

## **The Truth Behind the Titles – Matthew 1**

from John L Bell's *10 Things They Never Told Me About Jesus*

Reader: Judah was the father of Perez and Zarah (their mother was Tamar)

Woman 1: Let me tell you about Tamar.

She married the oldest son of a widower called Judah. The boy's name was Er. But, for whatever reason, tradition says that God considered him to be wicked and so he died before they had any children.

Then Tamar, following an old custom, married the next in line who was called Onan. He practiced coitus interruptus to avoid her conceiving, so again, tradition says it was God who did away with him as well.

There was a third son, called Shelah, but as Judah had lost two sons to Tamar, and feared he'd lose a third, he prevented any further matrimony.

This left Tamar in a bit of a fix. She wouldn't be accepted by the Hebrew community because she hadn't produced any heir to continue Judah's line. And she possibly wouldn't have been welcomed back in her own community as she was no longer a virgin bride.

So, what could she do to secure both her own future and descendants for her father-in-law?

She decided on a very risky ploy. She dressed up like a cheap tart and sat at a crossroads where she gave the come-on to her father-in-law when he passed by. He didn't recognize her and had sex with her. He had no money with him to pay for services rendered, but he left a couple of personal items with her as a pledge, and he promised to send a man to redeem them with an appropriate monetary payment.

When he got round to paying his debt, the man he sent said there was no sign of any streetwalker at the designated crossroads.

As time went on, Judah heard a rumor that his daughter-in-law had been playing the whore. Knowing that this would bring disgrace on the good name of his family, he ordered that she should be burned at the stake. As she was being led to the place of execution, she let slip that she was pregnant, and that the father of her child could be identified by the personal items he had left in her safekeeping.

Judah immediately recognized that he was the father of the unborn child, stopped the execution and took Tamar to be his wife.

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Reader: Salmon was the father of Boaz (his mother was Rahab).

Woman 2: Let me tell you about Rahab.

She was a prostitute who lived in a city called Jericho.

This was one of the cities which was on a list of locations to be conquered by Joshua, then the leader of the Israelites who were trying to settle in Canaan, which they believed to be the promised land.

Joshua sent two men to scout out the city. Once inside they decided to stay in Rahab's house. But the city authorities, made aware that two Israelite spies had visited the local brothel, demanded that Rahab hand them over. She said that they had indeed paid a visit, but had left before the city gates were closed for the night. Actually, she had hidden them in the rafters of her house where they could not be detected should a search be mounted.

The next day she told the two men that she had a good idea of their intentions for the town and that she was convinced that the God of the Israelites was able to do whatever he wanted. So she asked that if they attacked the city, she and her family might be spared.

The men agreed to secure her safety during the attack as long as she didn't betray them. She agreed to this and let them out of the city by a rope from her window. The understanding was that when the city was being attacked, she should hang a piece of scarlet cord from the same window through which the spies had escaped. That would be a sign to the Israelite troops to rescue all who were in that household.

This happened, and Rahab eventually married into the Israelite community.

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Reader Boaz was the father of Obed (his mother was Ruth)

Woman 3 Let me tell you about Ruth.

She was one of two young women who married brothers, the sons of an older woman called Naomi. Both brother died and Naomi decided that it would be best for her to go back to her home town which was called Bethlehem.

Ruth was insistent that she would go with Naomi whom she loved dearly. But, once there, she had to find work, and if possible find a husband through whom she'd be incorporated into the Hebrew community.

She began by gleaning what the reapers had left from harvesting the barley field. There her youth and beauty were a distraction to the workmen. However, the owner, whose name was Boaz, made sure she was not molested. He was a distant relative of her late husband, but much older than Ruth.

When Naomi discovered that Boaz was being kind to Ruth, she encouraged the girl to engage in an elaborate seduction ritual with the older man. This was successful and, in time, Ruth became his wife.

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Reader David was the father of Solomon (his mother had been the wife of Uriah).

Woman 4 Let me tell you about her. She was called Bathsheba. Her husband, Uriah, was a loyal soldier in King David's army.

One evening while his men were fighting a battle, David—who had remained in Jerusalem—took a stroll on his palace roof. From there he saw a very attractive women taking a bath. He lusted after her, told servants to bring her to him and had intercourse with her, even though her menstrual period ("time of the month") should have restricted such activity.

She—Bathsheba—became pregnant and sent word to David. He decided that he wanted her for a wife. So he engineered to have Uriah, her husband, sent into battle in such a way that it was guaranteed he would be killed. This happened, and Bathsheba became another wife in the royal household, but the child who had been conceived in these unusual circumstances didn't live long.

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Reader: Four women with rather curious sexual histories. And four women who were not born Hebrews, but were incorporated into the Hebrew community through marriage. And they are the only ones who are named in Jesus' genealogy.

Did this happen by chance? Or was it intended by God that these names and stories should have a place in scripture because Jesus was neither to be advantaged by a pedigree of flawless ancestors nor to attract only those who were morally virtuous.

Perhaps people would never have found credible Jesus' claim to be truly human if he had come from a pedigree of pristine piety, in which every ancestor had an unimpeachable track record.

What kind of conversations do you have at coffee and conversation following the service? Do you talk about the service you've just experienced? A reading or the sermon, the music or a prayer concern? Do you risk sharing your experience of the spirit moving in our midst? If you were riverside centuries ago when Jesus waded into the water, maybe you'd ask if anybody else saw a dove descend and heard a voice?

At one such coffee hour, a couple of visitors, one a middle-aged man who had attended church all his life and one young woman in her late twenties new to the church scene stand awkwardly in the corner in a room where everyone else seems to know one another.<sup>1</sup> And he, being a clergyman on holiday who wasn't quite sure about the reading of Jesus's genealogy which was presented the way it was here today, went fishing for her disapproval of the reading, asking what she thought of the service. Wouldn't you know, the item that particularly impressed her was the genealogy of Jesus. When asked why it had made such an impact on her she replied, "I used to be a prostitute. But I gave that up. I'm now a Christian and I have a son. He's seven now. But when he's older, I hope he comes to church and hears the Gospel read the way it was read this morning. Because one day I will tell him what I used to do. I don't want him to hear it first from anyone else. And on that day I will also want him to know that there's a place for women like me in the family tree of Jesus." That's how John Bell recalls the conversation that morning at Fellowship Time in his book *Ten Things they never told me about Jesus*, which is the inspiration for this series.<sup>2</sup>

How often do we celebrate the four women with rather curious sexual histories listed in Matthew 1? Their stories don't make it into the Lectionary. We know of Sarah, wife of Abraham, but she doesn't rate a mention in the list--we do have these outsiders named, these ancestors without pedigree with questionable track records. What might we conclude about a savior who comes with this history? --From a faith community who sees fit to record his ancestry in such a way?

There have been several occasions over the years when someone has tried to explain to me why they don't come to church. They tell me about their mistakes, their regrets, some criminal, some merely embarrassing. Sometimes they can't even name the transgression but you can see it weighs heavy on them. Sometimes they've come through whatever they are ashamed of, sometimes they are still in the midst of living it out--addictions, abuse, pornography or promiscuity, whatever choices they're not proud of. They tell me church isn't a place for people like them. Or if they dare come, they hover on the back-row (literally or metaphorically) and they feel unworthy to come forward for communion. . . . I rarely know what to say in these situations, no amount of my affirmation can make these people feel beloved. When I tell my friend about these conversations, he says, don't they realize that the Bible is all about the people of faith trying to faithful and screwing it up (only he uses more colorful language), and over and over again how they have to make their way back to God? The scripture is full of stories about how we separate ourselves from God and one another and keep trying to reconcile ourselves.

I'm not sure that's the picture of the Bible we call attention to, certainly it's not the picture of the church we advertise. We'd like to portray ourselves as those who have our act together: "Yeah, maybe we've made mistakes in the past but that's all behind us now--now we're Christians, we're believers, we don't drink or curse, we're not greedy or selfish, we're compassionate disciples trying to change the world, come join us."

Maybe what's needed is more Bible study—knowing the stories of a people who keep messing things up over and over again and how they are able to make their way back. I wonder if what's necessary is our willingness to be authentic about the fullness of our lives with a stranger across from us over a cup of coffee.

First though, we may have the more challenging task, of being honest with ourselves.... which, when it happens, and we discover we *can* approach God with all our truth, can lead to a deeper understanding of grace. I wonder if that's what happened to Jesus the day Matthew's gospel tells us about, when he decided to go to the Jordan River to seek out John's gift of baptismal waters. They don't tell us what was going on in Jesus' life up to that point—— but what leads any of us to seek out a cleansing dip by a wild man, rumored to be a prophet with questionable hygiene and few social graces. And what might happen if you submitted to such a cleanse—you could come up changed, you could be driven into the desert, you could be ask to face your demons and temptations.

They don't tell us what led Jesus to the riverside that day, but I'm thinking it could be *desperation*. Perhaps he was fed up with trying to do the right thing only to fail. Perhaps he knew all too well the sentiments that drove Paul to write in Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15) Perhaps he was tired of trying to set things right with never enough money, or time, or resources to make it happen. Perhaps he felt all alone on his path and wanted to be assured that someone else knew what it was like-- groping in the dark to find your way. Perhaps, he was beginning to realize that he needed others to join him on this journey. Or maybe, just maybe, the truth--that he needed God's grace before taking one more step-- washed over him with such intensity that to "deny it would take a stronger act of will than to just surrender to it,"<sup>3</sup> to quote Nadia Bolz-Weber. And so he stepped into the river, into the flow of the people of faith through the ages who have survived only by being bathed in God's grace.

We don't have to rely on ourselves, on our ability, there is a power greater, available to us. God's grace invites us to be open to what is real and true and trust one another with our truth also.

Perhaps then, we can wade out with Jesus into the cleansing waters of baptism and hear the voice that says "You are my beloved." Perhaps, what discipleship demands is not perfection but authenticity. When we have owned our unworthiness but also know it is just such people that God has called and used throughout history to bring about salvation. It's not just that God overlooks such messiness in our lives, it's not that God loves us in spite of our mistakes. It's more like God not only loves us—all of the parts of us—but God likes us— choosing humanity—in all its flawed glory, to be a part of and to work through. This is the good news: you are known, you are loved, you are liked even. May you feel the spirit's presence in your life descending upon your shoulders and hear, "You are my chosen, my beloved, delight of my life; with you I am well pleased."

1. From John L Bell's *Ten Things They never told About Jesus* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2009) 15.

2. From John L Bell's *Ten Things They never told About Jesus* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2009) 15.

3. Nadia BolzWeber *Patrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013) .