

Holy Mothers of God: Sex work, inheritance, and the women of Jesus' genealogy

Word count: 7,137 (excluding bibliography)

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Abstract

In this article I consider the stories of Jesus' women ancestors in the genealogy which opens the Gospel of Matthew. Reading these stories in light of Marxist-feminist analyses of marriage, sex work and reproductive labour; alongside contemporary sex workers' rights discourse, and through Marcella Althaus-Reid's claim that all theology is "a sexual act", I explore their implications for contemporary debates about property and propriety in both Christian systematic theology and contemporary Christian sexual ethics – which cannot, of course, be disentangled from one another. To conclude, I return to the twinned questions of righteousness and purity which centrally define both theological accounts of Christian identity and Christian sexual ethics, suggesting that righteousness relies for its coherence not only on the abjection of those who fall short of its standards, but also on their labour.

Keywords

Sex work; theology; marriage; Christian identity; Matthew's Gospel; Jesus' genealogy

Introduction

According to the genealogy of Matthew's Gospel which opens the New Testament, the God revealed in Christ Jesus is the God of orderly patriarchal lineage, of three sets of fourteen fathers;¹ but is also the God revealed, irregularly, unexpectedly, in five women who are remarkable not because of the men they were married to but because of the ways in which their risky sexual behaviour threatens the purity and integrity of the Abrahamic patriarchal line. Their actions place

¹ Although admittedly this genealogical regularity relies on some rather creative accounting.

them at risk of poverty, abuse and death yet – despite everything – ensure the continuation of the line of descent into which Jesus is illegitimately born. Christians, Matthew suggests, are those who worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary. To be a Christian is to worship the God of the men whose hypocritical insistence on sexual purity imperilled the lives of the women they considered their property; and it is to worship the God of the women who survived this violence. Most troublingly, it is to worship the God of the women whose risky sexual behaviour not only enabled them to survive but also functioned to perpetuate the violent logics of sexual propriety which put them at risk in the first place.²

Theology is, as Marcella Althaus-Reid has argued, “a sexual act” – profoundly entangled with the imagery and practices of gender and sexuality, inescapably intercalated with the hierarchical relations by which gender and sexuality are ordered. To do theology is to engage – consciously or unconsciously – with gender and sexuality; respectability and genealogy; purity and descent; fidelity and inheritance. The reproductive labour by which theology ensures the continuation of the Christian church and polices the boundaries of Christian identity is, therefore, a form of sex work.³ In this article I will examine the stories of the women of Jesus’ genealogy through the lens of contemporary sex workers’ rights discourse and Marxist-feminist accounts of sex, work and (social) reproduction, exploring the interplay of sexual and theological property and propriety, fidelity and infidelity, purity and impurity.⁴ Tamar’s story highlights the central duplicity of notions of property and propriety by which identity and purity are constituted. Rahab’s story makes clear the

² Ruth Kaniel traces a related lineage of “messianic mothers” in the Hebrew Bible which runs from Lot’s daughters to Tamar and then Ruth, seeing in this progression “a model of reparation and healing” in which “in each generation, the extent of female volition increases” (*Holiness and Transgression*, 70), eventually culminating in the arrival of the Davidic Messiah. No such clear progression is visible in Matthew’s genealogy, though see my later discussion of Mary for consideration of the role she plays as the culmination of this genealogical progression.

³ *Indecent Theology*, 36.

⁴ For a clear articulation of this approach in relation to sex work specifically, see Smith and Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes*; for discussion of gestation as labour, see Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now*; for a broader account of Marxist-feminist approaches to sex, work and social reproduction see Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* and *Revolution at Point Zero*; Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care” and Young, “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage”.

ambivalent ways in which transgression opens up space for survival for those marginalised by norms of property and propriety. Ruth's story demonstrates the central dependence of proper identity on risky border crossings. Bathsheba's story illustrates the vulnerability of those who seek safety via respectability. Mary's story shows the ways in which the violent norms of property and propriety are constituted – and therefore cannot simply be destroyed – by transgression. What becomes evident through an examination of the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary is that the lines of descent through which Christian identity is constituted are inextricably reliant on impurity, transgression, and miscegenation – yet the improper liaisons in which Jesus' mothers engage do not unsettle but in fact perpetuate the violence of the heteropatriarchal order which they violate. For these women of the Bible - for these mothers of Jesus - it is when they hew most closely to the standards of sexual respectability and marital virtue in their culture that they are most vulnerable, and most passive. To act on their own behalf, or on behalf of their families is, for all four, simultaneously to put themselves at risk, because the structures of the societies in which they live are ones in which marriage and sexual propriety are deeply at odds with women's freedom for self-determination. For these women to act is to transgress the role assigned to them, which is that of passive objects, the property of men. And yet to fail to act is to be vulnerable to the worst abuses of the men around them, men who very clearly cannot be relied on to display righteousness in their dealings with others. In each case, the narrative sides broadly with these women, whose actions are credited to them as righteousness and whose suffering is always at the hands of the men to whom God's promises are entrusted. Yet in each case, if not in the narrative itself then in the hands of Matthew, their cunning, their bargaining and their strategies work not only for their own redemption but also for the fulfilment of God's promises to the very men who make their lives so dangerous.

Tamar (Genesis 38)

The first of the women in Jesus' Matthean genealogy is Tamar. Not long after Judah has convinced his brothers to refrain from murdering Joseph in order simply to sell him into slavery instead (Gen 37:26-28), he commits the cardinal sin of the patriarchs by going down into Canaan and marrying a Canaanite woman.⁵ Yet Judah and his sons do not need to be tempted by the Canaanite woman to enter into moral decline: they seem all too capable of morally degrading themselves. Judah can only be bothered to name the first of his three sons, Er, leaving his wife to name Onan and Shelah, the younger brothers. Er marries Tamar, but before they are able to continue his line Er – wicked in the sight of God – is dispatched by God to an early death. Onan is therefore called upon to produce an heir for his older brother, and for his failure to do so meets a fate worse even than the blindness with which his sort-of imitators are threatened: he too is put to death by God, ensuring that the continuation he denied to his brother will be denied to him as well.

Tamar, having had two evil men die on her, is now left at the dubious mercy of her father-in-law who, attributing his son's deaths not to their own wickedness but to Tamar herself, sends her back to her father's house and fails to make good on his promise to marry her to his third son, Shelah. Without husband, property or children, her prospects look bleak. It is precisely at this point where Tamar is, apparently, most powerless, that the narrative focus shifts to her. She dresses up as a sex worker and seduces her father-in-law,⁶ exploiting, as E. Anne Clements says, 'the one thing she has

⁵ Despite numerous biblical references to the danger that foreign women will lead Israelite men into idolatry and unrighteousness (for example, Ex 34:16, 1 Kgs 16:31, Ez 10:2-3; Neh 13:26), the stories of the women of Jesus' genealogy suggest that it is, rather, Israelite men who pose a deadly threat to foreign women. Ken Stone, drawing on the growing scholarly consensus that the Israelites were in fact themselves Canaanites, shows that the ways in which contemporary Christian scholars draw on this distinction between Israelites and Canaanites, a distinction in which Canaanites are associated with deviant sexual behaviours position Canaanites "with respect to 'the Israelite' in something like the same way that the 'homosexual' is positioned with respect to the 'heterosexual'" ("Queering the Canaanite", 18). We can see here, then, a parallel with the ways that both contemporary Western society and contemporary Western Christianity position queer (and racialized) people as deadly threats to the existing order precisely as outwards projections of the violence by which that order is constituted – see, for example, Lee Edelman's discussion of the figure of the "sinthomosexual" in *No Future*.

⁶ I have avoided the term "prostitute" throughout for two reasons. First because, as many sex worker groups have argued, it tends to function less as a descriptive term than as a pejorative, e.g. "the term 'prostitute' is rarely used to refer to an occupational group who earn their livelihood through providing sexual services, rather it is deployed as a descriptive term denoting a homogenised category, usually of women, who poses threats to public health, sexual morality, social stability and civic order. Within this discursive boundary we systematically find ourselves to be targets of moralising impulses of dominant social groups, through missions

reclaimed as her own, her sexuality', investing her talents wisely and acquiring in return two crucial pieces of property: first, a child, and second, the signet, cord and staff which will later enable her to force Judah to recognise her. At this point, Clements comments, 'it is Tamar who is clearly in control of the situation, but her temporary control only lasts as long as it takes to change her clothes'. Returning to her widows' weeds, she 'returns to her former role as *persona non grata* inside her father's house.'⁷ There she remains until her pregnancy becomes apparent to the world, at which point Judah, in perfect illustration of the hypocrisy which has historically characterised men's attitudes to extramarital sex, responds to news of Tamar's 'whoring' with the demand that she be burnt to death.⁸

Wisely, Tamar has insured against this possibility so is able to produce the proof that Judah himself is the father – the signet, cord and staff with which he paid for her sexual labour. Judah concedes, somewhat begrudgingly that 'she is more in the right than I', but does not, of course, offer to accept for himself the fiery death he was so willing to visit upon Tamar. She is vindicated, and yet her vindication is also the point of her disappearance back into the background. The text switches from calling Tamar by name to referring to her simply as 'she' and 'her' as it reports the birth of her two sons, the reward of her unconventional righteousness. But it also states that Judah 'did not know her again'. In this context, the phrase suggests a double knowledge: Judah has not only known Tamar sexually but has also seen her with the eyes of God, whose vision throughout the story sees past superficial appearances into the truth of things. Yet whilst this momentary recognition of Tamar's true worth ends with her restoration to a position of outward righteousness, Judah 'did not know her

of cleansing and sanitising, both materially and symbolically" (Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, "Sex Workers' Manifesto". Second because, as Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema argue, it "is a term that suggests we view prostitution not as an identity – a social or psychological characteristic of women, often indicated by 'whore' – but as an income-generating activity or form of labour for women and men" (*Global Sex Workers*, 3). As becomes clear through my reading of the women of Jesus' genealogy, the trading of sex does not necessarily constitute a profession in the sense that is implied by the term

⁷ Clements, *Mothers on the Margin*, 55.

⁸ This violence is not, of course, exclusively the province of men. Insofar as social reproduction is predominantly the domain of women – particularly white women – then so too are the maintenance and enforcement of norms of sexual propriety. See, for example, the discussion of women's (and feminists') role in this enforcement in Mac and Smith, *Revolted Prostitutes*, 26-30.

again'; she disappears.

Two things are worth noting at this point. First is the doubleness of the attitudes towards sex work displayed in the text. Judah sleeps with Tamar, believing her to be a sex worker, not out of need but – we must assume – for pleasure. He shows no shame about this action: he is happy to send his friend to pay his bill, and his friend in turn seems happy to ask the local residents concerning the whereabouts of the woman. And yet, despite the position in which he has left Tamar, he has no hesitation in demanding that she be burned for her extra-marital sexual activity. As Ken Stone argues, her actions expose ‘the hypocrisy of those most eager to defend the system of sex, gender and kinship within which Tamar was expected to live.’⁹

Second is the complex entanglement of both marriage and sex work with property. In marriage, Tamar is herself little more than a possession, passed around from brother to brother to ensure the continuation of the line of property-owning men.¹⁰ When she begins to seem like a bad investment, a threat to profitability, she is put into storage in her father’s house – like the talents lent to Matthew’s foolish servant, buried in the ground for fear that their investment might result in loss. Tamar’s righteousness lies in the fact that she is a better steward of her own body than Judah or his sons, investing her sole property and gaining in return not only one son but two; and not only two sons, but proof of their paternity: surplus value indeed.¹¹ What Tamar does in the guise of a sex worker is what she did as a wife, except that here she is an agent rather than simply acted on; and here the risks are those she assumed for herself rather than those to which she was passively exposed in her position as her husbands’ possession.

⁹ “Queering the Canaanite”, 133. The presence of this violent threat in the text makes it difficult to be entirely persuaded by Kaniel’s claim that “the Davidic mothers are not marginal or vulnerable figures; rather, in each story their independence is highlighted” (*Holiness and Transgression*, xiv).

¹⁰ Rose Wu suggests that “the majority of women around the globe today face at least double oppression – namely, economic oppression and sexual oppression” (“Women on the Boundary”, 74). What we see in Tamar’s story, I would suggest, is that the two are not distinct but deeply entwined – regimes of property cannot be disentangled from regimes of sexual propriety.

¹¹ As Esther Fuchs writes, it is her concern “for Judah’s patrilineal continuity that redeems Tamar and valorizes her” (*Sexual Politics*, 69).

Rahab (Joshua 2:1-24; 6:15-25)

Next in line is Rahab, who is what Tamar briefly seemed to be: a sex worker. Her story begins when Joshua's spies are sent from Shittim (where Numbers records that the men of Israel 'began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab', joining them in their sacrifices to Baal and subsequently being punished by a plague from God)¹² to look over the land of Canaan. The reference to Shittim drives home what we might already have suspected of the Canaanite sex worker whose name – implying openness and wideness – seems to refer both to the land with which she is associated and also to the nature of the welcome she offers.¹³ She represents everything that is most threatening to Israel's identity, particularly in the book of Joshua in which her story takes place, obsessed as it is with boundaries, with the law, with Israel's ethnic purity and the destruction of everything that is foreign to God's people.¹⁴ Rahab's story, immediately preceded by Joshua's fierce warning that whomever disobeys God will be put to death (Joshua 1:18), begins with an act of disobedience on the part of Joshua's men who, commanded to explore the land, go straight to Rahab's house and, we are euphemistically told, 'stay there.'¹⁵ Where the men are disobedient, Rahab unexpectedly professes faith in YHWH. She saves their lives, committing herself to Israel and betraying the people of Jericho as she does so, winning by her infidelity to Jericho a promise from the spies that they will protect her and her family, itself a form of infidelity to the injunction they have received not to make any covenants with the people of the land.¹⁶

¹² Numbers 25:1.

As Aaron Sherwood points out, "Rahab's name (related to בָּהַר, 'to open wide/stretch out') is commonly taken to refer to her sex worker status, possibly ("A Leader's Misleading", 50); possibly reflecting an earlier version of the story written "as a kind of bawdy humor" (Runions, "From Disgust to Humor", 58).

¹⁴ Ovidiu Creangă describes Rahab as "the quintessential 'other'" ("The Conquest of Memory", 2).

¹⁵ Aaron Sherwood describes this "instance of command/failed fulfilment" as "the first indication something is amiss" ("A Leader's Misleading", 49).

¹⁶ Ken M Campbell argues that the agreement Rahab makes with the Israelite spies should be read as a covenant ("Rahab's Covenant", 243-244); as Clements points out, this directly contravenes the Deuteronomic prohibitions on making covenants with the people of the land (*Mothers on the Margin*, 77). Frymer-Kensky argues that this act of hiding and betrayal is an allusion to the Egyptian midwives' refusal to follow Pharaoh's orders to murder Hebrew babies – "hiding and lying is the way biblical women demonstrate their loyalty"

Rahab's encounter with the spies ends with her decisively in control, extracting promises from the men as they dangle precariously from the rope by which she helps them to escape over the city wall, sending them back to Joshua where their report to him consists of repeating what Rahab has told them.¹⁷ When Israel return to conquer Jericho, Rahab and her family – that is to say, 'her father, her mother, her brothers, and all who belonged to her' are not only spared but given a place in Israel where, the text reports, 'her family has lived ... ever since.'¹⁸ Rahab's story is followed by the story of Achan who, in contrast to Rahab is 'the quintessential Israelite from the pre-eminent tribe of Judah ... the ultimate insider',¹⁹ yet who breaks faith with Israel and is punished by death.

What makes Rahab a threat to the people of Israel – her liminal status, her ownership of her own sexuality – is also precisely what makes her able and willing to help them. The text does not spell out Rahab's motivations for aligning herself with the God of Israel and against the people of her town. E. Anne Clements argues that this decision arises from her belief that YHWH is God.²⁰ The Bible-reading group that Avaren Ipsen set up with members of the Sex Worker Outreach Project in Berkely, California, see her decision in less pious and more pragmatic terms, as a canny strategy for assuring a better life for Rahab and her family.²¹ But both assert that it is Rahab's marginal status as a sex worker – signified in the text by the location of her house on the boundary wall of the city – that makes this faithful betrayal possible.²² For Clements, Rahab's marginality is inseparable from

("Reading Rahab", 60, 59).

¹⁷ Clements, *Mothers on the Margin*, 78.

¹⁸ Joshua 6:23, 25. Perhaps, Runions suggests, the story "also served as an etiology for the accepted practice of sex trade in Israel" (*From Disgust to Humor*, 61).

¹⁹ Clements, *Mothers on the Margin*, 84.

²⁰ *Mothers on the Margin*, 89.

²¹ Ipsen quotes here the group member Carol Stuart: "Forget the metaphors, forget the metaphors. She is a whore. She gave up her people, so she could gain, whatever financial gain, which was for her family, her family's survival. OK? That is absolutely the definition of prostitution" (*Sex Working and the Bible*, 74), an account which certainly matches the role of sex work in Tamar's story.

²² As Ipsen points out (*Sex Working and the Bible*, 84), postcolonial readings of Rahab's story which see her primarily as a collaborator with violent invaders tend to gloss over the relationship between Rahab's sex worker status and her active role in the story. Musa Dube, for example, describes Rahab in passive terms as "a woman who can be taken by any man who desires her ... A woman/land that can exchange hands from one man to another" ("Rahab Says Hello", 156); Judith McKinlay acknowledges the agency Rahab is given within the text yet nonetheless concludes that the message of the story is "that foreign women are sexually available, just as their land lies there for the taking" ("Rahab: a Hero/Ine?", 53); and Laura Donaldson takes Rahab's sex worker status to be a "retroactive" projection of "the spectre of the Squaw" onto Rahab, the result rather than

her relative independence as a woman and a property owner, which in turn is associated with her ability and willingness to negotiate with the Israelite spies. For the Sex Worker Outreach Project readers, it is Rahab's socially marginalised status which must be understood as enabling, if not directly causing, her willingness to betray the people of the city she lives in: 'How can they be her people if they look down on her'?²³

What is most striking about Rahab's story is the degree of independence which is afforded to her by her profession. Unlike Tamar, Rahab is never depicted as being at the mercy of men; in fact, both the Israelite spies and the men of her own family owe their lives to her intervention. And unlike Tamar, Rahab does not recede back into the background once her family's continued existence is secured: her family continues to live in Israel in perpetuity.²⁴ So free is she of determination by men that in order to include her in his patrilineal genealogy, the author of the Gospel of Matthew has to fabricate a husband for her. Theodore W. Jennings suggests that when Matthew's Jesus pairs tax collectors with 'prostitutes', saying that both will enter the Kingdom of God ahead of respectable Pharisees,²⁵ this is because the two are linked by their 'suspect loyalty to national integrity'.²⁶ But there is another possible connection between these two: both sex workers and tax collectors earn

the condition of her betrayal ("The Sign of Orpah" in, 166; this reading runs against the broad scholarly consensus that the earliest version of the story is a bawdy tale about a sex worker, with Rahab's confession of faith in Yahweh a later addition to the text (see, for example, Erin Runions, "From Disgust to Humor", 56)). As Runions argues, attention to Rahab's sex worker status "doesn't 'rescue' Rahab from her disturbing collaborator status" but "queerly challenges the genocidal ideology ... of the ... Deuteronomistic History" (44). Taking sex work to be primarily about sex rather than work, Roland Boer overlooks the complexity and ambiguity of Rahab's agency as a sex worker when he describes Ipsen's reading of her story as straightforwardly "sex positive" – Rahab's sex work is not straightforwardly celebrated by Ipsen and the SWOP readers, who – as Boer acknowledges – describe sex work as "'sacrifice for one's own survival'" (*Earthy Nature*, 86). As Mac and Smith write, "You don't have to like your job to want to keep it" (*Revolt Prostitutes*, 55).

²³ Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, 74. Sarah Melcher notes that Rahab's primary allegiance seems to be to her family rather than "her Canaanite community" but does not connect this fact to her sex worker status ("Rahab and Esther", 164); Melcher also suggests that Rahab might be understood as making "the best choice available to protect her family from harm", aligning Rahab with a long history of sex working women whose work has functioned to enable their survival under the threat of both patriarchal and colonial violence (see, for example, Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance" and Janet M. Bujra, "Women 'Entrepreneurs'").

²⁴ Richard Nelson suggests that the earliest function of the story might have been to explain the ongoing presence of a non-Israelite group within Israel (*Joshua*, 43).

²⁵ Matthew 21:31-32.

²⁶ Theodore W. Jennings Jr., *An Ethic of Queer Sex*, 97. Read in light of postcolonial critiques of Rahab's story as one of indigenous collaboration with genocidal colonizing powers, this claim reads more uncomfortably than Jennings acknowledges.

their living precisely by disrupting the smooth flow of wealth from father to son. Yet the violence which hovers in the background of Rahab's story - both the colonizing violence of the invading Israelites and the patriarchal violence which the SWOP readers see informing Rahab's willingness to betray her people to save her family – makes it difficult to see even Rahab's relative independence as straightforwardly liberating.

Ruth (Ruth 1-4)

Like Tamar, Ruth is a foreigner made vulnerable by the death of her Israelite husband. But where Tamar was sent back to her father's house, Ruth refuses to go back home – interestingly, to, her *mother's* house (Ruth 1:8) – and opts instead to remain with her mother-in-law.²⁷ This is one of the few stories in the biblical texts that actually passes the Bechdel test, and it is perhaps worth noting that this rare moment of gynocentric scriptural narrative is made possible by the fact that all of the men are dead.²⁸ The text does not say why Ruth chooses to return to Israel with Naomi, and nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures are foreigners depicted as migrating *into* Israel other than as the wives of men who have first travelled out of Israel. Laura María Agustín points out the false dichotomy often made between tourists and migrants in contemporary Western culture: 'in this metanarrative', she argues, 'leisure is considered an aspect of western modernity that facilitates tourism, which is characterised by the absence of work, while migration is undertaken by less

²⁷ Danna Nolan Fewell points to hints in the text that Naomi might have been a child bride ("The Ones Returning", 28).

²⁸ The Bechdel test is taken from a comic strip by Alison Bechdel, in which a character says that "I only go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. **One**, it has to have at least two women in it, who two, **talk** to each other about, three, something besides a **man**" ("The Rule" in *Dykes to Watch Out For*, 22). The test has come to be used as a measure for the representation of women in popular culture. Eunny P. Lee notes both that this is "a women's tale" and also that it is the story of a family "facing extinction due to ... the death of its men", but does not quite make the connection between these two facts ("Women's Doings", 32). Likewise, Lee notes that God appears only at the beginning and end of the book but sees these two mentions as evidence that "divine initiative sets the narrative in motion" rather than considering the possibility that it might be the absence of divine activity which, along with the absence of men, makes space for Ruth's activity: the prayers repeatedly addressed to God in the book are answered not by God but by "the very people who utter them" (33-34).

modern people impelled by identifiable causes to leave home.’²⁹ Tourism is characterised by the male gaze and desire; migration by feminised labour (domestic work, care work, sex work) and necessity.³⁰ The story of Ruth suggests that the violent consequences of the sexualisation of women migrants are far from new; and Agustín’s work in turn is a useful reminder that, while the text remains silent on Ruth’s reasons for migrating to Israel, it is at least worth considering the possibility that she, like the patriarchs, was driven to travel not only by love for Naomi but also by less classically feminine motives such as desire, boredom and curiosity. Perhaps, like the contemporary women Agustín interviews, Ruth was driven by a complex mixture of colonial violence, economic necessity, boredom, queer desire, the desire to escape abusive men in her family, familial love, and the longing to see more of the world.³¹ Perhaps we can recognise in her story echoes of the story told by the women of the Empower Foundation, a sex worker-led organisation in Thailand:

If this was a story of man setting out on an adventure to find a treasure and slay a dragon to make his family rich and safe, he would be the hero. But I am not a man. I am a woman and so the story changes. I cannot be the family provider. I cannot be setting out on an adventure. I am not brave and daring. I am not resourceful and strong. Instead I am called illegal, disease spreader, prostitute, criminal or trafficking victim.³²

Like so many contemporary migrant women, Ruth finds, on her arrival in Israel, that her two main

²⁹ Laura María Agustín, *Sex at the Margins*, 11.

³⁰ *Sex at the Margins*, 13-14; 23-26. Cf also the discussion of sex work and migration in Thia Cooper, “Fair Trade Sex”.

³¹ The women Agustín interviews list numerous reasons for migrating, including, “there’s no money [here]”; “I worked in a company, but they were letting people go. I had problems with my children’s father, he mistreated me”; “Since the work was hard, I said to myself, I’m going to go far away ... to Spain, because I had a friend here”; “I found out there was something else in life ... now that I have lived in a city, I do not think I could live in the province any more”; “I enjoy working, I can travel and see beautiful places. I can go to nice restaurants. I enjoy that the Turkish men view us as desirable” (*Sex at the Margins*, 24-25). There is an extensive literature on the book of Ruth as a story of queer desire – for a recent example, see Stephanie Day Powell, *Narrative Desire*. Less commonly noted are the resonances of Ruth’s story with the contemporary associations between queerness and gender non-conformity, sex work and migration (see for example, Nick Mai, *Fractal Queerness*). For readings of the story of Ruth which position Israel as colonial power in relation to Moab as colonised nation, see Judith McKinlay, “A Son is Born” and Laura E. Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpah”.

³² Empower Foundation, “Hit and Run”.

options for survival are gruelling, precarious agricultural work or the feminised reproductive labour associated with marriage.³³ Like Tamar, Ruth decides to capitalise on her only valuable asset, her sexuality. At Naomi's advice, she anoints herself, puts on her best clothes, and goes out at night to lay down by Boaz' feet and put herself – and her reputation – at his mercy.³⁴ It is interesting that, inasmuch as Ruth's plan hinges on avoiding even the appearance of sex work, she is left without any guarantee that Boaz will do right by her. She is far less safe, laying down by his feet on the threshing floor, than Rahab ever was when she welcomed the Israelite spies into her own house in the city.³⁵ Fortunately, Boaz proves honourable. Ruth is returned to propriety and Naomi to property. Again, the deaths of Naomi's husband and sons make possible a brief glimpse of a matrilineal society: Naomi's daughter-in-law is 'more' to her 'than seven sons' and the women of the neighbourhood name the new baby, saying 'a son has been born to Naomi.'³⁶ Yet even here, surrounded by women, Ruth is unable to escape the fate of women restored to respectability. 'Ironically', Clements notes, 'having come in from the margins of society as a wife and mother, her individuality within the narrative is lost, just as Tamar's was.'³⁷ The book ends with an all-male genealogy – emphasising, Esther Fuchs suggests, that women's risky behaviour is to be celebrated only when it functions to sustain patrilineal descent.³⁸

³³ Ruth 3. For a comparison of Ruth's situation with that of contemporary migrant workers in Israel, see Athalya Brenner, "From Ruth to the 'Global Woman'". Brenner argues that sex workers' experience "is not relevant to the biblical Ruth's situation" (165) but if we consider sex work and marriage in light of Marxist feminist work on reproductive labour, the clear distinction between marriage and sex work that Brenner's claim relies on is untenable. The close association of migrant women's precarity and sex work can be seen in Brenner's own contemporary retelling of Ruth's story, where Ruth is described by an unnamed observer as "Not a prostitute, doesn't look like one, but who knows? Obviously foreign, can't speak the language properly" (162).

³⁴ Ilana Pardes reads the book of Ruth as an "idyllic revision" of the story of Leah and Rachel; where Leah and Rachel compete with one another for the crumbs from the patriarchal table, Ruth and Naomi help one another to find ways to survive within patriarchy (*Countertraditions*, 98-117). Perhaps then we might see in their relationship not only echoes of queer kinship but also of the formal and informal ways that sex working women organize to share harm reduction advice, care for one another and push back against different forms of social and legal violence (for examples, see *Revolting Prostitutes*, 134-139).

³⁵ Mieke Bal describes Ruth's seduction of Boaz as "incredibly outspoken and daring" (*Lethal Love*, 70).

³⁶ Ruth 4:14-15.

³⁷ Clements, *Mothers on the Margin*, 113. As Danna Nolan Fewell points out, "at the end of the story the elder woman is 'restored' to the community, while the younger one continues to function instrumentally, providing plot-resolving social linkages and reproductive gifts before disappearing into the background" ("The Ones Returning", 25).

³⁸ "No matter how righteous and deserving, mothers must not be included in generational or dynastic lists"

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11-12)

Bathsheba is both the least active of the four Old Testament women and the only one who is not explicitly named in Matthew's genealogy. The sole contribution of 'she of Uriah' to the process by which she is removed from the possession of Uriah and brought in to secure the succession of Israel's patriarchal lineage is the three-word message she sends to David after he has seen, sent for and slept with her: 'I am pregnant.'³⁹ She is the barely moving object of David's machinations: because of her great beauty she is made, first, an adulterer; second, a widow; and third, a grieving mother.⁴⁰

It is David who sends for her while her husband is at war. It is David who arranges for Uriah first to return to Jerusalem and then to be sent to his death. It is David who sends for her once her period of mourning is over. It is Nathan whom God sends to rebuke David, picturing Bathsheba as a ewe lamb, a daughter, a small and helpless animal. It is David who pleads and fasts and remonstrates with God when his child with Bathsheba falls ill and dies – a severe kind of mercy, Clements suggests, saving Bathsheba from 'the dishonor of future palace gossip over the identity of the child's father.'⁴¹ At no point does Bathsheba actively put herself or her reputation at risk; at no point can she be said to be putting her body or her sexuality to work.⁴² She does everything right;

(*Sexual Politics*, 82).

³⁹ 2 Samuel 11:5.

⁴⁰ As Adele Berlin argues, the narrative positions Bathsheba as "a passive object ... a complete non-person" ("Characterization in Biblical Narrative", 72-73); Alice Bellis points out the ways in which the story can be (and often has been – see, for example, Klein, "Bathsheba Revealed"; Nicol, "The Alleged Rape"; and Bailey, *David in Love and War*) read as "the victimizer" whereas in fact she is "the victim" of David's actions (*Helpmeets, Harlots and Heroes*, 132). As J Cheryl Exum says, by "depriving her of her voice and ... portraying her in an ambiguous light", the story's author "leaves her vulnerable, not simply to assault by characters in that story but also by later commentators on the story" (*Fragmented Women*, 171).

⁴¹ Clements, *Mothers on the Margin*, 138, referring to the argument of S. Joy Osgood, "Early Israelite Society", 177.

⁴² Though the fact that she is so commonly depicted as David's seductress (as Clements discusses in *Mothers on the Margin*, 126) is revealing of the way in which blame for sexual transgressions is apportioned in biblical narratives, and recalls the double standards which were so clear in Judah's treatment of Tamar.

and it does not save her.⁴³

Mary (Matthew 1:16-25)

It is with Mary that the reason for Matthew's genealogical emphasis on the women of Jesus' genealogy becomes clear. Christ himself, it transpires, belongs in the lineage not by birth – not by natural inheritance – but by virtue of the adoption of another woman of questionable respectability into the line of Israel.⁴⁴ While all of the women of Matthew's genealogy are to some extent irregular, disrupting the smooth mathematical flow of the begats, Mary's entry into the genealogy is most disruptive. Where Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and 'she of Uriah' were all included by virtue of their relationship with their husbands, in Mary's case it is Joseph who belongs to her: Joseph is 'the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah'.⁴⁵ Like Tamar, Mary's pregnancy in the absence of a husband appears scandalous from the outside. It is no accident that rumours of her promiscuity or rape were so commonly directed at the church in its early days, although, as with Tamar, the God's-eye view afforded to us by Matthew ensures us that Mary's loss of virtue is more apparent than real.

And yet, like so many of the women of the genealogy, Mary's reputation depends not on her own actions or intentions but on the decisions made by her husband. Unlike Tamar, Mary takes no action to protect herself. She is protected, like Ruth, by the virtue of the man who is to marry her; and, like

⁴³ I have focused here on the narrative about Bathsheba found in 2 Samuel, which seems to be the primary reference point for Matthew's depiction of her as "She of Uriah". Bathsheba also appears in 1 Kings 1:11-31 and 1 Kings 2:13-25, where she plays a more active role, though her actions here function solely to ensure that her son can take his place in the masculine line of Davidic inheritance (I am indebted to Adam Kotsko for this point).

⁴⁴ Peter-Ben Smit suggests that a gender-sensitive approach to Matthew's genealogy means that we "should" identify what the women share in common as their "irregular" or "somewhat awkward" relationships ("Something About Mary?", 195, 198) as opposed to other readings which see them connected by their status as "non-Jews ... sinners ... Gentiles ... proselytes" (192-193). While apparently an attempt to avoid stigmatizing and sexist language and read the genealogy as "ethnically inclusive", this coy description misses the complex entanglement of race, gender and sexuality in constructions of identity in both the contemporary and biblical worlds, and the ways in which these entanglements endanger and marginalize women in particular even as they rely on their sexual labour.

⁴⁵ Matthew 1:16.

Bathsheba, by a messenger sent from God to open the eyes of the man whose fatherhood of her child is in doubt. Of all the women in Matthew's genealogy, Mary is least the protagonist of her own story – in contrast to Luke's account, the Mary of Matthew's gospel does not even speak, let alone assent to any of the events which befall her. Yet her presence is arguably even more threatening to the patriarchal order she is brought into. Where the agency of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba is (at least on Matthew's account) ultimately in service to the continuation of Abraham's line, Mary's role is to ensure that the one who (for Matthew) fulfils that line belongs there only by adoption. The sexual double standard so consistently visible in the stories of Jesus' women ancestors cannot, of course, be understood without acknowledgement of the necessary entanglement of patriarchal lineages and the insistence on women's sexual fidelity. It is no coincidence that parthenogenesis is so frequently a feature of feminist utopian imaginings of a world without men and therefore without patriarchy.⁴⁶

Strangely absent from E. Anne Clements' detailed account of Matthew's genealogy and its possible meanings is any serious engagement with the implication of this central oddity of the genealogy: that Jesus belongs there only by adoption. This suggests a rather stronger reading of Matthew's emphasis on what Clements calls a 'positive gynocentric counternarrative' than she is willing to allow.⁴⁷ Jesus belongs in the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob only insofar as the women of that genealogy belong there; less so, if anything. He is his mother's child more properly than he is the son of Joseph, and thereby of the patriarchs. By contrast, Elaine Wainwright notes the anomaly, arguing that, while we cannot read this as a 'profound critique of the androcentric perspective of the genealogy', we can see here instead both a tendency to see women as needing to be brought into 'the patriarchal order and under patriarchal control' and also an affirmation of 'a power and presence of women which critiques patriarchal exclusion'.⁴⁸ Yet perhaps the crucial point is that,

⁴⁶ See, for example, Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*; Joan Slonczewski, *Door into Ocean*; Charlotte Perkins Gilman *Herland*.

⁴⁷ *Mothers on the Margins*, 175.

⁴⁸ *A Feminist Critical Reading*, 74-75.

despite this irregularity, the genealogical line continues. As Stuart Love says, ‘the remote possibility of a genealogy through Mary is impossible since it is only through the father’s family that a viable ancestry is established.’⁴⁹ Owing more to the disruptive women of his ancestral line than to the orderly inheritance of the patriarchs, Jesus is nonetheless brought decisively into the masculine logic of inheritance, purity and descent. Likewise Christianity, which comes into being in part on the basis of Matthew’s gospel, reconfigures the relationship between Jews and Gentiles so as to give birth to a new identity which does not end this logic but intensifies it. As Gil Anidjar writes, ‘Christianity, the Jesuic distinction in humanity ... is the difference between innocence and guilt as the basis of human society, the difference *across* humanity, between the old and guilty (humans) and the new and innocent (Christians). It is indeed the advent of a new humanity. From now on, may God protect the humanity of old’.⁵⁰

Holy Mothers of the Church

Reading the stories of the women of Jesus’ genealogy through the lens of contemporary sex workers’ rights discourse and Marxist feminist analyses of sexual and reproductive labour has implications for the inextricably interconnected questions of theological conceptions of Christian identity and inheritance and theological accounts of sexual ethics – including theological conceptions of marriage, reproduction and sex work. These questions cohere around the theme of righteousness and purity which recur in readings of both the individual women’s stories and the genealogy in which the author of Matthew’s gospel brings them together.

Throughout Clement’s account of the women of Matthew’s genealogy, she repeatedly acknowledges that a majority of commentators have presented these women as sexually scandalous or disreputable; and she insists throughout that, against this mainstream interpretation, the text itself

⁴⁹ *Jesus and Marginal Women*, 44.

⁵⁰ *Blood*, 254.

presents the women as righteous, as justified in their actions, as innocent of wrongdoing.⁵¹ But by driving this wedge between the alleged impurity of the women and the purity of their intentions, Clements implicitly assumes that, if things had been a little different then the women would have been culpable, that they would have deserved any stigma attached to their actions. If Bathsheba had intended to seduce David – like Tamar seduced Judah, perhaps? – then she would have been a bad woman; if Tamar had really been a sex worker – like Rahab, perhaps? – she would not have been righteous. Yet what we see consistently in these texts is precisely the unsettling of the neat boundaries between righteous and unrighteous behaviours. If a woman who seduces her father-in-law can be more righteous than the patriarch himself; if a foreign sex worker can be more faithful to the God of Israel than Jewish men; if a poor migrant woman can work to secure the line of Messianic descent; if perfect adherence to respectability can leave a woman vulnerable to male violence; if an unmarried pregnant woman can merit inclusion in a royal line to which she has no claim, then perhaps we should be less invested in the question of whether marginalised and sexually scandalous women are truly righteous and ask instead what function our notions of righteousness play in our constructions of Christian identity, purity and tradition.

One of the problems with the focus on the individual righteousness of the women of Jesus' genealogy is that it isolates the decisions and actions of these women from the context in which they lived and made decisions – and in particular, the relationship between gendered norms about sexual propriety and the organisation of property in the societies where these norms emerged. We cannot understand the unruly women of Jesus' genealogy without also understanding the patriarchal structures within which they are located. Tamar's decision to seduce her father-in-law must be understood in the context of the precarious situation in which widowed women were left by the society she lived in. Rahab's relative freedom and independence as a sex worker seems unexpected

⁵¹ For example, "in part my work is a response to a long-held, traditional view that has collectively labeled these women as sinners or sexually scandalous" (*Mothers on the Margins*, 3); see also the discussions on pages 30-38, 172-175, and 179-193.

until we understand the dependent status of married women at the time she lived and worked. We cannot understand the riskiness of Ruth's seduction of Boaz until we consider the dangerous difference between the relative independence enjoyed by sex workers and the importance of at least *appearing* to be chaste for women whose economic security depended on marriage. Bathsheba's passive acquiescence to the demands of King David might seem blameworthy until we consider the immense power kings had over their subjects. And we can make sense neither of Mary's acceptance of the angel's message nor of Joseph's decision to marry her unless we grasp the different pressures at play on them in their particular context. When we speak about righteousness, we cannot separate individuals from the structures and social norms within which they make their decisions about how to act. This individualising logic can be seen at work also in Christian and theological responses to sex work and exploitation. As Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick argues (focusing specifically on the issue of Christian anti-trafficking campaigns), many of the limitations of Christian approaches arise from a focus on individuals at the expense of considering the structures within which individuals act, for example seeing 'trafficking emerging from the actions of individuals and the solution being to rescue individual victims ... a 'law and enforcement' approach, in contrast to the 'human rights' approach that conceptualizes trafficking and slavery in terms of complex social relations and cultural conditions that both perpetrators and enslaved persons are embedded in.'⁵² Likewise, sex workers' rights advocates argue that the greatest threat to sex workers' safety and well-being comes not from their clients but from the police who are charged with maintaining social order.⁵³ Existing social norms of property and propriety are not a safe haven to which women need to be returned, but the primary cause and locus of violence and exploitation.⁵⁴

⁵² Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick, "To seek and save the lost", 121; cf also Lauren McGrow's critique of "the usual Christian motif of rescue of sex workers" in "Doing It", 150.

⁵³ See, for example, Jo Doezema's *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters*, which points out that "sex worker organisations the world over identify the state, particularly the police, as the prime violators of sex workers' rights" (142), or Open Society Foundations' "10 Reasons to Decriminalize", which highlights the fact that "wherever sex work is criminalized, police wield power over sex workers. Police threaten sex workers with arrest, public humiliation, and extortion" (3).

⁵⁴ There are parallels here with the widespread and repeated insistence of sex workers that the greatest threat to their safety and well-being comes not from their clients but from the police who are charged with

How then are we to understand these women in relation to the violent structures of righteousness and unrighteousness within which they act? Linn Tonstad cautions against queer readings of the Christian tradition which identify inconsistencies in binary oppositions as inherently queer. Such reading, she argues, ignore ‘the intractability of interrelated, hierarchical symbol systems’.⁵⁵ More strongly, Slavoj Žižek argues that the symbolic order on which distinctions such as that between righteousness and unrighteousness depend relies on certain ‘inherent transgressions’, certain forms of disavowed transgression of their explicit principles, such that, for example, the peaceful legality of white communities in the American South relies for its coherence on the unacknowledged horror of the Ku Klux Klan’s violence against black people.⁵⁶ Given this structure of power, he argues, it is all too easy to mistake inherent transgressions for radical subversions or the upending of existing hierarchies. In patriarchal societies, he argues, bringing to light women’s quiet subversion of male power can be, in fact, ‘the most subtle way of succumbing to the patriarchal trap.’⁵⁷ This argument is related to Ruth Kaniel’s observation that, in the Davidic dynasty of the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish tradition – a kind of sister-genealogy to that of Matthew’s gospel – the transgressions of the messianic mothers seem to be central to their sacredness. As Kaniel and others have argued, ‘the profane forms the sacred, and ... taboo is conditioned upon its violation.’⁵⁸ Yet when this interplay of clean and unclean, insider and outsider, is located within a violent heteropatriarchal order, the proximity of women to both sacredness and impurity is not liberating: rather, as Rachel Adler argues, ‘purity and impurity define a class system in which the most impure people are women’.⁵⁹ What Matthew’s genealogy suggests is that righteousness relies for its coherence not only on the

maintaining social order. See, for example, Jo Doezema’s *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters*, which points out that “sex worker organisations the world over identify the state, particularly the police, as the prime violators of sex workers’ rights” (142), or Open Society Foundations’ “10 Reasons to Decriminalize”, which highlights the fact that “wherever sex work is criminalized, police wield power over sex workers. Police threaten sex workers with arrest, public humiliation, and extortion” (3).

⁵⁵ “The Limits of Inclusion”, 6.

⁵⁶ See, for example, *Metastases*, 54-56.

⁵⁷ *Metastases*, 56.

⁵⁸ “Holiness and Transgression”, xi.

⁵⁹ “In Your Blood, Live”, 40.

abjection of those who fall short of its standards, but also on their labour; that the coherence of Christian identity relies not only on the exclusion of non-Christians but also on their contribution.⁶⁰ This is not, of course, to suggest that the women of Jesus' genealogy are without agency; only that this agency is exercised within 'power dynamics that are not their choosing, but from which they cannot so easily abstract themselves or obviously resist.'⁶¹ Survival is not, in itself, revolution. What I am arguing here has implications not only for how we conceive of Christian identity and the ways in which its boundaries are policed, but also for theological conceptions of gender, sexuality and labour, which – as Althaus-Reid argues – cannot be separated from the structures of systematic theology. The location of Jesus on the women's side of the genealogy, the side of transgression, of scandalous sexual behaviour, of illicit liaisons and improper filiation highlights the logic of exclusion on which genealogical notions of identity relies. Christianity has not only perpetuated these distinctions it inherited from its Hebrew ancestors but created new ones. The notion of racial difference which has come to so deeply structure the unjust systems of the world in which we live goes back to the 1449 Statutes on the Purity of Blood instituted by the Christian city of Toledo, Spain, which insisted that only Christians who could trace their genealogies back several generations could be considered to be of pure Christian blood, relegating recent converts to second-class, impure status.⁶² Racism, and the colonialism that the belief in different races enabled, have long structured Christian responses to sex work, from the racism of the white slavery panic and the colonialism of white feminist campaigns in the Victorian era to the racism of contemporary attitudes to migrant women sex workers and the neo-colonialism of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women.⁶³ Often this assumption that 'we' Christians must rescue 'them' the sexually

⁶⁰ See also Marika Rose, *A Theology of Failure*.

⁶¹ Runions, "From Disgust to Humor", 65.

⁶² Gil Anidjar, *Blood*, 61.

⁶³ For more detailed discussion of these issues, see Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History*; Elizabeth Bernstein, "Militarised Humanism"; Jo Doezema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters* and "Ouch!"; and Agustín, *Sex at the Margins*.

exploited takes the form of a maternalism: we are the mothers and they are our children.⁶⁴ Yet what Matthew's genealogy suggests, if anything, is that it is *they* who are *our* mothers: the systems of property and propriety we inhabit are built on their unacknowledged labour.

Similarly, just as for the women in Jesus' genealogy, so too for many people today marriage and the family are not a safe haven but the primary cause and locus of patriarchal violence. As Theodore Jennings points out, marriage has all too often been 'the incubator of patriarchy and of extreme violence against women', an institution within which, in the contemporary Western world, child sexual abuse occurs so frequently as to appear 'endemic, rather than incidental'.⁶⁵ From LGBTQ teenagers in New York forced into survival sex work by the breakdown of their relationships with their parents⁶⁶ to women in India choosing sex work because it is easier to insist on condoms with their clients than it would be with their husbands,⁶⁷ marriage and family relationships are deeply bound up with sexual violence and exploitation. 'It is no accident', Jennings writes, 'that the Jesus tradition as transmitted through the Gospels regards marriage and family with deep suspicion'; yet it also, as we see in Matthew's Gospel, perpetuates them.⁶⁸

It is also clear from the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary that gender and sexuality are deeply bound up with the social organisations of work and of property. The reason that Rahab is so much more in control of her interactions with men than any of the other women is that she alone has independent means of survival. She has a house of her own; she has a profession; she does not depend on any men for the roof over her head, the food on her table, or (later) her

⁶⁴ For example, Doezema argues that Josephine Butler tended to cast herself as the "saving mother" of fallen women (*Sex Slaves*, 62); Elizabeth Bernstein talks about the common rhetoric of "womenandchildren" which casts women as helpless and childlike ("The New Abolitionism", 133).

⁶⁵ Jennings, *An Ethic of Queer Sex*, 5.

⁶⁶ The 2015 Urban Institute report, "Surviving the Streets" gives several examples of teenagers being "forced out of their family homes as a result of their families' unwillingness to accept their sexual orientation or gender identity" (16).

⁶⁷ Andrea Cornwall describes this situation in an interview with Shabana, a member of Vamp, a collective of sex workers in Maharashtra, India. Shabana says, "If I'd been married, I would have been HIV positive by now" ("Indian sex workers")

⁶⁸ Jennings, *An Ethic of Queer Sex*, 5.

citizenship in the nation in which she lives. The strictures under which the other women live are in turn related to questions of work and of property. Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary are the property of the men in their family, and they struggle with a society in which women's sexual activity is much more strongly policed than that of men, precisely because, in their society, property is passed from father to son and so it is absolutely crucial to ensure the sexual fidelity of the women who bear the sons. Work and property are organised somewhat differently in the contemporary world, and yet their relationship to sexual and gendered labour remains. The British sex worker collective, SWARM, argues that the problem with seeking to tackle sexual exploitation by criminalising the purchase of sex is that it does not create better options for those selling sex as a means of economic survival. Far more effective, they argue, would be to work towards meeting their demands for free universal childcare, for migrants to be able to work legally, for an end to the part-time gender gap, for secure housing for all, and for a universal basic income. They say that to argue that “it isn't poverty that creates prostitution – it's men's demand” is to ‘identify “prostitution” as the issue that should be tackled, leaving poverty untouched.’⁶⁹ What the stories of the women of Jesus' genealogy suggest is that the decriminalization of sex work – a core demand of contemporary sex workers' rights activists – is a necessary but not sufficient condition for liberation. Women can be freed from the dangers associated with both sex work and sexual impropriety only by a radical transformation of property relations, that is, by the abolition not only of private property but also of the key institutions which enforce and reproduce it – the state and the family.

By highlighting the importance of these five women in his genealogy, Matthew suggests that the birth of Christ, the culmination and fulfilment of Israel, is made possible only by the disreputable and risky behaviour of these mothers of God. By tying Jesus into the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob only by adoption he goes a little further still and suggests that Christ himself is more truly the

⁶⁹ SWARM, “SWOU statement”

child of these scandalous women than he is of the respectable patriarchs. Like so many of these holy mothers, he has no property but his own body, which he puts at risk in order to secure the future of those he loves; and the fatal violation of his body on the cross is the realisation of the threat of death which lurks more or less explicitly in the background of each woman's story.⁷⁰ What the stories of these women suggest is the deep reliance of both Christianity theology – itself always a sexual act – on the very people it outwardly seeks to destroy, of the necessity of the unacknowledged and officially disavowed work of women like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary to the regime of patriarchal inheritance and heterosexual marriage.

What Matthew's genealogy implies, I am arguing, is that the faithfulness of the church, as the people of God, is inextricably bound up with, actually *dependent on* and *constituted by* betrayal. Like Jesus' ancestors, our line has long been revitalised with risky encounters with those who are foreign to us, and yet we persistently disappear these transgressive liaisons into the background of the stories we tell about our history and identity. What would it mean instead to seek not to incorporate Jesus' mothers into our existing systems of identity, purity and respectability, to widen the bounds of our inheritance to include, them, but to begin, instead, with them, and to ask what it might mean to organise our identities in relation to theirs?

The modern sex workers' rights movement can be traced back to the 1975 occupation of Saint-Nizier church in Lyon, France by sex workers protesting at their brutal treatment at the hands of the police. Molly Smith takes the event as indicative of the importance of refusing 'the division of people who sell sex into "worthy" or unworthy', deserving of safety or deserving of violence.' At Saint-Nizier, she points out, 'When the French police threatened to take custody of the sex workers' children, the protestors were joined in the church by local non-working women, who dared the

⁷⁰ As Matthew's Jesus says, "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (8:20); as Clements says, in Matthew's gospel "women's suffering provides the model for the suffering of Christ and women's healing provides the model for the resurrection of Christ" (*Mothers on the Margin*, 248).

police to try to discern who was a prostitute and who was not.’⁷¹ What the inclusion of these five women - of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary – into Matthew’s account of Christian identity offers us, I am suggesting, is the possibility – though not the guarantee – of something akin to what Marcella Althaus-Reid describes as ‘indecent theology’, in which salvation is not the place of ‘the safe and sound, the unscathed, the immune (sacer, sanctus, heilig, holy)’, but a place of insecurity, riskiness, and transgression.⁷² This demands a refusal of the theological logics of property and propriety: the abolition of the distinction between Christian and non-Christian as the distinction between saved and unsaved, innocent and guilty, and the abolition of the key institutions which enforce and reproduce these distinctions – of the church insofar as it functions, like the state and the family, to reproduce and to violently enforce these logics of property and propriety.⁷³ What Jesus’ genealogy offers us is the possibility of standing alongside the women of Saint-Nizier, facing down the violent enforcers of property and propriety, and insisting that none of us is righteous, because righteousness is constituted by unrighteousness; none of us is respectable, because respectability is built on the unacknowledged labour of the disrespectable; none of us is pure, because purity is born from impurity. Theology is sex work, and the church owes its being to the unacknowledged and disavowed labour of women, migrants, gender non-conforming people, people racialized as non-white, and – especially – to sex workers.

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⁷¹ Molly Smith, “The ‘Swedish Model’”.

⁷² *Indecent Theology*, 152, quoting Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge”, 2.

⁷³ See also Marika Rose, *A Theology of Failure*, which seeks to develop a notion of Christian identity along these lines.

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