

Jesus' Genealogy

There's more than a hint of scandal in the family tree – but so what?

CHRISTIANS would agree that Jesus' execution as a criminal was a scandalous injustice. They are less likely to concede that there was also a whiff of scandal about his birth, so cocooned has the story become in miracle, piety and sentiment. The suggestion is right there, however, in the gospel of Matthew.

Word had got around that Jesus' mother, Mary, had become pregnant while she was engaged to Joseph. In those times a girl was often betrothed to a man while in her early teens. They might not marry for several years, but the arrangement had the legal force of marriage, though sexual relations were frowned on.

Joseph was not impressed to learn that Mary was pregnant. His first impulse was to break off the engagement and send her back to her family. Yet it appears the community still assumed Joseph to be Jesus' father, and Matthew traces his forebears back to the patriarch Abraham through him – which is odd if Joseph was not really the father.

The gospel writers try to resolve this inconsistency by giving Jesus a miraculous conception: Joseph was the father-protector of the family, but the baby was conceived through the Holy Spirit. This they did to highlight the uniqueness of the man who this baby became.

Their theological purpose was clear, their telling of the birth story evocative, and their explanation of how Mary became pregnant credible according to the understanding of the times. Today, however, the faith of many people is content to lean on the first two of these elements, and politely demur on the last.

Tucked away in a little-read portion of Matthew's Christmas narrative is a hint that such people may be right. In his genealogy tracing Jesus' forebears there is mention, quite uncharacteristically for a patriarchal culture, of four women. They have two things in common: none of them is Jewish, and all have a taint of sexual irregularity.

Centuries earlier Tamar, for example, had married a son of Judah, but he died. According to custom her husband's brother then married her, but he died too. Judah was not going to expose his surviving son to similar risk, so sent Tamar away to live out her widowhood elsewhere.

Hearing one day that her father-in-law was approaching nearby, she dressed up as a prostitute and sat in wait for him. Judah was duly seduced and she bore him twins, one of whom appears in Jesus' whakapapa or genealogy.

The second woman, Rahab, was a fully-fledged prostitute in Jericho at the time the Hebrews were invading the Promised Land. She sheltered two of their spies sent ahead on reconnaissance and, when they were detected, helped them to escape. In return, they promised that when the city was captured, she and her family would be spared the inevitable massacre. Rahab and her son Boaz figure in the genealogy.

Then comes Ruth who, after her husband's death, crept into bed with Boaz while he was drunk, so that when he woke he felt obliged to marry her. They in turn contributed to Jesus' line.

And finally there was the beautiful Bathsheba, whom King David spied from his rooftop one evening taking a bath. He fell for her big-time, invited her to his home and made love to her.

Unfortunately for David, she was already married to one of his soldiers, Uriah. So David plotted to remove this impediment by having Uriah dispatched into the thick of a battle. As he hoped, Uriah was killed, opening the way for David to marry Bathsheba. Their son became King Solomon.

Here is a catalogue of lust and intrigue second to none. The question is why Matthew drew attention to it by naming these four, of all the women in his family tree, among Jesus' forebears.

A possible answer is that they foreshadow Mary's compromised status as an unmarried expectant mother. In a man's world each of the four was vulnerable without a husband. Each had an irregular union. Yet each came to be honoured for her part in carrying forward the divine purpose as the Jews discerned it.

So if there was a hint of scandal about Mary, Matthew seems to be saying, so what? Subtly he suggests that God's promise to Israel could unfold regardless – the hope for a messiah was kept alive even through such flawed human beings in Jesus' lineage. And through Mary that hope was fulfilled.

Over time, the focus on the virgin birth would obscure the hint of scandal. But its vestiges remain embedded in the text.

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