

Could These Bible Women Say #MeToo?

According to *The Washington Post*, in the past seven years alone, social-media users have created more than 96 million tweets about sexual harassment. Daily we encounter objectifying and sexualizing of women on television, the internet and magazine ads. The one place we often don't realize sexualizing the innocent has crept into our thinking is in our Bible reading. Often when we hear the names Bathsheba, Tamar and the Samaritan woman, we think "immoral women." However, a fresh look at five such women in the Bible reveals a different reality.

Tamar

Big gaps exist between our world and that of Tamar, the twice-widowed member-by-marriage of Judah's family. In hers, a brother of the deceased had a duty to the widow to provide offspring. When she bore a son, he would bear the name of the deceased. (See Deut. 25.) Additionally, a detail we find in her culture was that if a brother could not "fulfill the duty," the father-in-law could do so.

The author of Genesis makes a point of saying Tamar's father-in-law is widowed. Such a detail suggests that involving him was probably within Tamar's rights. At the least, in her mind.

Seeing that Judah withheld son No. 3, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute. She knew Judah would hire her, and he did. Later, when he learned she was pregnant and called for a burn-her-alive honor killing, she outed him as the father. In that moment he recognized that she, not he, was the righteous one. He even said so.

Tamar was not wanting physical pleasure with her father-in-law, and she was certainly no prostitute. She *posed* as one. Once. Out of covenant love to her dead husbands. Later, when Ruth and Boaz have a baby, the people ask God to make Ruth

like Tamar.

We should remember Tamar for her loyal love. That is how the Bible presents her.

Rahab

Now, Rahab of Jericho was indeed a professional sex worker. But that was before she professed faith in the God who changes lives. We find her story at the time of the conquest, when God sent Israel to wipe out the Canaanites and take their land.

Israelite spies came to her brothel, and she hid them. In doing so, she saved their lives. Rahab told them she had heard of their great God and his mighty acts. The spies reciprocated by promising to spare her. After they did so, we find her married and grafted into the line of Jesus.

Lest we think the conquest story is about Israel vs. non-Israel, we see in Rahab's faith that God is on the side of any who believe in him. We should remember Rahab, not for her former occupation, but for her faith that resulted in actions and the greatness of the God who spares all who believe.

Bathsheba

Often people speak of King David and Bathsheba as "having an affair," but describing what happened as "rape" falls closer to the truth.

Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, was one of King David's warriors. One spring when kings would usually accompany troops to war, David stayed home. One day, he looked down from his balcony and noticed a bather. So, he asked about her, and his men told him that not only was she the wife of a loyal soldier, but also related to another of the king's good men. The subtle suggestion was: "Think about what you're doing, sir." But he ignored them.

In the tenth-century ancient Near East, people had no bathtubs or bathrooms. If someone lived at a lower elevation than the

palace (everyone), even if that person bathed in a private courtyard, someone looking from the palace could see all. The text says only that Bathsheba was washing herself—and that word “washing” could mean she was washing her hands. There’s no suggestion that she was unclothed.

What did the king do upon seeing her? Instead of looking away, he wanted her. So, he asked about her. Then, he “sent” for her. In fact, he sent “men,” plural, to get her. Consider the power differential between Israel’s king and the wife of one of his soldiers. She might have even thought the king had news of her husband.

Interestingly, whoever wrote down the story assigns zero responsibility to Bathsheba while he presents David as a peeping Tom who lusted and “lay with her” with no hint of her consent. When Bathsheba turns up pregnant, David has Uriah sent to the battle front so he’ll die—which he does. When he dies, the text says, Bathsheba mourns.

Why have we vilified Bathsheba? Hers is an ancient #MeToo story.

Her son, Solomon, though not David’s firstborn, took the throne of Israel. Ultimately, her legacy leads to the Messiah, so we should remember Bathsheba for how God had mercy on a woman who suffered at the hands of a power-abusing king.

The Samaritan Woman at the Well

In John 4, we find a story about Jesus encountering a woman at a well in Samaria. He knows what no one could have guessed: she’s had five husbands and the one she’s living with is not “her own.” As Westerners in the 21st century, we thus assume she’s immoral, dumping many men and living with some guy. She is also young, beautiful and seductive. Right?

Wrong.

In her world, women could not just appear in divorce court, or any court for that matter. Also, the main cause of death for

men was war. So, picture an older woman who's lost five husbands. The sixth time, it's likely she had to settle for a polygamous arrangement to keep from starving. If such is the case, imagine the impact of Jesus' words: "Go call your husband."

"I don't have one," she replies.

"You're right. You've had five, and you have to share the one you have now," said with compassion and concern for the grief and injustice. (Not facing her about her sin.)

"You're a prophet! (How else could you know all that?) We're hoping for Messiah."

(And he's finally here!) "I AM." Jesus, who usually talks in enigmatic statements about his identity, comes right out with who he is.

We should think of this woman as one whose suffering with hope in the Messiah was honored by Jesus and to whom he overtly revealed his identity.

Mary Magdalene

The narratives go to extremes with Mary Magdalene: Either she was the wife of Jesus (thanks, Dan Brown) or a former prostitute (thanks, Gregory the Great). Yet, interestingly, she is never described in such terms. The text says only that she was healed of seven demons.

The confusion about Mary started in A.D. 591 when Gregory the Great preached a sermon in which he conflated the "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7), Mary of Bethany (John 11-12) and Mary Magdalene. It took another thousand years to clear up the mistake. The Catholic church made the official correction in 1969, but apparently word has been slow to travel.

To be fair, Gregory's mistake is understandable. A modern search for "Mary" in the New Testament turns up 51 passages

that include the name. While it's easy to sort through them with today's electronic searches, sixth-century manuscripts were less easily compared.

In truth, once delivered, Mary supported Jesus out of her income and followed him. She was an eyewitness of his miracles, teachings and sufferings, as well as being the first at the tomb. After the resurrection Jesus appeared to her. As a result, she got to tell the apostles, "I have seen the Lord!"

We should think of Mary Magdalene as being the first herald of the best news of all time.

Through the centuries, we have tended to see sexual sin lurking in the closets of many women in the Bible whom the Bible does not portray as having such skeletons. Certainly, Jesus saves sinners, but that is only part of his redeeming work. He also calls, equips, and rewards; he redeems injustice, and he reveals himself to those who seek him. These are what we should associate with the names Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, the Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalene. {eo}

This article was adapted from Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified and Marginalized Women of the Bible (Kregel Academic).