



## Mothers on the Margin? The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy

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**Mothers on the Margin? The Significance of the Women in Matthew's Genealogy.** By E. ANNE CLEMENTS (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2014), pp. 310, £21/\$34 pbk. ISBN 978-0-227-17474-6.

In this book, Clements sets out to steer a course between the sexism of traditional readings of Matthew's genealogy and the liberalism of radical feminist readings of the text, in order to retrieve a "gynocentric counternarrative" in Matthew's gospel that makes it possible both to hold onto the authority of the text and to read it as sympathetic to an egalitarian vision of biblical gender relations. Setting out to refute the traditional view — that the women in Matthew's genealogy are bound together by their shared sinfulness or scandalous sexuality — Clements argues instead that the common characteristic these women share is marginality. All five women occupy marginal positions within Israel or at its boundaries, and so their inclusion in Matthew's genealogy is intended to signal the gospel's concern with broadening Israel's boundaries. Like the rest of Matthew's gospel, Clements argues, the genealogy combines a dominant and male-focused narrative with a counternarrative focusing on women. Clements rejects the hermeneutics of suspicion which has often characterised feminist interpretations of scripture in favour of a "hermeneutics of hospitable awareness" which welcomes "not just the friend but the stranger and even the perceived enemy" (6).

Part One of the book offers narrative analyses of the stories of each of the women of Matthew's genealogy — Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, "She of Uriah" (Bathsheba) and Mary. Part Two explores the relationship between the themes of these women's stories and the Gospel of Matthew as a whole, particularly its focus on the virtues of righteousness, faith and loyalty; its attention to marginalised groups; and its treatment of women.

Rejecting the "patriarchal" interpretation of the Church Fathers which takes the women to be united by their sinful sexuality (31) — pointing out that the women of the genealogy can hardly be said to be more badly behaved in this respect than the men — Clements goes in search of a different set of shared characteristics. She notes that the women are the main protagonists in three out of the four stories in the Hebrew scriptures, an unusual exception to the typical androcentrism of Hebrew narrative, and that although the texts are short on moral evaluations of the women's behaviour, two of the stories clearly portray the men as evildoers. Tamar is at the mercy of the men in her life until she takes matters into her own hands and seduces her father in law, Judah, whose willingness to visit what he takes to be a temple prostitute is not matched by a similarly relaxed attitude to Tamar's extra-marital activities. But Tamar's cleverness means that she is able to recover her position as a traditional woman — and now mother — although, Clements notes, this return to respectability marks also her disappearance as an individual from the text. Likewise, the righteousness and orthodox obedience to YHWH demonstrated by Rahab is in contrast to the faithless spies who spend the night at her house. Lacking the independent means of Rahab, Ruth — like Tamar — takes a risky step outside the bounds of sexual respectability in order to secure Boaz as a husband and provider for herself and her mother in law; also like Tamar, Ruth recedes into the background of the text once her position as a mother is assured. All three of these women, Clements argues, are characterised not by their sinfulness or sexuality but by their possession of virtues that are crucially important to Matthew. Bathsheba, by contrast, is marked out not by her risky activity but — as indicated by her designation in Matthew's genealogy simply as "she of Uriah" — by her vulnerability and passivity in the face of David's shameful activity towards her. That she continues the line which will lead eventually to Christ is, for Clements, an indicator that God's mercy outweighs divine judgement. What Mary shares in common with her four antecedents is not her scandalous sexuality — Clements emphasises the text's insistence on her virginity — but her vulnerability to social exclusion based on others' perceptions of her sexuality, and her structural marginalisation on the edge of patriarchal and social norms.

Together, Clements argues, the righteousness, faith and loyalty of Tamar, Rahab and Ruth indicate the centrality of these virtues to the Matthean vision of discipleship. That these virtues are first exemplified by these women at the margins of respectable Israelite identity indicates Matthew's commitment to widening of the boundaries of this identity. The marginality of all five women is, likewise, indicative of Matthew's ongoing emphasis on the inclusion of marginalised groups — both marginalised Jews and Gentile outsiders. That it is five women who disrupt the structured masculine descent of Matthew's genealogy is indicative also of a "positive gynocentric counternarrative that subverts the dominant androcentric narrative of the Gospel" (231). Women not only play important roles in the stories of Jesus' life and ministry but their experiences of suffering provide the model of Christ's suffering on the cross, and their experiences of healing prefigure his resurrection. Clements' narrative analysis of these stories of women in Matthew's gospel relies here rather heavily on the repeated assertion that their narrative importance "outweighs" the narrative space allotted to them (239, 258, 260). That Matthew's Gospel ends, as it began, by drawing attention to women — here the three Marys who witness the empty tomb — suggests, for Clements, that "Christian identity will no longer be construed in terms of male hierarchy and dominance. Women will take their places alongside men in a discipleship of equals" (269).

While there is much to admire in this book — particularly Clements' careful reading of the text, and her attention to narrative structures and details — her desire to rescue the women from scandal and disrespectability seems to blind her to an alternative narrative which seems to emerge from her reading of the texts. The women she discusses are placed in danger not by their own unrighteousness but by the very sexual standards which their vulnerability and powerlessness forces them to violate. Clements assumes that sexual morality is a system concerned primarily with the righteousness of individual intentions, rather than a system of patriarchal property relations which forces women into risky sexual behaviours precisely by denying them access to any means of support outside of marriage, motherhood and male control. She takes for granted that marginalisation functions independently of sexual transgression, and her concern with establishing the sexual and religious respectability of the women of Matthew's genealogy means that she never considers the possibility that respectability might be precisely the problem. What becomes clear in the stories she so carefully considers is that the patriarchal lines of descent on which Christianity bases its identity have always been constituted and enabled by the sexual transgression and social marginalisation they create and decry. If the marginalisation of women within Christianity is to be countered, perhaps this requires us also to consider the role that Christian sexual ethics play in creating it.

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**Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture.** By MARK A. YARHOUSE (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), pp. 191, £13.20/\$20.00 pbk, ISBN 978-0-8308-2859-3.

Mark Yarhouse, a clinical psychologist, holds a chair in Christian Thought in Mental Health Practice at Regent University, Virginia. He has previously published in the areas of family therapy, sex therapy, and counselling, and this book is published in association with CAPS, the Christian Association for Psychological Studies. The book is clearly motivated by a benevolent pastoral impulse and a desire to be compassionate toward people who experience gender dysphoria. However, here lie two of its limitations: first, that it is grounded in *compassion toward* trans people rather than *speaking with* trans people; and second, that it focuses on gender dysphoria to the exclusion of other aspects of transgender experience.