “great” male figures in the Old Testament had more than one wife; or they had one or more wives and concubines.

The *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* explains more:

**Concubine.** A slave girl who belonged to a Hebrew family and bore children. Concubines were acquired by purchase from poor Hebrew families, captured in war, or taken in payment of debt. A girl in this classification achieved a certain status if she bore sons (Genesis 21:10; 22:24; 30:3; 31:33; Exodus 23:12; 21:7, 10). Her son might become a co-heir; her name was remembered because of her offspring; a barren wife might have a son through her; she might have her own quarters; she was to benefit by the seventh day of rest; and she had the right to food, clothing, and sexual intercourse. She had the affection of her “husband” (Judges 19:1–3). Eunuchs were put in charge of concubines (Esther 2:15); they are called “man’s delight (Ecclesiastes 2:8) along with singers. A king might have many concubines (1 Kings 11:3). The faithfulness of a daughter of a concubine induced David to give decent burial to the bones of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 21:10–14).

What a concubine lacked, however, were the automatic legal rights that a legal wife had, including the right of her sons to share any inheritance.

**Abraham and Sarah’s Ethical Decision.** In Genesis 21, after Abraham’s true wife Sarah bore him Isaac in their old age, Abraham simply banishes Hagar and her son Ishmael. Hagar was an Egyptian woman who was Sarah’s personal slave, and Abraham had used her, with his barren wife’s permission, to father an heir. But when Sarah finally did give birth because of God’s special promise (Genesis 21:1–2), so Abraham of course wanted his and Sarah’s son to be the ultimate heir of his inheritance. Ishmael, although born first, didn’t count because his mother was only a slave, or concubine.

In the telling of this story, it is not Abraham who looks bad (according to our standards). Sarah prods her husband to “get rid of” Hagar and her son (Genesis 21:9) because of jealousies between the two sons.

“Get rid of that slave woman and her son,” she said to him, “for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

Who says? Abraham and Sarah and their clan were nomadic peoples at the time. The Law of Moses was still hundreds of years in the future. But the story is told as if there is a clear legal precedent that would preclude Ishmael from receiving the inheritance. And in the story, Abraham sends Hagar and the boy away, literally into the wilderness.

This *sounds* like a cruel story. Bu the whole story is told to show that *the purposes and the mercies of God are higher than the purposes of people.*

So in Genesis 21:17-20, we are told that God heard the boy crying, and miraculously provides water (means of survival) in the wilderness, telling his mother Hagar (almost *as a consolation prize*) that he will make Ishmael’s line into a great nation also – a similar promise to the one God had made to Abraham and Sarah (see: Genesis 18).

This story, incidentally, is the legendary source of the animosity of Jews and Muslims (really Arabs) – based on the belief that each ethnic group can trace its lineage back to Abraham. Resentment can run for thousands of years!

In this entire sequence, however, while we have strange and even reprehensible human behavior—such as jealousy and the abandonment of a mother and child in the wilderness—what we *do not find* in the Scriptures is any judgment or condemnation of concubinage or plural wives, or therefore of sexual expression outside of monogamy! It is worth noting that Christian ethics has tried to evaluate Biblical ethics and to build a more consistent and human sexual ethic from the biblical views. Sometimes modern Christians are shocked to find that the Bible does not condemn something that we automatically think is evil or should be condemned.

But culture always influences ethical values. In the earliest centuries, Christians were heavily influenced by Greek and Roman cultural ideals, and quickly gave up polygamy or even bigamy. Hence, Paul’s advice to Timothy, “a bishop must be the husband of one wife.” The nomadic peoples of the middle east, however, continued to allow polygamy. The Koran, dictated by the prophet Mohammed (who lived from A.D. 570-632), allows for a man to have up to four wives, and there are countries in the Middle East which continue to permit this custom under Islamic law.