The Inclusion of Non-Israelite Women in Jesus' Genealogy and Its Implications to Contemporary Churches in Africa

By

Grace O. Olajide
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria
micharis2008@gmail.com
+2348068587843
&
Michael D. Olajide
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria
michaeldeji8201@gmail.com
+2347031300406

Abstract

It is unconventional in Judeo-Christian contexts to include women and non-Israelite individuals in significant literary documents. Four non-Israelite women are included in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew's Gospel. This paper probed into and elicited certain truths from the Gospel according to Matthew and its applicability to contemporary churches in Africa. There are on-going gender disparity and discrimination in African traditional societies which have been imported into the Christian circles. This paper argues for favourable treatment of women in Christian societies in Africa. Ethnicity vis-à-vis racism should be adumbrated so that the church can thrive both in quality and size.

Keywords: Matthew, genealogy, church, gender, ethnicity, Jesus, women

Introduction

The term "genealogy" occurs only twice in the New Testament namely 1Timothy 1:4 and Titus 3:9. The term did not appear in the LXX nor in the Gospels. Genealogy can be defined as a written or oral expression of one's descent from an ancestor or ancestors by enumeration of intermediate persons. It may appear in the format of either a narrative or a list (Wilson, 1975). It is a list of the ancestors of a person or group. Ancestral registers existed in several ancient Near Eastern communities and Greco-Roman world, such genealogies were usually very brief and typically pertained to royalty. Extended genealogies are found primarily in Hebrew and Jewish contexts. The Old Testament contains roughly twenty-five genealogies (Brown, 1992).

The Gospel according to Matthew has been a favourite of the church throughout history, not least because of its accent on the teachings of Jesus. The Gospel according to Matthew is attributed to Matthew, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ. The title. *kata mathathaion,* was probably added by A.D. 100, likely when it was combined with the other three Gospels for circulation (Brown, 2013). Matthew's purpose of writing his Gospel is to portray Jesus as God's authorized Messiah who teaches and enacts the reign of God, and who ushers in the kingdom through his self-giving ministry and death.

The gospel according to Matthew is one of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). The Synoptic Gospels are named so because of the overlap among their narratives. The term "gospel" is derived from the Greek word (*euaggelion*) which literally means "good news" In the ancient times, the term "gospel" was used when a new emperor emerged. The early followers of Jesus Christ adopted and applied this nomenclature as the life account of Jesus Christ. According to the early adherents of Christianity, the coming of God in the person of Jesus Christ, his miraculous birth, his earthly ministry, his death and resurrection and his expected messianic rule. All these events were "good news" for the whole world.

Interestingly, the pervasive use of the Old Testament in Matthew provides a unique starting point for understanding its genre. Wright (1992:402) suggests that "Jewish-style biographies, designed to show the quintessence of Israel's story played out in a single life... The gospels are therefore the story of Jesus told as the history of Israel in miniature." Furthermore, the Gospel according to Matthew shares certain peculiarities with that of Luke. One of the convergences common to both Matthew and Luke bother on Jesus' genealogy. Matthew emphatically traces and Jesus' family tree to Abraham and David while Luke concentrates on Jesus as the "son of God". Matthew's Gospel in contrast to Luke mentions four women apart from Mary in its genealogy. They are Tamar (1:3), Rahab (1:5a), Ruth (1:5b) and the wife of Uriah (Matt 1:6; Bathsheba). The inclusion is in this perspective catchy. This article studies these four women who are Gentiles and their stories in the Old Testament in view of its relevance to African situations.

Jewish Genealogical Writings

Genealogical documents are often preserved to keep in memory some prominent ancestors. In the ancient Jewish society, priests and Levites are required to demonstrate their ancestry before they could carry out their duties. The Davidic royal line was one of the most prominent Jewish family ancestries. Matthew's and Luke's genealogical accounts trace Jesus' royal ancestry via Joseph's side of the family through different paths. Both accounts emphasize that Jesus' line proceeded from king David (Rom. 1:3; Rev. 5:5).

There were several purposes for Jewish genealogies. First, it was meant to highlight the purity of one's Israelite ancestry. It is surprisingly fascinating that Matthew includes in his genealogy four women who had conspicuous affiliations with Gentiles. These women include three ancestors of king David and the mother of king Solomon. Thus, Matthew highlights God's inclusivistic embrace for God-fearing Gentiles already in his opening paragraph, based on Israel's history.

Second, genealogies were designed to provide a connection between significant generations. A close look at Genesis one may notice that it does not narrate the activities of every generation between Adam and Noah or between Noah and Abraham. Rather, Genesis focuses on those major figures and summarizes the time between them by listing others. Similarly, Matthew follows such pattern by listing many generations, albeit in schematic groups of roughly fourteen each, connecting the most momentous occasions in Israel's history: Abraham, David, the exile and now the Messiah (Keener, 2016). Third, biblical genealogies reflect Israel's tribal origins where one's provable identity as a member of the tribe is a passport to survival because the tribe cares for its members. Fourth, it is used to undergird status, especially for the offices of king and priest where lineage is important. Lastly, biblical genealogies are related to the concept of collective personality. That is, if something of the ancestor is thought to reappear in the descendant, then one's genealogy may reflect on one's character, personality, or traits (Brown, 1993).

One's ancestry is a proof of God's faithfulness throughout history. Ancient Jewish teachers remarked that arranging all the marriages in people's ancestry was a greater miracle than the parting of the sea Moses' day. Matthew's genealogy sets the tone of his Gospel by arousing the biblical history of Israel. Also, ancient rabbis sometimes developed wordplays by changing a letter here or there, and some scholars find such wordplays in Matthew's genealogical account. In addition to Jesus being the heir of the royal line of David, he is the spiritual heir to the Psalms and the Prophets (Keener, 2016). Thus, it is noted that the Greek text of Matthew's genealogy speaks of not precisely "Asa" but the psalmist Asaph (Matt. 1:8) and not precisely the king "Amon" but the prophet Amos (Matt. 1:10).

What caused Matthew's choice of selecting these four women? There are three propositions that are worthy of note: The first proposal that states that the four women were regarded as sinners and their inclusion foreshadowed for Matthew's readers the role of Jesus as the saviour of sinners. This view falls short of biblical portraits of these four women. For instance, Ruth was never portrayed as having sinned with Boaz. But, while in the Old Testament the other women were guilty of unchastity. But then, in the Jewish piety of Jesus' day these women were respected. Tamar was respected as a saintly Jewish proselyte (a convert Canaanite). She is said to have done what she did because of her faith

in the messianic promise concerning Judah's lineage and she wanted to partake in its blessing. Rahab was also classified as a heroine for having aided in Israel's victory at Jericho was hailed as model of faith (Heb. 11:31). Even Bathsheba's adulterous act was not always condemned in rabbinic literature because she gave birth to Solomon. In view of this, there is no or little likelihood that Matthew's audience would have considered these four women as sinners (Brown, 1993).

The second proposal states that the women were regarded as foreigners and were included by Matthew to show that Jesus, though Jewish messiah, was related by ancestry to the Gentiles. Based on biblical accounts, Rahab and Tamar (probably) were Canaanites, while Ruth was a Moabite. Bathsheba was never identified in the Old Testament as a foreigner but called a wife of Uriah (the Hittite) that Matthew identifies her, and definitely points to the fact that they are to be considered as foreigners in the genealogy of Jesus. The drawback of this proposal lies on the premise that it is not likely that the Jews of the first century would have regarded these four women as foreigners despite the Old Testament evidence. In the post-biblical Jewish literature Rahab and Tamar were not presented as Gentiles but as proselytes or Jewish converts (Brown, 1993).

The third proposal which has been followed by considerable followers, finds two convergences in the four Old Testament women that they share with Mary: (a) there is something extraordinary or irregular in their union with their partners— a union which, though it may have been scandalous to outsiders, continued the blessed lineage of the Messiah; (b) the women showed initiative or played an important role in God's plan and so came to be considered the instrument of God's providence or His Holy Spirit (Brown, 1993).

The non-Israelite women in Matthew's Genealogy

According to Howell (1990, 98-99):

> The genealogy of Jesus...which opens Matthew's Gospel should be considered expositional in this sense, because Matthew uses it to place his story of Jesus firmly in the history of Israel and thus establish one of the temporal coordinates for the narrative world projected by his Gospel. In this way the genealogy lays the basis for the repeated references to the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, references which are the evangelist's primary device for anchoring his story to the past history of Israel. With the Old Testament formula quotations, Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfilment of Israel's Messianic hopes and of God's plan to save his people.

1. Tamar

Tamar is identified by Matthew as the woman through whom Judah the son of Jacob generated Perez and Zerah (1:3). Genesis 38:1-30 confirms these names and union; there is no doubt therefore that Matthew is referring to the Tamar of this story. Although the biblical account is vague about Tamar's ancestry, according to pre-Christian Jewish traditions in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Book of Jubilees she was a daughter of Aram (Charlesworth, 1983).

The story of Tamar is situated in a family; and in relation to the family as the nucleus of the society, it betrays human passion, love, procreative anxiety and honour. She is thought to be a Canaanite who was married to Judah's first son, Er. After the death of her husband, Er, she was given into levirate marriage to Er's brother, Onan, so that he might raise children and continue the inheritance of his deceased brother. Conscious that the offspring from Tamar would not be legally his, Onan sabotaged the intent of the relationship by practicing withdrawal at each sexual encounter with Tamar and was struck dead by God. Afraid of the two deaths, Judah tried to avoid the death of his third son, Shelah, by telling Tamar to go home to her people and wait till Shelah is old enough to marry her. But, Judah failed to abide by his words thus ending Tamar's dream of a child for her late husband and her welfare.

Tamar took matters into her own hands and played the prostitute to raise a descendant for her late husband through her father-in-law, Judah. This risk which Tamar took for her late husband was consequently interpreted by Judah as righteousness (Gen 38:26) and it led to the birth of a twin, one of whom was Perez, an ancestor of David (Ruth 4:12. 18-22; 1 Chr. 2-4) and Jesus (Matt 1:3). Through Perez, therefore, Tamar is notably mentioned in Matthew's account of the genealogy as the ancestress of Jesus.

2. Rahab

Rahab is identified as the woman with whom Salmon fathered Boaz the father of Jesse who later fathered David (Matt 1:5a). The name also occurs in two other places in the NT (Hebrew 11:31 and James 2:25). Joshua 2:1-24 gives an account of a certain prostitute Rahab who saved the lives of the two men sent by Joshua to explore Jericho. She is of the Canaanite nations and probably a secular prostitute without any cultic or sacred affiliation. She hid the two Israelite spies on the roof of her house and thus saved their lives from attack by her king and his men.

She consequently enhanced the fulfilment of God's covenant-promise of land to his people by assisting Joshua conquer Jericho. Her cooperation with Joshua's team was loyalty to the cause of Yahweh and his people. As a reward for this loyalty she was on her request spared

with her whole family and given a place outside the camp of Israel (cf. Josh 2:13; 6:17.25). The nature of her request identifies her legitimate and objective concern for the welfare of her family.

The relatively few verses dedicated to her in the Old Testament do not indicate that she was married, or had any sexual intimacy with Salmon. Ruth 4:21 and 1 Chronicles 2:11 however provide the Old Testament evidence that Salmon was the father of Boaz. Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 are however more distinctive in their reference to 'Rahab' as the personality mentioned in Joshua. Like Tamar was to Judah, Rahab was a prostitute and deceptive towards the king in relation to the spies. Her misleading the king and his men would indicate her instinct for self-preservation in an attempt to bluff the authority that had not cared to provide for her and her family (Newman, 1985).

Rahab is mentioned both in Hebrews 11:31 as a model of faith and in James 2:24 as a model of justification by works. She combines both and satisfies the complementary theory of necessary coexistence between faith and good works in James 2:17, 26. Cooperation with the plan of Yahweh brought redemption to a woman who was not only a non-Israelite (Canaanite) and therefore an outsider to the promise, but also a prostitute. The figure of Rahab reminds the reader that faith may be illustrated not only doctrinally but also and necessarily in terms of lives lived (Coote, 1998).

3. Ruth

Ruth is mentioned in the genealogy as the woman with whom Boaz the son of Rahab fathered Obed the father of Jesse (1:5). The uniqueness of these final links of the pre-monarchical section of the genealogies consists in the fact that Boaz the son of a non-Israelite woman fathered Obed (the father of Jesse) from another non-Israelite woman Ruth. Obed the grandfather of David had a mother who was a non-Jew and a paternal grandmother who was equally not a Jew. There is at this point of the family tree an elevated concentration of non-Jewish blood flowing in the veins of David's ancestors.

Ruth was a Moabitess and daughter-in-law of Naomi (Elimelech's wife). At the apparent seductive instigation of Naomi, Ruth suggestively influenced a male member of the Elimelech family Boaz into taking her over as his wife to establish a family and redeem her on behalf of her late husband. The language of the plot is suggestive of a sexual overture which met the fancy of Boaz. Her action was described by Boaz as 'kindness' (Ruth 3:10).

4. Wife of Uriah (Bathsheba)

Matthew identifies the woman with whom David fathered Solomon as 'the wife of Uriah' (1:6b). He does not give her name but the woman known in the Old Testament as the wife

of Uriah and mother of Solomon is called Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:3; 12:24). There is therefore no doubt that she is the one referred to here by Matthew as 'the wife of Uriah. Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, is said to be a Canaanite according to *T. Jud*. 17, 1-3 (Charlesworth, 1983).

She is reported to have had (at the instance of David) a sexual liaison with David that led to the murder of her husband by the latter. She became pregnant from that sexual intercourse with David. The detail that the intercourse with David took place just after she had cleansed herself from her monthly period ties the pregnancy to David. She became the wife of David after the death of her husband and gave birth to Solomon after the death of the first child (2 Sam 11:1-12:24). The death of the child of that adulterous encounter comes within the package of divine displeasure for wrong doings while the birth of the second child said to have been loved by God points to how providence works.

Scholarly attempts to re-present Bathsheba as the initiator of the encounter who exposed herself with the intent of being seen by David do not hold because there are no textual indications to that effect (Hertzberg, 1964). Rather the choice of verbs like 'David finding out about her' and 'sending his men to fetch her' reveals that the author intends to place the moral responsibility entirely on David as the initiator (2 Sam 11:2-5). The author's comments in v. 27b and 12:7 favour this understanding.

Implications to Contemporary Churches in Africa

The forceful divisive factors in life among others are gender, status and ethnicity. Some of the takeaways from the Gospel of Matthew include but not limited to gender and ethnicity vis-à-vis racism. One of the menaces wreaking havoc among Christian societies in Africa is divisive ethnicity. Divisive ethnicity is a situation where an ethnic group discriminates against "others" on the basis of ethnic identity. It is a phenomenon where absolute loyalty to ethnic affiliation supersedes loyalty to a nation, state, God, or the church (Maigadi, 2006). At the global level, racism is tearing communities apart. But in Africa, divisive ethnicity is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into every fabric of the African society and even Christian organizations and ministries are not exempted. Hegemony is the order of the day. Competency and merit are often sacrificed for ethnic affiliations. Certain privileges and opportunities are reserved for some people because of their ethnic associations.

Against the cultural norms and practices in Matthew's day, he paid attention to these four women regardless of their gender. Gender discrimination is inimical to the growth and peace of Christian societies in Africa. Women in contemporary societies have proven to be more than just sex machines rather they are a force to be reckoned with in every sphere of

life. In order to preserve the peace which Jesus came to give, and to accomplish the purpose of his death, which is the salvation of the world, the church must avoid suspicions and contentions among men and women (Oderinde, 2012). The church needs to follow the pattern of Matthew who gave these four women by giving due recognition.

For example, in some parts of Nigeria some cultures still promote boy-child education at the expense of that of girl-child. Some churches still follow defaults of anti-female cultural traditions. Jesus Christ came to the world in order to save his people from their sins including women enslavement and discrimination (Matt. 1:21). Continual gender discrimination will continue to impede the fulfilment of the great commission which is about soul-winning (Matthew 28:18-20).

Bakoshi (2016) counsels that the church in Nigeria should take a redemptive stand towards gender issues. The women should be redeemed and set free to be what and do what Jesus Christ has called them into. This would bring emotional and spiritual healing within the family and the body of Christ. The church should set the pace for the society and not vice versa.

African Christian societies should place much value on the girl-child. Girls are subjected to molestation, assaults and sexual abuse nowadays. Even some so called "men of God" abuse young girls. Every now and then there are reported cases of how young girls are being molested, brutalized and sexually abused. Contemporary churches should advocate for the protection and promotion of the rights of every girl-child. Some girls have opted for prostitution because they do not have options for survival. It is part of the social responsibility of the church to cater for the needy (Matt. 11:28-30). Young girls should receive favourable attention of churches. Churches should embrace, engage and empower young girls by providing conducive environment, constant instruction and support.

Conclusion

The Gospel according to Matthew is a distinctive literary masterpiece. By including the four non-Israelite women in the genealogical account of the Messiah was a counter-cultural engagement. Such literary act was a total departure from the usual practice in the Judeo-Christian communities in the first and second centuries. Christian societies in Africa should learn from Apostle Matthew. It is imperative for the church, especially in the global south, to do all within her reach, to reach all, encourage all and empower all. A sinner today may become a saint tomorrow, so people should not be written off because of their moral decadence which might be conditioned because of situations beyond their control. Churches are enjoined to embrace people irrespective of their moral bankruptcy, cultural and ethnic affiliations, gender and social positioning, economic class and the likes.

References

Bakoshi, I. A. (2016). *Gender Inclusiveness: A Biblical Prescription for Enhancing the Relationship of Men and Women.* Jos: Challenge Press.

Brown, R. E. (1993). *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.* New York: Doubleday.

Brown, J. K. (2013). "Gospel of Matthew" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels.* Downers Grove, Michigan: Inter-Varsity Press.

Charlesworth, J. (Ed.). (1983) *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Volume One. New York: Garden City.

Craig, S. K. (2016). *NIV Cultural Background: Study Bible.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.

Howell, D. (1990). *Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Maigadi, B. S. (2006). *Divisive Ethnicity in the Church in Africa.* Kaduna: Baraka Press.

Newman, M. (1985). "Rahab and the Conquest." In Butler. J. (Ed.). *Understanding the Word*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.

Coote, R. (1998). "The Book of Joshua" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 2. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Hertzberg, H. (1964). *I and II Samuel*. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press.

Oderinde, O. A. (2012). *Gender Relations: Lessons from Jesus' Relationship with Women in Mark.* Ibadan: Korem Prints.

Wilson, R. R. (1975). "The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 168-189.

Wright, N. T. (1992). *The New Testament and the People of God.* Minneapolis: Fortress.