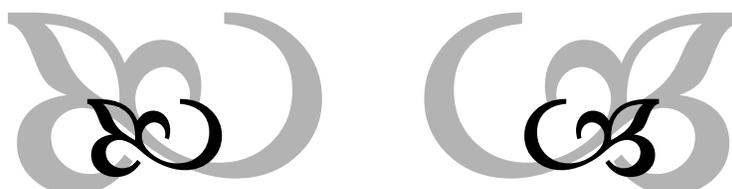


*If we believe the scriptures are a keyhole through which we can peek into God's inner sanctum, we had best be prepared for periodic eye-rubbing to clear our vision as we contemplate the narratives of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba.*

# SCARLET THREADS IN THE LINEAGE OF JESUS

## FOUR WOMEN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT



*By H. Parker Blount*

AS A YOUNG MAN, I WANTED TO BE A WORTHY priesthood holder entitled to a pure, sweet, clean virgin who would accompany me to the temple. I don't know that I acquired that view on my own, but having heard Church leaders repeatedly picture it as the narrow gate to marital bliss and exaltation, I adopted it as my own. I had read *The Scarlet Letter*, and I shrank from the oppressive and fetid consequences of sexual transgression. Poor Hester Prynne vividly demonstrated what we were frequently told. In contrast to the permeating peace of virtue retained, lost virtue is crimson pain incarnate. If we lost our virtue, we were told, we would be overcome with guilt, self-recrimination, and despair. We would lose self-respect and the respect of others. We would suffer endless unhappiness, and repentance would be a long and painful process. Even though we could repent and be forgiven, our virtue could never be restored.

We were told that a girl who lost her virtue was like a dust-covered and bruised flower along the wayside, ignored by the travelers who had their eyes on the pristine beauty growing high above and out of reach of the grime stirred up by the trav-



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elers' careless feet. Although these notions were primarily aimed at girls, boys were made to understand what sorry specimens they were if they took the virtue of one of these innocent daughters of God, or even besmeared her through necking or petting. Said one member of the Twelve of that era:

The leaders of our Church have said that they would rather see their children dead and in their graves clean, than to have them lead unclean lives. Virtue is more important than life. Protect it above your life. If the time ever comes when you must choose between the two, then sacrifice your life, but under no circumstances sacrifice your virtue.<sup>1</sup>

SHE WAITED BY the wayside. Her outfit and posture shouted, "For a price, you can have me." A man came along, saw her, was aroused, bargained a price, and a trick was turned. The woman was Tamar; the man, Judah. Their story is found in Genesis 38.

My interest in Tamar came about when, sometime back, I decided to reread the New Testament, beginning with "The Gospel According to St. Matthew." Ordinarily I skip the lineage of Jesus, otherwise known as "the begats," in Matthew chapter 1.

The begats are a quintessential patriarchal statement testifying to the male power to procreate. The begats are also terribly boring. For some reason, I decided to read them this time. I began: Abraham begat Isaac; Isaac begat Jacob, Jacob begat Judah. I was already tired after just two verses. I was ready to quit and move on to where Matthew mentions Joseph and Mary and Jesus, but my eye caught something that sur-

prised me. There in verse three, in which Matthew tells us that Judah begat Pharez, Matthew adds, “of Tamar.” Why include Tamar, I wondered. He hadn’t included Sarah, Rachel, or Leah. As I read the following verses that march us steadily, begat by begat, toward King David, Matthew mentions three more women by whom a male child in Jesus’ lineage had been sired. They were Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. (Matthew doesn’t identify Bathsheba by name but as “her that had been the wife of Uriah.”) Then silence—no more women for twenty-seven generations, until Matthew introduces Mary, “of whom was born Jesus” (Matthew 1:16).

Forty-two generations. According to Matthew, forty-two men and a mere five women make up the lineage of Jesus. It is obvious why he included Mary, even if he did it in the passive voice—Mary didn’t bear Jesus; Jesus was born of her. Was there something special about these four women? I began searching the scriptures to see what I might learn about them and what their stories might reveal. What follows are some of my discoveries and thoughts regarding these women. To help put things in perspective, I will continue with Tamar’s story and then summarize the Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba stories.

ILLUSTRATIONS BASED ON PAINTINGS BY HE QI



TAMAR

AS FAR AS we know, Tamar was not a practicing prostitute. But on this occasion, she resorted to using sex, as do many women, to acquire something that she seemed, as a female, unable to achieve through her own merits. What Tamar wanted was a child. To use Rachel’s words, “Give me children, or else I die” (Genesis 30:1) A childless woman had no stature in Tamar’s culture. Tamar had married Judah’s oldest son, Er, whom the scriptures say God slew for some unnamed wickedness. Childless, she was given to the second son, Onan, to raise up children to his brother. At the critical moment, however, Onan withdrew, spilling his seed on the ground (Genesis 38:9). God was unhappy with Onan’s *coitus interruptus* and slew him, too. God likes a man who sees things through to the end.

Judah promised Tamar his youngest son, Shelah, when he came of age. But Judah forgot his promise. Desperate for a child, Tamar apparently concluded that using her sex to get her father-in-law’s attention could also give her the child she wanted. So she dressed herself as a harlot and waited at the side of the road. Judah, not recognizing his daughter-in-law, and thinking her a harlot, asked what it would take for him to sleep with her. They settled on a kid from his flock, to be de-

livered at a later date. Tamar, however, insisted on collateral against the delivery of the kid. Judah left with her his signet, bracelets, and staff.

As a result of that encounter, Tamar became pregnant and gave birth to twin boys. During delivery, one of the babies “put out his hand” as though he were testing the waters of life. The midwife tied a scarlet thread around the exposed hand, a symbol that will show up in yet another story. “And it came to pass, as he drew back his hand, that, behold, his brother came out: and she said, How hast thou broken forth? this breach be upon thee: therefore his name was called Pharez” (Genesis 38:28–29).

When Judah discovers that Tamar is pregnant, he wants her burned. She produces the signet, bracelets, and staff and asks Judah what had to be for him a startling question, “Whose are these?” Judah recognizes these tokens and acknowledges his mistake: “She hath been more righteous than I; because that I gave her not to Shelah my son” (Genesis 38:26). Tamar is not burned, and, in fact, there is no evidence of Judah nor Tamar experiencing any recriminations. What the Bible *does* tell us is that Judah fathered what became the most prominent of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the one to which the promised Messiah would be born. And it was Pharez, the child of Tamar and Judah’s illegitimate union, who became a forefather of King David, and, according to Matthew, Jesus.



RAHAB

AS THE CHILDREN of Israel approached the promised land, Joshua sent two spies secretly into Jericho to survey the situation (Joshua 2). They lodged at the house of Rahab the harlot. We don’t know why they chose to lodge at such a house, but one conspicuous possibility is to avail themselves of what the house had to offer. In Rahab’s words, “There came men unto me” (Joshua 2:4). The king of Jericho became aware of their presence and sought to apprehend them. Rahab hid the spies on her roof, and misled the king’s agents by telling them the spies had only moments before left the city. “Hurry, you can catch them,” she essentially said. She told the two spies that people were afraid of the power of the god of the Israelites, and she knew that their god would give them the land of Jericho. She begged the spies to spare her and her father’s family. Because of her kindness in saving their lives by hiding them, they promised her that her house and everyone in it would be spared when they came into the land. They gave her a scarlet thread to hang in her

window to mark the house to be spared. She then lowered them over the wall in a basket, and the two spies returned and reported to Joshua what they had heard of the people's fear.

A midrash tells that the two spies were Zarah and Pharez, the twins of Tamar and Judah, and the scarlet thread to be hung in the window was the same that had been bound around Zarah's hand at his birth.<sup>2</sup> That, of course, is not part of the biblical account. What is recorded there is that the prostitute Rahab, along with members of her family, were spared by the invading Israelites, who under the guidance of their powerful God captured the land. The record also reports that Rahab gave birth to a son whom she named Boaz.



RUTH

**E**LIMELECH AND HIS wife Naomi, with their two sons, left famine-starved Bethlehem-Judea and moved to Moab. There the two sons married Moabite women, one of whom was named Ruth. In time, both Elimelech and his two sons died. Naomi decided to return to her homeland, and Ruth chose to leave Moab, her home, and go with her mother-in-law.

The narrator of Ruth's story has her say to her mother-in-law, "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1: 16). This beautiful and poetic statement has made the story of Ruth extremely appealing. Using that lyrical verse, LDS speakers teach principles of conversion, fidelity, and loyalty. According to one LDS apostle, Ruth is a "model of ideal womanhood."<sup>3</sup>

Ruth's beautiful statement is just the beginning of her story. Ruth returns with Naomi to Naomi's homeland. Soon Naomi masterminds a plot whereby Ruth captures the attention and favors of Naomi's wealthy kinsman Boaz, the same Boaz born of Rahab. Naomi tells Ruth that late in the evening, Boaz will be at the threshing floor eating and, along with his meal, drinking wine. Ruth is directed to wash, dress—apparently in a special outfit—and perfume herself. Ruth is to slip unseen to the threshing floor. After Boaz is well under the influence of wine and lies down, she is to lie down next to him.

"And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of corn: and she came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid her down" (Ruth 3:7). When Boaz discovers her, she tells him, "I am Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine hand-

maid; for thou art a near kinsman" (Ruth 3:9). Ruth spends the remainder of the night with him only to slip away before dawn under cover of darkness in hopes that no one would discover she had spent the night on the threshing room floor.

Now, you tell me: what do you think is about to transpire when a sexually experienced woman lies down beside a tipsy man in the dark of night? Do you think they were discussing grain futures? What might "uncover his feet" be a euphemism for? What about "spread thy skirt over thine handmaid"?<sup>4</sup>

Later, we read that Boaz marries Ruth, and "the Lord gave her conception, and she bare a son" named Obed, the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David the king (Ruth 4:13–17).



BATHSHEBA

**D**AVID SEES BATHSHEBA bathing, summons her, and has sex with her. She becomes pregnant. Here the narrator of the story allows Bathsheba to utter her only words: "I am with child." David brings home Uriah the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband, from his military campaign expecting him to sleep with Bathsheba and thereby make her pregnancy seem legitimate. "And David said to Uriah, Go down to thy house, and wash thy feet" (2 Samuel 11:8). Alas, David is foiled. Uriah will not allow himself to have fun while his military colleagues are in the field of battle having none. David's solution is to put Uriah in a vulnerable position on the battlefield where he is sure to be killed. Following Uriah's death, David and Bathsheba are married.

Unlike the three other cases, where there is no evidence the Lord is displeased with either the man or the woman, the Lord is displeased with David. He sends Nathan the prophet to David. "Thou hast despised me," the Lord says through Nathan. You have killed Uriah with the sword of Ammon, and you have taken his wife to be your wife. David had many wives, and the Lord would have given him more if he had asked. But David took a poor man's one little ewe lamb without asking. For his failure to ask, and for setting Uriah up to be killed by the Ammonites, thus giving Israel's enemies a chance to blaspheme Yahweh, the Lord tells David the sword will never depart from David's house, beginning with the death of Bathsheba's child (2 Samuel 12:8–10, 14). But first the child must suffer a severe illness, the Lord keeping him barely alive for seven days before he is to die. That is Yahweh's justice—killing the child to punish David. Why not kill David? Apparently Yahweh had further plans—important plans for both David and Bathsheba.

At the death of the child, David goes to Bathsheba to comfort her. The compassionate comforting leads to sexual intercourse. We might even say that she uncovered his feet and he spread his skirt over her. She conceives and bares a son, whom they name Solomon. And the scriptures tell us the Lord loved Solomon. Go figure.

Of all of David's wives and concubines, it is to Bathsheba that the Lord gives the child Solomon, who is to play such a crucial part in shaping Judeo-Christian religion. Prior to Solomon, Yahweh is Israel's tribal god. During Solomon's rule, we see a shift in the text and begin encountering references to Yahweh as more than just Israel's God and protector, but also as God the Father. Solomon builds Yahweh a temple in which to reside. And Solomon, the Lord said, "shall build an house for my name; and he shall be my son, and I will be his father" (I Chronicles 22:10).

**A**S A YOUNG man at BYU, I often heard better dead and clean, than alive and unclean, or some similar refrain. Being clean, of course, meant sexual purity. The frightening thing was that I had sexual desires. I hated to admit it, and I didn't, even to myself if I could help it. But it was nevertheless true, and those desires were a great threat to my peace of mind as well as, I assumed, to my eternal salvation. For young men my age, our sexuality was like a virus that could strike and kill us spiritually. It was to be controlled with prescriptions such as singing a hymn to ourselves, reading the scriptures more regularly, and praying more intently. The underlying message seemed to be that if we were living worthily, we would be immune to those desires (that is, they wouldn't exist). Looking back, it seems to me that most of my associates were boys who hid behind a mask of blue blazers and striped ties, trying hard to be a younger version of general authorities who came nearly weekly to speak to us, and who obviously had never had to wrestle with a single impure thought.

So why did Matthew include *these* four women out of forty-two generations of male begats? He doesn't tell us,<sup>5</sup> so I decided to back up a step and ask why these stories might have been important to ancient Israel. What was it about these women and what they did that made them worthy of the New Testament's spotlight?

An important key to understanding the Old Testament is to recognize that one of its primary purposes is to show that Yahweh is more powerful than any of the gods of the other tribes in the land. Time after time, we are shown how he outwits and out-muscles the Israelites' enemies (and their gods). As we read in Exodus, "The Lord is a man of war. . . . Thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy" (Exodus 15: 3, 6). In addition, the Old Testament tells how the Hebrews interpreted their relationship with Yahweh as his chosen people and what it meant to be faithful. In these writings, they reveal their perception of Yahweh's personality—what sets him off, and what he winks at.

How do the stories of these four women show the power of Yahweh? He gives these women children—boy babies. Male children are a gift from God. It was an affirmation to the

mother that God took notice of them, that they were righteous and acceptable to God in perhaps the same way that being called to certain LDS leadership positions is taken by some as an affirmation of righteousness. As the Psalmist sings, "Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward" (Psalm 127:3).

Nevertheless, I can't quite believe that the stories of these four women are important to the biblical writers exclusively because they gave birth to male children. There are hundreds of women with sons who aren't mentioned. The reason that ancient Israel valued these stories, or that Matthew included them in the begats, is not explicitly revealed in the stories nor in the commentaries. We are left to find their value as we interact with the narratives themselves.

**M**Y PURSUIT OF these stories led me to another question: Why are these women and their stories largely ignored in LDS teaching? Is it because they tell us so little? Or is it because they tell us more than we are prepared to hear?

Instead of discovering in these women's stories the ethics and morality we Latter-day Saints are predisposed to find in the scriptures, we are confronted with astonishingly different characters. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, are, as Jonathan Kirsch tersely observes, "non-Israelites who married Israelite men, and all four engaged in sexually questionable conduct, including acts of prostitution and seduction."<sup>6</sup> To that we can add that each story contains some rather underhanded scheming. Rather than confirming the image of irreplaceable virtue, these stories contradict it. In these stories, what we have been taught to consider as immoral behavior is not followed by misery and unhappiness, but by the ultimate blessing—a child is born, "God hath taken away my reproach" (Genesis 30:23). These women are a far cry from the image we construct of the ideal woman. And the men? Well, the less said the better.

Because the events that followed the scheming in each story are not what we expect to hear, it is all the more important to explore, rather than ignore, them.

I am struck by the openness of these stories. Nothing is hidden. The women's sexuality is neither disguised nor ignored; neither is their scheming. If anything, these women are celebrated because of the way they challenged the patriarchal society through negotiating, contriving, and even deceiving. They are who they are, and that is what the stories tell. The Hebrew chronicler says in effect, if not in fact: this is what these women did and how they lived, and they are a vital part of the story that tells us who we are.

When I think of Tamar, I see a woman shaped by a cultural milieu that tells her that her mission in life is to bear a child. She, a non-Israelite woman, willingly abides by the Hebrew levirate marriage custom in which a brother marries his dead brother's widow and "go[es] in unto her . . . and perform[s] the duty of an husband's brother unto her" (Deuteronomy 25:5). The scene depicted in Tamar's story prior to her seduction of her father-in-law, then, is of a grown woman waiting for a boy

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to mature physically so that he can impregnate her. I struggle to find a morality paradigm in which I can be comfortable with this situation.

When I encounter Bible stories, I have to remind myself how important it is to really listen. As Marcus Borg says, "Reading [the Bible] well involves listening well—seeking to hear what the text is saying to us and not simply absorbing the text into what we already think."<sup>7</sup> What I hear is Tamar saying: "Enough already. I tried their program, and it hasn't worked. Now it is time to take things into my own hands." And she, the seductress, Judah confesses, was more righteous than he (Genesis 38:26).

While Tamar played the role of a prostitute, Rahab, in fact, was a prostitute. However, the narrative does not judge her prostitution. She is deeply concerned about her father's family, and she may even have been driven to prostitution to provide for them. I don't know how many women choose the profession because they find it personally fulfilling. But Rahab reads the signs of the time, and she is an opportunist. Instead of remaining loyal to her own government, she casts her lot with what she figures will be the winning faction. Interestingly, when the two spies report to Joshua, the only information they have about Jericho is what Rahab has given them. Whatever the spies were doing in Jericho, they weren't spying—and they took the word of this prostitute and delivered it as their report to their commander. Rahab's home and all who occupied it are spared by the conquering Israelites. And then she marries and has a child, a boy named Boaz, who grows up to marry a Moabite woman named Ruth.

The Book of Ruth raises interesting questions about what constitutes family. Naomi gives her two daughters-in-law good advice about the importance of family and place. "Go, return each to [your] mother's house," she tells them. Later she says to

Ruth, "Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law" (Ruth 1:8, 15). Ruth, of course, doesn't return but instead goes with her mother-in-law.

The irony is that in our Mormon community, even though we celebrate Ruth as a model of ideal womanhood, the advice we would give in a similar situation would be the same that Naomi gave, and we would decry a young woman's leaving the stakes of Zion to go to a strange land and acquire a new religion. It is the choice of Ruth's sister-in-law Orpah, not Ruth's choice, that we modern Mormons would hold up as the ideal.

What really grabs my attention in Ruth's story is that it is set against a harsh exclusivity distinguishing between who is "chosen" and who is not. The Moabites were the descendants of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter. They were disliked by the children of Israel and generally considered enemies. When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity, the prophet Ezra demanded that the men who had married non-Israelite women, including Moabites, divorce and abandon their wives and children. Even those Moabite women who wished to make Israel's god their god were not considered worthy and acceptable as members of the chosen. The story of Ruth somehow offsets the bitter taste of Ezra's command. Since Tamar, Bathsheba, and Rahab were most likely non-Israelites, their stories each deliver the same message of diversity and inclusion. At the very least, God included them—so the stories imply—by giving them offspring in the royal lineage. Did they convert? Did they make Israel's God their God? Except for Ruth, the record doesn't say. Maybe it wasn't important.

Each of these four stories, but Ruth's in particular, stand apart from the exclusivity and rigidity that we find in Ezra, as well as elsewhere. The compilers of the Hebrew Bible seem quite willing to set one idea against another. They are willing to let the contradictions and the paradoxes stand, as though these were important in understanding God and how God relates to his chosen people. The compilers could live with ambiguity—and they needed to, since their experience showed Yahweh to be an unpredictable God. His paths are seldom straight but contain sweeping curves and sharp angles like a twisting mountain path.

Of the four tales, the story of Bathsheba may be the most interesting, certainly the most complex. For most of the narrative, we see Bathsheba only in the background of David's story. And in this story, unlike the others, God is a character. Readers often assume that Bathsheba was fetchingly beautiful, but all we know is that David was a randy fellow. Against the roiling David, Bathsheba comes across as quiet waters—unlike the portrait of the other women we discuss here. When she discovers she is pregnant, she doesn't scream, "Oh my God, I'm pregnant." She simply sends David word, "I am with child."

We can sense something of Bathsheba's character by comparing her with one of David's other wives, Michal. Michal, was given to David by her father Saul. Later, as Saul's fear and hatred of David increase and while David is on the run, Saul gives Michal to Phalti (again showing us the status of women

among God's chosen people). In time, David takes back Michal, but when Michal criticizes David for an unseemly dance witnessed by young girls, David expels her from his life. "Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death" (2 Samuel 6:23).

According to the Bible, Michal loved David. There are frequent references to a man loving another man, but to my knowledge, this is the only account in the Old Testament mentioning a woman's love for a man. The romantic in me says that Michal deserved to bear Solomon. We don't know if Bathsheba loved David, but unlike her sister wife Michal, Bathsheba prevailed.

The story of these four women, and the Hebrew men who interacted with them, are surprisingly reminiscent of stories from Mormon history. If we look closely, we will find that all the particulars are there. Women used sex to survive and find self-worth, just as Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba did. They schemed to survive when men were away on missions or in the face of polygamy. And in those early days of the Church, there were counterparts to Judah, the spies, Boaz, and David. Just as Bathsheba responded to a powerful David, the Lord's anointed, so did women respond similarly to powerful leaders of the new kingdom.<sup>8</sup> If we were as open as the Hebrew storytellers, I have every reason to believe that we would see aspects of these stories unfolding in the Church's recent history.

The only difference between the Hebrew and Mormon narratives is not in the particulars, but in the telling. The Hebrews told them without judgment and without tidying or polishing them. They weren't concerned about flaws and warts, because everyone had them. Being God's chosen people did not hang on the merits of any given individual.

**A** GIRL I was dating when I was at BYU told me that she and her roommates had been watching the Sunday morning session of general conference when one of her roommates left the room in tears. It turned out that she had given birth out of wedlock and had put up the child for adoption. A speaker's comments regarding chastity, moral cleanliness, and the preciousness of virtue, which could so easily be lost, had engendered deep feelings of guilt and unworthiness in this young woman. Even though she had gone through the process of repentance and done all her bishop had asked, she still carried a heavy burden.

She was a really lovely girl who attracted the attention of the guys. But my girlfriend and I felt sorry for her. We knew that she could repent, but she could never reestablish her virtue. It was gone forever. And, of course, she would have to confess her indiscretion to any boy who became serious about her. And what would that lead to? Who would want as their eternal companion this used and bruised flower?

It never occurred to us to question any of that. We didn't, perhaps couldn't, go deep enough to realize that virtue wasn't exclusively associated with an unbroken hymen. I don't know why we didn't realize that virtue wasn't so tenuous that one could be filled with it one minute and then be absolutely and forever devoid of it the next.

I believe the Hebrew perception of God and morality is less exacting and less rigid than the view I acquired from my immersion in the Mormon way of thinking. I don't think the Hebrews were as preoccupied with the ideal—the ideal home, family, man, woman—as we seem to be. Perhaps they didn't have the leisure to get much beyond the everyday effort of living. Or maybe they didn't believe they could forge themselves into flawless vessels. It is possible they didn't even believe that was necessary.

Compared to the Hebrew narrative, I wonder if we aren't a little too supercilious about our purity, or even about our definitions of worthiness and purity. Thinking about these four women makes me wonder if we haven't perhaps overgrazed the "body is a temple of God" pasture. One LDS women's leader recently said:

You can recognize women who are grateful to be a daughter of God by their outward appearance. These women understand their stewardship over their bodies and treat them with dignity. They care for their bodies as they would a holy temple, for they understand the Lord's teaching: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16)<sup>9</sup>

A temple, just like a body, can be a whited sepulcher full of dead men's bones. A little less body talk and a little more talk about the interior would suit me better. But, then again, the body is worth thinking about. According to the male voice in the Song of Solomon, his lover's lips "are like a thread of scarlet" (Song of Solomon 4:3). His lover's breasts are like . . . well, you probably aren't interested in what her breasts are like. But according to Cathy Smith Bowers, in her poem "Elegy for Enkidu," "Gods are cruel, / though, knowing few men can resist a woman's breasts."<sup>10</sup>

"Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). It is so easy for us, standing apart, to equate the inviting scarlet mouth of a desirable woman with a path to crimson sin. And what is there but sex and seduction woven through the tales of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba? Tales of scarlet threads attached to scarlet women, like Hester Prynne's scarlet letter.

Hester was required to wear her scarlet letter by the community, a community that presumed such righteousness that they could humiliate anyone who deviated from their strict code of sexual conduct—or at least those whose conduct was exposed. This community wanted to be able to tell by outward appearances at a glance who loved God and who didn't.

Hester Prynne's community branded her with a scarlet letter, whereas Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba seemed not to experience any disapproval from their communities. We now seem to find the stories of these four women hard to bear. Their sexuality, determination, and machinations exceed the boundaries of our template for the ideal woman. Consequently, we don't include their stories in our litany of faith-promoting accounts of women the Lord will love—or women who love the Lord, for that matter.

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SOME YEARS BACK, I held a Church position that required me to hear confessions and make judgments about worthiness. A young woman from one of the outlying wards of the stake sought me out to confess sexual transgressions. We sat facing one another in one of the classrooms of the ward building with its opaque windows and ivory-colored concrete block walls. “I was,” she told me, “taken with rodeo cowboys.” It had led to sex. Later, before she married her non-member husband, they had sex together. Her voice hung with tears as she began, and they ran down her cheeks as she continued. She clearly was uncomfortable, not wanting to tell me these things that became despicable to her as she worked her way through the past in that cold cell of a room.

Her husband had joined the Church, and they had two little tow-headed boys. The couple attended meetings, had callings, and were deeply involved in the ward community, which included her large and active extended family. And she suffered. The flow of her life was dammed tightly, the waters backed up into black, impenetrable pools. Her husband had been baptized and came out of the waters clean and innocent while she was fully immersed in her sins. She had heard the sermons, directives, and lessons, and she knew she was flawed, that she had cheapened herself, that she wasn't worthy. Her only hope was to confess this ugliness to the proper priesthood authority.

What did I say to her? I told her it was in the past. I told her to forget it (hoping she could). I tried to assure her that from the perspective of the Church (and I was the Church at the moment), her repentance was complete. I wanted to erase it for her and to not see her scoured raw.

I don't remember her name. I can't reproduce a clear image of her face. I *do* remember the sound of her pain. I remember that because I remember my own pain as I sat with her. After she left, I cried. I didn't know why I was crying. Something was trying to speak, but it was too deep for me to find words to express it. Crying was the only voice I had.

I don't know that I am any clearer today about why I cried than I was then. But I have some thoughts now that I didn't have then. I cried because of what we do to one another and the

things we heap upon each other. I cried because Church repentance requires such a big dose of pain. I cried because she had to prostrate herself before me. Too many had. I cried because I am frail and human, and I don't know how to be anything else. I hadn't had her experiences, but I could have.

I think I cried because she couldn't choose to whom she would like to tell her story—or even whether she needed to tell the story. I think I cried because I sensed her story had been hijacked. As far as I know, she may have felt about her cowboy the way the poet Thomas Lynch said he, as a young man not yet twenty, felt about Johanna Berti.

About the only thing I knew for sure about my future was that I wanted to spend a good portion of it in the embrace of Johanna Berti, or someone like her. She had recently disabused me of years of blissless ignorance the nuns and Christian Brothers had labored to maintain.<sup>11</sup>

Even if the young wife I mention felt that way, she could not have told that story, probably not even to herself. She was left to tell a story that required her to make shame and guilt the center of it, whether it naturally belonged there or not.

THE CHILDREN OF Israel thought the accounts of these four women were worth remembering and studying. I would love to know exactly why they thought them important. I would love to be able to see the reason etched clearly in black and white. I say this knowing that the Old and New Testaments are mostly a grab bag of meaning. If we aren't careful, all we get from them is what we bring to them.

If we believe the scriptures are a keyhole through which we can peek into the inner sanctum of God, we had best be prepared for periodic eye-rubbing to clear our vision as we contemplate the narratives of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. We have been pretty much conditioned to favor an orderly, predictable God who is quick to reward righteousness and swift to punish evil. We favor stories such as Jonah's, in which, when Jonah tries to run away from his mission call, he is gulped down by a big fish. But these four women's stories tell of something quite different. They are certainly stories of salvation and redemption—not of the eternal kind, but of ordinary people aching for survival in the face of the ordinary vicissitudes of life. They are narratives about our human predisposition to long for something not easily identifiable or easily satisfied. Judah said to Tamar, “Go to, I pray thee, let me come in unto thee” (Genesis 38:16). In effect, this is what the men in each of these stories said to the women. But we, all of us, male and female, stand begging, do we not, for intimacy, willing to barter and trade? We yearn to be connected and to be whole. Maybe these narratives are telling us that God understands that better than we understand it.

I would like to think that Matthew thought we should know these four women were ancestresses of Jesus because whatever these stories may say to us, they are, at their heart, our stories. By knowing these women's stories, we might better understand this child of Mary's who said when he grew up, “Neither do I condemn thee” (John 8:11). 

## NOTES

1. "An address delivered to the Campus Branches Mutual at the Brigham Young University by Elder Mark E. Peterson on February 3, 1953," printed as a pamphlet May 1965, by the Military Relations Committee, <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/DEn/8748/> (accessed 3 November 2006).

2. See Elly Teman, "The Red String," [www.afsnet.org/sections/jewish/Elly\\_Teman.doc](http://www.afsnet.org/sections/jewish/Elly_Teman.doc) (accessed 30 October 2006).

3. Thomas S. Monson, "Models to Follow," *Ensign*, November 2002, 60.

4. There is strong scholarly consensus that there was a sexual element to Ruth's visit to Boaz that evening, though opinions about the extent of that sexual element vary widely. (See *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, John Barton and John Muddiman, eds. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], 194–95; *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 5: 843–45.) It is possible that Ruth simply uncovered Boaz's feet, perhaps to awaken him. Raphael Patai says, "The throwing of [a] . . . man's cloak, over the head of the bride is part of the marriage ceremony among the Bedouins of the Sinai Peninsula." Patai relates this to Ruth's request that Boaz spread his skirt over her. (See Raphael Patai, *Sex and Family in the Bible* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959], 97.)

Much of the speculation about the sexual activity implied in this story comes from the biblical use of the word "feet" as a euphemism for "genitals" (see, for example, Exodus 4:25; Isaiah 7:20; Deuteronomy 28:57). The David and Bathsheba story, discussed later in this essay, has David calling Uriah home from battle and telling him to "Go down to thy house, and wash thy feet," which is followed a few verses later by Uriah's explanation that he is unwilling to "lie with my wife" when his fellow soldiers are still fighting Israel's cause in the field (2 Samuel 11:8, 11). Two discussions of this euphemism, one from an LDS-themed blog, can be found at: <http://www.bycommonconsent.com/2006/01/weird-ot-euphemisms-uncovering-the-feet/> and [http://www.telecomtally.com/blog/2005/05/a\\_euphemism\\_for\\_1.html](http://www.telecomtally.com/blog/2005/05/a_euphemism_for_1.html).

Whether the story of Ruth is using euphemisms for something sexual, or is making reference to symbolic acts for which we now have no key, cannot be determined. Some commentators underscore the innocence of the events on the threshing room floor, citing Boaz's testimony of Ruth's virtue, "all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman" (Ruth 3:11). However, even though the narrative doesn't explicitly say that Ruth and Boaz engaged in sexual relations, it can certainly be interpreted as saying that something sexual transpired, and most commentators do interpret it that way. Boaz's declaration of Ruth's virtue is not unlike Judah's avowal that Tamar was more righteous than he: Boaz is not necessarily using the term "virtue" as it is used in the Church today, meaning sexual purity.

5. Following my Sunstone symposium presentations, I was directed by a friend, Boyd Petersen, to a source where New Testament scholar Raymond Brown asks what common characteristics these women share that would cause Matthew to include these four women in his list of begats. Brown explores three possibilities, each of which hinges on notions that the four women "foreshadowed" some aspect of Jesus the Messiah and Redeemer. The first is that the women were sinners, and

their inclusion alludes to and underscores the role their descendant, Jesus, plays as the redeemer of sinners. The second possibility is that the women serve to show that Jesus was related to gentiles. And third, the four women shared a commonality with Mary: each of their stories contains a sexual irregularity that initiated a step (through the influence of the Holy Spirit) that furthered God's plan. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 71–74.

My own journey with these four women, which has lasted for several years now, began with the question of why Matthew included them. That question has become less important to me as I gradually began to ask what the narratives themselves have to say to me and to the collective Mormon worldview. The commonalities that the four women share are easily derived from the Bible narratives, but I don't find anything that convinces me that any or all of the commonalities Brown mentions were the impetus for Matthew to include these women in his genealogy. As far I know, he may have copied the genealogy from another source without giving any thought to the women's inclusion.

6. Jonathan Kirsch, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 142.

7. Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again For the First Time*, (San Francisco: Harpers, 2001), 30–31.

8. I would compare the women who responded to Joseph Smith when he introduced them to plural marriage to Bathsheba. The hundreds of women who were sealed to the Prophet after his death, rather than to their own husbands, make me think about how women have always responded to the allure of a powerful leader, and I see similarities to levirate marriage in the way women sealed to Joseph for eternity were subsequently sealed for time to Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. The promise of exaltation, God's love, is powerful, and I believe that like the biblical women under discussion here, many LDS women of the past used their sexuality as leverage to achieve what they desired above all else. John A. Widtsoe wrote:

Zealous women, married or unmarried, loving the cause of the restored gospel, considered their condition in the hereafter. Some of them asked that they might be sealed to the Prophet for eternity. They were not to be his wives on earth, in mortality, but only after death in the eternities. This came often to be spoken of as celestial marriage. Such marriages led to misunderstandings by those not of the Church, and unfamiliar with its doctrines. To them marriage meant only association of earth. Therefore any ceremony uniting a married woman, for example, to Joseph Smith for eternity seemed adulterous to such people. Yet, in any day, in our day, there may be women who prefer to spend eternity with another than their husband on earth. (See John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960], 343.)

9. Margaret D. Nadauld, "The Joy of Womanhood," *Ensign*, November 2000, 14.

10. Cathy Smith Bowers, *A Book of Minutes* (Oak Ridge, Tennessee: Iris Press, 2004), 22.

11. Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 145.

