The Five Women in Matthew’s Genealogy as Paragons of Virtue

The Gospel according to Matthew begins with a list of Jesus’ ancestors in which the names of five women occur among those of forty-two men.1 Mention of Mary is not surprising, because she is Jesus’ mother, but why does the author include four other women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba)?

There are various answers to this question. Usually the exegetes look for something which the four Old Testament women have in common,2 while Mary is not taken into consideration. One explanation that used to be popular is that the four women are sinners who indulge in dubious sexual activities, and that they were included in the family tree in order to make clear that Jesus was born to liberate people from their sins (1:21).3 This interpretation is a classical example of an androcentric exegesis which associates women with sexuality, connects sexuality with sin, and shuts eyes to the far from irreproachable conduct of many men in the genealogy.


2 John P. Heil, “The Narrative Roles of the Women in Matthew’s Genealogy,” Bib 72 (1991): 538–545 (544), asks the opposite question; he notes that “previous attempts to explain the roles of the women in Matthew’s genealogy have overestimated what they have in common and underestimated their differences”. See also the recent study by Jason B. Hood, The Messiah, His Brothers and the Nations: Matthew 1.1–17 (Library of New Testament Studies 114; London: T&T Clark, 2011), esp. 88–118.

3 An example of this interpretation is to be found in Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1992), 23: “Three of the four are of morally dubious reputation. Matthew is surely saying that the gospel is for all people, not Jews only, and that the gospel is for sinners.”
A different explanation, still current, is that the four women are all foreigners.\(^4\) Ruth is Moabite, Rahab is from Canaanite Jericho, and Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, is Hittite. That Tamar is also of foreign origin is deduced from the meagre indications in early Jewish literature.\(^5\) The presence of these non-Jewish people points in a universalistic direction: Jesus has foreign blood in his veins. He has indeed sprung from the people of Israel, but Matthew makes it clear at the very beginning of his book that Jesus is also important for the Gentiles. This view has the drawback that it applies to Tamar and Bathsheba an attribute which in the Hebrew Bible is applied explicitly only to Ruth and Rahab.

These two interpretations ignore Mary, since she is not a Gentile, and the exegetes who emphasize that the Old Testament foursome were sinners do not go as far as to accuse Mary of sinful behaviour. The two explanations referred to are sensitive only to the contrast between Mary and the four other women.

In this chapter I wish to defend a different view. In my opinion, we should search for a correspondence, rather than a contrast, between Mary and the four other women. Many answers have already been given to the question whether the five women possibly have something in common. The answers sometimes remain extremely abstract. Brown speaks of “something extraordinary or irregular in their union with their partners,” a deviation from the current pattern; the five women are outside the normal course of events and serve to show that precisely through these eccentric individuals God effects the fulfilment of Israel’s history.\(^6\) Franz Schnider and Werner Stenger allude to “eine Zeugung


\(^5\) Gen 38 does not give a clue about Tamar’s ancestry. That she was Canaanite (so, e.g., Gundry, *Matthew*, 14), is contradicted by *T. Judah* 10 and *Jub.* 413–7. According to these texts, Er hated her because his mother was from the daughters of Canaan, whereas Tamar was a daughter of Aram, and consequently came from Mesopotamia, the homeland of Abraham, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel (cf. Heil, “Narrative Roles,” 539). For more information see Richard Bauckham, “Tamars Ancestry and Rahab’s Marriage: Two Problems in the Matthean Genealogy,” *NovT* 37 (1995): 313–329.

\(^6\) Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 73. See also Krister Stendahl, “Quis et Unde? An Analysis of Matthew 1–2,” Pages 69–80 (74) in *The Interpretation of Matthew* (ed. Graham Stanton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995, 2d ed.): “The common denominator for these four women [Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba] is found in that they all represent an ‘irregularity’ in the Davidic line, an irregularity which is not only overcome by God’s recognition of them as mothers of Davidic descendants: exactly by the irregularity the action of God and his Spirit is made manifest.”