

## **MATT 1.1-17: A CUPBOARD OF SKELETONS**

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As many a presidential or prime-ministerial hopeful has discovered, most – if not all of us – have skeletons in the family cupboard.

My great-grandfather, for instance, was an Irish bookie living in London's East End. An avid gambler himself, I'm told that he kept on winning and losing fortunes – alas, at the end of his life he was real loser.

I remember as a young child meeting him at the end of his life – an old man, with long, long, finger-nails, he seemed to me quite repulsive. He certainly wasn't the kind of person I would have wanted to introduce to my friends.

Jesus too had skeletons in his family cupboard.

In particular, four of these skeletons were women of dubious repute.

What's more, they are all mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.

Indeed, they are the only women who are mentioned.

Clearly as far as Matthew was concerned, these women had special significance.

This morning I want us to look at these four women and then reflect on why Matthew happened to mention them. Incidentally, I must warn you that each one of them has a murky past. Not one of their stories is really fit for family reading.

### ***Skeleton no 1: Tamar***

Tamar was the wife of Judah and the mother of Perez & Zerah – that's all that Matthew tells us (1.3) – in fact there was much more to their relationship than that.

In Gen 38 we discover that Judah had three sons.

1. “**For his first son Er, Judah got a wife whose name was Tamar**” (v6) – but “**Er's conduct was evil... so the Lord killed him**” (v7).
2. Unfortunately, **Er** & Tamar had not had any children, so, as was the custom, Judah then asked his second son **Onan** to sleep with his sister-in-law, so that his brother Er might be said to have had descendants. But Onan refused – or rather, each time he & Tamar had sex together, he managed to withdraw himself just in time and spilt his semen on the ground. From this behaviour the English language has derived the term ‘onanism’ – unfortunately that has come to be a synonym for masturbation, rather than ‘coitus interruptus’ – wow! I told you that this tale was pretty murky.
3. So Judah then promised Tamar that when his 3<sup>rd</sup> son, **Shelah**, was a little older, she could sleep with him with a view to having a child. But Judah reneged on his promise.

Then came the day when Judah's own wife died.

At that point Tamar decided to take things into her own hands.

Disguising herself as a prostitute, she caught the attention of Judah and said that she would have sex with him for the gift of a goat – but insisted that Judah give her his seal and stick as a pledge that he would indeed send her a goat.

Judah not recognising the prostitute was his daughter-in-law, agreed.

Surprise, surprise, Tamar became pregnant. When three months later Judah heard Tamar was pregnant, he ordered that she be burnt alive – whereupon she produced the seal and the stick – and Judah was forced to confront his hypocrisy as also his sin. Six months later Tamar gave birth to twin boys, Perez & Zerah.

***Skeleton no 2.: Rahab.***

Rahab's behaviour was if anything worse than Tamar: For whereas Tamar pretended to be 'on the game', Rahab was a professional **prostitute**, offering herself to all & sundry. You'll find the story of Rahab in Joshua 2. Rahab was the woman who ran a brothel in Jericho. Past commentators have tried to gloss over the fact that she was a prostitute – indeed, the NIV's alternative reading describes her as an "inn-keeper".

True, she may have been a reluctant prostitute – some have suggested that Rahab was a widow who was forced to turn to prostitution because there was no other form of work left over to her.

Whatever, it was at her place that the two spies sent by Joshua stayed.

Did they simply have B & B – or did they do what all her other clients would have done? We don't know.

What we do know is that when the king of Jericho sent out a search party, she hid the two spies – when you run a brothel, confidentiality is an essential part of the business. But then she made a deal with the 2 spies. Recognising that Israel's God was "**God in heaven above & on earth below**" and that therefore ultimately Jericho would be taken by the Israelites, she promised that she would not betray them to the Jericho authorities provided that they she, her father & mother, her brothers & her sisters, & all their families were saved.

Needless to say, the spies agreed to this deal. Furthermore, in order to identify Rachel's house when Jericho was ultimately invaded, they gave her **a red cord** and told her to tie it to the window through which she let them down.

***Skeleton no 3: Ruth.***

Described as the mother of Obed & grandmother of King David, there was also a murky side to her life. For although she proved to be a truly admirable daughter-in-law to Naomi, she too was a woman who was not afraid to chase her man. The fact is that the Bible's story of Ruth is full of all kinds of euphemism & double-meanings.

What exactly went on at midnight on the threshing floor, when we are told "**Ruth slipped over quietly, lifted the covers and lay down at the feet**" of her relative Boaz? My understanding is that Ruth almost certainly seduced Boaz.

True, Boaz later married her and after the marriage did Ruth become pregnant. But it would appear that some hanky-panky took place before the wedding ceremony.

#### ***Skeleton no 4: Bathsheba***

Bathsheba is probably the most famous adulteress in the Bible.

The story is told in 2 Sam 11: “**One day, late in the afternoon, David got up from his nap and went to the palace roof. As he walked about up there, he saw a woman having a bath. She was very beautiful**”. Before you could say Jack Robinson, David sent messengers to fetch her: “**they brought her to him and he made love to her**”. Unfortunately that one afternoon stand caused Bathsheba to become pregnant.

Not surprisingly, Bathsheba sent a message to David to tell him the news.

The news put David in a spot. Without going into all the details, David eventually got rid of her husband Uriah by putting him into the front line, where the fighting was the heaviest, and then ensuring that the other soldiers retreated and that he was killed. Thereupon David married Bathsheba – but the Lord was not pleased, and their love-child died. Fortunately God’s anger eventually abated, and a second child was born to David and Bathsheba – his name was **Solomon**.

Clearly in this story of David and Bathsheba, David was the key-wrong-doer.

It was David, and not Bathsheba, who took the initiative in this wrong relationship.

True, Bathsheba was probably asking for trouble in bathing in a place where she could be observed; and furthermore, she probably could have resisted David’s advances, even although he was the king. Whatever, a pretty sorry story.

So there we are. Each of the four women mentioned by Matthew in Jesus’ family tree had something of a history. You would have thought that such was their history, that Matthew would not have mentioned them – and yet mention them he did.

Why? It seems to me that there are four possible reasons

### **1. GOD IS IN THE BUSINESS OF SAVING SINNERS**

All four women in their various ways were sinners:

- Tamar seduced her father-in-law Judah
- Rahab was a prostitute
- Ruth probably seduced Boaz
- Bathsheba committed adultery with David.

One possible reason therefore for the inclusion of these four women in Jesus’ family tree is that they point in a very stark way to the fact that God sent Jesus to save sinners. Indeed, this is the message of the angel to Joseph: “**Mary will have a son, and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins**” (1.21).

It doesn’t matter who we are, it doesn’t matter how far we have fallen from God’s standards, it doesn’t matter how much we have messed up our lives or indeed the lives of others, we can be forgiven. There is no sin which God cannot forgive. “**The blood of Jesus God’s Son cleanses us from every sin**”, wrote the Apostle John. Here is good news. In Jesus there is always a new beginning.

## 2. GOD IS IN THE BUSINESS OF SAVING EVERYBODY

In one sense that is a restatement of the fact that God sent Jesus to save sinners. And yet in fact it is a separate point.

It is significant that all four women were Gentiles – that is to say, they were not Jews.: Tamar was an Aramaean (Jub 41.1), Rahab was a Cannanite, Ruth a Moabite; and Bathsheba was married to Uriah the Hittite.

Jesus may have come from Jewish stock – but it was not pure-blooded.

In our multi-cultural society we feel like saying ‘So what?’.

But for Jews, who were so proud of their ancestry, this was remarkable.

It may well be that Matthew has included these four women to show that God is in the business of saving everybody – that Jesus is the Saviour of the world.

- This may well be the reason for Matthew’s inclusion of the story of the wise men. Whereas Herod the Jew wanted to kill the baby Jesus, the wise men who came from the East wanted to worship him.
- It is Matthew too, who ends his Gospel with the Risen Christ instructing his disciples to **“go to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples”**

For all the Jewishness of his Gospel, Matthew is keen to emphasise the world-wide significance of Jesus.

God is in the business of saving everybody. Here again is good news.

Indeed, Jesus is good news for people of every race, of every colour, of every nation.

He is in the business of saving you & me – if we would but respond to his love.

## 3. GOD IS IN THE BUSINESS OF SURPRISING US ALL

We see this in the story of Mary. The very way in which Matthew refers to her as the mother of Jesus, shows there is something odd. Unfortunately the oddity of the situation is somewhat hidden in the GNB, which ends the list of Jesus ancestors with **“Joseph, who married Mary, the mother of Jesus”**.

Listen to the tail-end of Jesus’ family-tree as we find it in the NRSV:

**“Eliud was the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph”**.

At this point we expect to hear *“and Joseph was the father of Jesus”* – but no: Joseph is simply described as **“the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born”**.

Even if we did not have the second half of Matt 1, with its statement that Mary had conceived **“by the Holy Spirit”** (v20), we would know that there was something distinctly odd or different about the birth of Jesus.

For Matthew does not say Joseph was the father of Jesus – nor does he say: *“Mary gave birth to Jesus”*, but rather that Mary was the one *“of whom Jesus was born”*.

Here we have what is called the divine passive – Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, follows the Jewish custom of avoiding the use of the divine name, and rather describes God’s activity by using the ‘divine passive’.

God was at work in the birth of Jesus

The fact is that Joseph was – and was not – the father of Jesus. Joseph was the father of Jesus in a legal sense, but not in a physical sense. Joseph gave Jesus his name and thereby accepted his role as father – but Jesus himself was, as both Matthew & Luke declare, born of a virgin...

It is at this point that the previous four women in the genealogy become relevant. For in each case there was something odd, if not scandalous, about their union with their male partners. And yet, what appearances can be deceiving. That was true of Mary and her relationship with Joseph. And what was true of Mary, was true for most if not all of the other four women. Each one of their apparently scandalous relationships can be viewed positively.

1. Take *Tamar*. Her behaviour was not as outrageous as it first appears. For Tamar had been wronged; under Jewish law after the death of her husband she had a right to expect one of his relatives to father a child for her, but none did. She tricked Judah in having sex with her for no other reason but to continue the family line. Like Mary, she experienced the scandal of becoming pregnant while unmarried; yet in so doing she fulfilled the purposes of God.
2. Initially *Rahab* seems an unlikely candidate to fulfil the purposes of God. She was a prostitute – how much lower can you get? And yet she leaves the stage of history as one of faith's heroines (Hebs 11.31). Her faith is exemplified in her response to the 2 spies: “**According to your words, so be it**” (Josh 2.21), words which later are almost exactly duplicated by Mary in her response to the angel Gabriel: “**Let it be with me according to your word**” (Luke 2.38). In spite of their differences, Rahab and Mary were soul-sisters.
3. So too *Ruth* & Mary. As Mary made her way to Bethlehem, she must have wondered what the future held for her & her unborn child. Similarly Ruth in following Naomi to Bethlehem must have wondered what the future held for her. Humanly speaking, the prospects were far from good. Yet she abandoned her native gods and bravely declared to her mother-in-law “**Your God will be my God**” (Ruth 1.17). Although we might perceive her to have seduced Boaz, as far as Naomi & Boaz were concerned, she simply showed family loyalty – for her relationship with Boaz not only brought Naomi grandchildren, it also enabled Boaz to continue his family line.
4. Of all the women, *Bathsheba*'s connection with Mary is the most tenuous. It is difficult to say anything positive about her sleeping with David while her husband was away on military service. And yet ultimately even Bathsheba had a part to play in fulfilling God's purposes, A reminder that, amazingly, God can redeem our failures – sin never has the last word. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “**We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him**” (Rom 8.28)

God is indeed a God in the business of surprises.

#### 4. GOD IS IN THE BUSINESS OF CALLING FOR A RESPONSE

There is yet another parallel between Mary & the four women.

Each one of them actively played a part in God's purposes by at one stage or another taking a significant risk – or what we might term an 'act of faith'.

Not one of the women was a passive agent – they all took courage in their hands and in so doing played a part in the coming of Jesus.

1. **Tamar**, took a risk in seducing her father-in-law Judah – once her pregnancy was discovered she could have been put to death for her shamelessness – indeed, before he realised that he was the father Judah ordered his men to burn her to death.
2. **Rahab**, the prostitute, likewise took a risk in hiding the spies – had the king of Jericho found it, she too would have faced certain death
3. **Ruth** took a risk in coming to Boaz by night – Boaz might have been angry rather than just pleasantly surprised;
4. Although **Bathsheba** probably didn't have much option in resisting David's advances, she later took a risk by drawing David's attention to her pregnancy. In the end that son died, but her initiative ultimately ensured that she became the mother of Solomon who in turn became one of JX' ancestors.
5. And of course **Mary** herself played an active role in the purposes of God – in the sense that she co-operated with the purposes of God. To the angel Mary said: "**I am the Lord's servant; may it happen to me as you have said**" (Lk 2.38)

Here maybe is a challenge for us. In what way will we be remembered when we are gone? Will in future days stories be told of our faith, of our determination, of our actions and decisions which in one way or another advanced the cause of the Kingdom? To what extent will we have responded to the call of God on our lives?