

Transgression, Tradition, and Transformation: Six Women of the Matthean Genealogy

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Most scholars think of Jane Schaberg as the sixth woman relevant to Matthean genealogical study. Aside from Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary, the women actually contained in the genealogy, Schaberg has contributed much to the study of these women and the role that they play as foremothers of Jesus.¹ Her main proposal holds that each of the above biblical women was party to and participant in a sexual scandal, yet in each case, the scandal was legitimated in some way. This leads to the subsequent legitimization of Jesus's birth, even in light of potential scandal on the part of Mary. Schaberg's thesis is primarily supported by the Hebrew Bible and her reading of various texts in a historical or, more accurately, chronological order; thus, one has a text and then a tradition. In this specific case, there is a sin and then a legitimating of some kind through the tradition. An examination of the LXX and early Jewish traditions, however, blurs her sequential approach. If the LXX presents traditions that remove scandal and this is the primary text, her thesis suffers. Second, if a tradition is strong enough, one cannot assume that texts are read chronologically; one should, instead, assume the reverse: it is not the text that helps one read the tradition but, rather, the tradition that reads the text. In making a strong case for early tradition, one can then support not the legitimization of the women's scandals but their innocence altogether.

Schaberg's sexual scandal theory revolves primarily around an interpretation of the Hebrew texts alone, particularly those that relate to the women in question; in interpreting and understanding the stories from this context, Schaberg concludes with merit that

all four women themselves outside patriarchal family structures, are wronged or thwarted by that world, and in their sexual activities risk damage to the social order and their own condemnations. The

situations of all four are, in a sense, righted by the actions of men who acknowledge guilt and accept responsibility, or by men who accept the responsibility of others, drawing the women under patriarchal protection, giving them an identity and a future within the patriarchal structure, legitimating them and their children-to-be. I have argued that mention of these four is designed to lead Matthew's reader to expect another story of a woman who becomes a social misfit in some way; is wronged or thwarted; who is party to a sexual act that places her in great danger; and whose story has an outcome that repairs the social fabric and ensures the birth of a child who is legitimate or legitimated. The four stories lead me also to expect a story marked by lack of miraculous, divine intervention, a story of divine accommodation to human freedom in the complexity of near tragedy.²

The sexual scandal is obvious to the reader in three cases. Tamar commits incest with Judah (Gen 38),³ Rahab is a prostitute (Josh 2),⁴ and Bathsheba is adulterous.⁵ Though Ruth's case is more ambiguous, the narrative in the book of Ruth implies sexual scandal (Ruth 3).⁶ All of this is indisputably found in the text of the Hebrew Bible, but what of other Jewish texts?

As suggested above, the Septuagint seems to work toward removing or at least changing difficulties regarding two of the women's sexual behavior (Tamar and Ruth), and if this is not found explicitly in the text itself, it can be found in its reading. Other traditions that may have been commonly circulated among Matthew's community of hearers also serve to "clean up" the women of the genealogy, removing sexual scandal entirely. A case-by-case examination of the women will demonstrate this point.

Tamar: Incestuous or Iconic?

In the Hebrew text, Tamar is the daughter-in-law of Judah (כלה), but the Greek text translates the term as *νύμφη*, which also means "wife." This LXX text, then, contains an ambiguity that is not present in the Hebrew, which leads to interpretations, as in the *Testament of Judah*, in which Tamar does not dress as a prostitute but rather as a bride. "Tamar's role has been reduced to that of an immoral temptress who causes her father-in-law to succumb to vice. . . ." ⁷ As well, in the LXX of Gen 38:14, Tamar does not hide her face but beautifies

it (ἐκαλλωπίσατο), which removes ideas of deception; further, the word used for prostitute, when it comes, is πόρνη, which is related to fornication. It is possible, then, that the text is moving away from the deceitful and incestuous connotations in the Hebrew text. What is emphasized instead is intent to seduce Judah on the part of Tamar. These alterations in the LXX may indicate the reason for the *Testament of Judah's* interpretation of the text as follows:⁸

Decking herself out in bridal array she sat at the entrance of the inn in the city of Enan, for there was a law among Amorites that a woman who was widowed should sit in public like a whore. Since I (Judah) was drunk with wine I did not recognize her and her beauty enticed me because of her manner of tricking herself out.⁹

Later, the text seems to indicate that some guilt has been alleviated from Tamar, and it also adds that she was only acting in accordance to custom.¹⁰ The guilt seems to lie primarily on Judah who later added that the entire event was “from the Lord.”¹¹ Targum Neofiti emphasizes the action of God in this event and, thus, alleviates further the guilt of those involved.¹²

Philo also holds Tamar in high regard. J. W. Earp concludes that “Tamar (‘palm’) is a symbol of victory; however, Philo’s interpretations are connected, not so much with the name, as with the story of Judah and Tamar in Gen. xxxviii from which Tamar emerges as a type of virtue, even of chastity.”¹³ Judah commented, regarding her deception of him, “She is justified, since I gave her to no mortal” (V. *Mut.* 134–136).¹⁴ In “VIII. *Virt.* 220–222, Tamar is said to have turned from polytheism to worship the one great cause, to have kept her life stainless, and to be a pattern and source of nobility (see 208[N], 221 [N], and VIII. Gen. Introd. pp. xvii, xviii & n).”¹⁵

Pseudo-Philo seems to continue in the vein of alleviating Tamar’s guilt by stating, “For her intent was not fornication, but being unwilling to separate from the sons of Israel she reflected and said, ‘It is better for me to die for having intercourse with my father-in-law than to have intercourse with gentiles.’”¹⁶ Here, Tamar risks her life for the continuation of the purity of the Jewish people; she is held up as a model.¹⁷ In Tamar’s study, here the tradition is very strong and comes to the point of justifying her by the voice of God. There is

difficulty now in seeing scandal. Free will has been removed, the divine has intervened and thus all that is left is innocence. This tradition seems strong enough to all readers to move back to the Hebrew text and see there not guilt but righteousness, not sexual sin but purity. Unless one is sceptical of the tradition from the outset, here Tamar's sexual scandal has been removed.

Ruth: Deliberate Seductress or Loyal, Obedient Maiden?

Ruth is another example of one whose character undergoes transformation toward greater righteousness through early traditions. In the LXX, Naomi commands Ruth to proceed to the place of Boaz and, after he has drunk and is asleep, to uncover him and lie at his feet. However, later in the narrative (3:7), Boaz is not said to have drunk¹⁸ and Ruth is not said to have lain at his feet; the Greek text has omitted the verbs that were contained in the Hebrew, although it is clear (3:8) that Ruth was lying at the feet of Boaz.¹⁹ This removal of the verbal action on both his and her parts can lead one to remove some of the deception, for Boaz may not have been drunk and Ruth was no longer acting entirely on her own volition but may have become a more passive agent in simply obeying Naomi's commands.

Josephus seems to emphasize Ruth's purity and dedication. The daughters-in-law are begged and implored by Naomi to return to Moab (*Ant.* 5.321-22) but Ruth refuses. Later, when Josephus comes to the sexual scandal, he clearly interprets Ruth as only obeying the commandments of Naomi as a pious duty (*Ant.* 5.329). Finally, Josephus adds that Ruth should rise early and depart to guard against scandal, for nothing had passed between them (*Ant.* 5:330).²⁰ He thereby clears her of any wrong-doing. The innocence of Ruth and Boaz in the area of sexual scandal is re-enforced by rabbinic tradition.²¹ Josephus does not read the Hebrew text finding sin but the reverse; he has removed the scandal from the text. Felman believes it is possible that the Rabbis influenced Josephus. If this is true Josephus may serve as an example of how tradition had conformed or transformed the reading of the biblical text, but if this was the LXX for Josephus he only needed a little more help before he saw in the text complete innocents.

Rahab: Whore or Heroine?

Rahab is also seen as righteous in early traditions. In Hebrews 11:31, it is her faith that is recognised against the ἀπειθήσασιν of Jericho. “Many readers have wondered how a ‘harlot’ like Rahab came to be listed among the roll call of the faithful. There are several reasons for this: (a) when she joined forces with the Israelites, she became a believer or a faithful person in the eyes of the author; (b) she had ‘faith’; (c) she assisted in the conquest of Canaan, led by the old Joshua.”²² A similar version of the story is recounted in James 2:25 in which Rahab is declared righteous (δικαίω). Here, however, the emphasis is on the deed she accomplished and not on the faith.²³ In Josephus, she is regarded as an innkeeper (*Ant* 5.8; 5.30).²⁴ In 5.12, Josephus represents Rahab as

knowing about the coming Israelite victory because she had been “instructed by signs from God” τὰυτὰ γὰρ εἰδέναι σημείους τοῖς ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ διδαχθεῖσαν. The “scarlet thread” of the scriptural narrative which she is to tie to her window becomes the ‘red flags’, φουνικίδα” (2.13). And in 7.30 after the destruction of Jericho Rahab is rewarded with lands by Joshua. [Josephus then presents Rahab as] a prophetess, gifted with a supernatural knowledge of the future, or at least with a technique for discovering the future by means of signs.²⁵

It seems that, although Hebrews and James mention that she was a harlot, these books focus on how her faith and works led her into the people of God. It has already been indicated that Rahab received land as a reward for her actions. She put her life at risk in housing the “spies” of a people that she knew had come to conquer; she is regarded as righteous and faithful and is recorded to have dwelt with the people of Israel in the writings of Josephus. Sexual scandal is only implied in the title harlot and Schaberg concedes this point. One must, however, ask whether it is surprising that a harlot does deeds of righteousness or surprising that a righteous woman is called a harlot. Is ‘harlot’ only mentioned as a means of identification? Josephus has again removed any idea of a scandal and one is left with the conclusion that it is traditions that have interpreted the texts.

The Ambiguous Case of Bathsheba

The narrative and traditions surrounding Bathsheba have been the subject of varied comment for some time. The primary texts are so short that the reader can create almost any type of background. She has been portrayed as nearly everything from rape victim²⁶ to intentional adulterer having a strong political agenda.²⁷ While neither the LXX nor Josephus change her story to alleviate guilt on anyone's behalf, later tradition removes the culpability from both David and Bathsheba. The Rabbis are clear on this point. In one example, Uriah offers Bathsheba a certificate of divorce before he leaves for war, thus clearing her and David of their wrongdoing.²⁸ The case for an earlier, widespread tradition of Bathsheba's innocence, however, is difficult to ascertain. That said, since contemporaneous traditions clear the other three women of their culpability in a "sexual scandal", it seems likely that the same would hold true for Bathsheba.

Implications

This brief summary of four of the women in the Matthean genealogy indicates that some early Jewish traditions removed the "scandal" from the related texts. Tamar, Ruth, and Rahab are remembered for different reasons, and each became an example for others to follow in certain ways. The case of Bathsheba is more difficult due to the lack of sources and brevity of the narrative, though a "clean" tradition may have already begun to emerge at the time of Matthew's writing. These early traditions that remove the scandals seem to create a problem for Schaberg's theory regarding the women in Matthew's genealogy. The Hebrew text was likely interpreted through tradition, and if the sacred text used by the Matthean readers was the LXX, this translation had already begun to remove scandal from the Hebrew traditions. Thus, the reworking of the sacred text itself indicates the power of tradition. In the cases of Ruth and Rahab, Josephus seems to have made the common traditions into the history of the text.²⁹ Matthew entrenched his birth narrative with these Jewish traditions.³⁰ Through allusions, references, and symbol, the gospel is molded into a Jewish framework.³¹ There are distinctions, but the introduction of the gospel identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the son of David.³² Mary

stands in a righteous lineage, and certainly scandal is not the traditional reading of the text.

Notes

1. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 20–34.
2. Jane Schaberg, “Feminist Interpretations of the Infancy Narrative of Matthew,” *JFSR* 13.1 (1997): 51.
3. For thorough discussion, see Esther Marie Menn, *Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) in Ancient Jewish Exegesis: Studies in Literary Form and Hermeneutics*, (SJSJ 51; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 12–106.
4. Phyllis A. Bird, “The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts” in *Semeia 46: Narrative Research on the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mari Amihai, George W. Coats, Anne M. Solomon (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 126–32.
5. George G. Nicol, “The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative,” *JSOT* 73 (1997): 43–54.
6. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 167–99.
7. Menn, *Judah and Tamar*, 151.
8. *Ibid.*, 165.
9. H. C. Kee, “Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs,” *OTP* 2:798.
10. Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 2nd ed., (SNTSMS 8; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 159.
11. Kee, “Testament of the Twelve,” 798.
12. For further discussion on the early traditions regarding the story of Tamar and Judah, see C. E. Hayes, “The Midrashic Career of the Confession of Judah (Genesis XXXVIII 26): The Extra-Canonical Texts, Targums and Other Versions,” *VT* 45.1 (1995): 62–81; also C. E. Hayes, “The Midrashic Career of the Confessions of Judah (Genesis XXXVIII 26): The Rabbinic Midrash,” *VT* 45.2 (1995): 174–87. His conclusions are that the statement of Judah, “she is more righteous (צַדִּיק) than I,” is interpreted to be a comparative between Judah and Tamar in Jubilees, the LXX, the Peshitta, and the Vulgate. The targums (*Onqelos*, *Pseudo-Jonathan*, *Neofiti*) and the midrashim (*B. Sotah* 7b, 10b; *Num Rab* 13:4; and others) use the term צַדִּיק in a legal narrative to pronounce Tamar innocent of the entire action and justify this with the voice of God.

13. J. W. Earp, "Indices to Volumes I-X," in *Philo in Ten Volumes: And Two Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 10, *The Embassy to Gaius*, trans. F. H. Colson, LCL (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), 427.
14. *Ibid.*, 428.
15. *Ibid.*
16. D. J. Harrington, "Pseudo-Philo," *OTP* 2:315.
17. See notes in Cecilia Wassén, "The Story of Judah and Tamar in the Eyes of the Earliest Interpreters," *Literature and Theology* 8.4 (1994): 362–64.
18. For remarks on the textual tradition, see Gregory E. Sterling, "The Invisible Presence: Josephus's Retelling of Ruth," in *Understanding Josephus*, (JSPSup 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 112.
19. For further distinctions regarding the Hebrew text, see discussion in D. R. G. Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (JSOTSup 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1977), 153–68.
20. Regarding the innocence of Ruth, see John R. Levison, "Josephus's Version of Ruth," *JSP* 8 (1991): 31–44; Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (SJSJ 58; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 193–202.
21. Beattie, *Jewish Exegeses*, 169–87.
22. George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, 2d ed. AB 36 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 199.
23. A. T. Hanson, "Rahab the Harlot in Early Christian Tradition," *JSNT* 1 (1978): 53. For further discussion, see Robert W. Wall, "The Intertextuality of Scripture: The Example of Rahab (James 2:25)," in *The Bible at Qumran*, ed. Peter W. Flint and Tae Hun Kim (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 217–36.
24. The Hebrew term, זונה, in Joshua 2:1, is regarded as a secular prostitute not a temple prostitute (זונה). "Attempts were made in antiquity to give her [Rahab] a more respectable calling; thus Josephus (*Ant* 5.7 ff.) makes her the keeper of an inn (καταγωγίον), as does also the Targum of Jonathan at Josh. 2:1." (Aram. *pundekita* is "a loan word from Gk. πανδοκείτρια, 'innkeeper'.") (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. [NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990], 318.) It must be noted, however, that although this tradition was carried on by some (Rashi on Josh 2:1), it is generally regarded as a misunderstanding of the Aramaic. "The adherents of this theory simply misunderstood the Targum for the Targum to the Prophets in various passages also renders *zonah* by *pundyta*, *pundqan* or *pundqn* (e.g., 1 King 3:16; Ezek 23:44), in which it cannot possibly have been understood to mean anything but "prostitute." Therefore, the Targum's rendering of Hebrew "prostitute" with Aramaic "innkeeper" is to be understood either as a euphemism or as an

intended double entendre, implying that there is a connection between bars or inns and prostitutes.” (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. “Rahab.”) Yet, even if it was considered a misunderstanding, it may have been widely acknowledged as early as Josephus.

25. Hanson, “Rahab,” 55; the tradition of a prophetess continues in 1 Clement 12 (Hanson, “Rahab,” 55–56).

26. Trevor Dannis (*Sarah Laughed* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1994], 140–75) indicates that Bathsheba is a sexual victim but politically active later in the quest for Solomon’s ascension to the throne.

27. Nicol, “The Alleged Rape,” 43–54; see also George Nicol, “Bathsheba, a Clever Woman?” *ExpTim* 99 (1987-1988): 360–63.

28. Sandra R. Shimoff, “David and Bathsheba: The Political Function of Rabbinic Aggada,” *JSJ* 24 (1993): 248.

29. For the mixture of text and tradition in relation to the reading of the scriptures, see Charles Perrot, “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue,” in *Mikra*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder and Harry Sysling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 137–61.

30. See, for example, W. Barns Tatum, “The Origin of Jesus Messiah (Matt 1:1, 18a): Matthew’s use of the Infancy Traditions,” *JBL* 96.4 (1977): 523–35; also Arland J. Hultgren, “Matthew’s Infancy Narrative and the Nativity of an Emerging Community,” *HBT* 19.2 (1997): 91–108.

31. Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

32. For a recent account of the illegitimacy of Jesus hypothesis, see Scott McKnight, “Calling Jesus *Mamzer*,” *JSHJ* 1.1 (2003): 73–103.