

Putting a (gendered) face on poverty: With special attention to Jesus' foremothers in Matthew 1

1. GENDER AND POVERTY

At a recent conference on "Gender and Poverty," hosted by the Beyers Naude Centre of Public Theology, I was asked to speak on the link between gender and poverty in the biblical traditions. One would think this to be an easy task. After all, numerous studies (Basu 2000; Kehler 2001; Oduyoye 1999) point to what is called the "feminisation of poverty." It is not just that women more often are considered poor or living in extreme poverty, but also the way women experience poverty is subject to issues unique to their gender. For instance, women typically experience a higher unemployment figure and/or find themselves underrepresented in better remunerated waged work¹; women have been largely marginalized from access to and control over land; women are often excluded from educational opportunities and skills training; women bear the brunt of finding alternatives for lack of basic services like water and electricity (rural women spending hours every day collecting water); women often find themselves victim to sexual and domestic violence and have proven exceedingly vulnerable with regard to HIV/AIDS. It is increasingly evident that in both ancient and contemporary societies, women tend to experience greater vulnerability with regard to their economic options and their choice of survival strategies.

In South Africa statistics also indicate large numbers of women who can be counted among the poor. Over 70% of the poor in South Africa is found among the 40% of people classified as rural Africans. Within this demographic, particularly rural women fall into the category of the poor to the very poor – poverty defined according to Martin Ravallion (1992:3) as an ongoing situation in which one or more persons in a particular society "do not attain a level of material well-being deemed to constitute a reasonable minimum by the standards of that society."² As Cheryl Walker (2002:72) notes in her essay "Land Reform and the Empowerment of Rural Women in Post-Apartheid South Africa:" "Men were recruited as migrant workers while women were left to manage the domestic economy of those areas" or as she formulates it: "manag[ing] institutionalized poverty."

And with regard to the rest of our continent, the situation is equally dire. Mercy Amba

1 Cf. also the fact that women find themselves more often unemployed than men and for a longer period of time (United Nations 2000:109). Within South Africa's high unemployment rate (42% in 2003), 56% of the unemployed were women compared to 44% men. Moreover, an United Nation publication, *The World's Women, 2000: Trends and Statistics* (2000:131), notes that even though the principle of "equal pay for work of equal value" has been incorporated in the labour legislation for many countries, in no country for which they collected data did women actually receive equal pay for equal work, statistics showing that women typically received 20% less than their male counterparts – in some countries, the gap being even larger. Cf. also Bonvillain (2007:170-182); Basu (2000:24-25).

2 In his report for the World Bank, "Poverty Comparisons: A Guide to Concepts and Methods," Martin Ravallion shows that what makes a poverty analysis and comparison necessary is that what constitutes poverty in one setting (e.g. in the developed world), would be very different than what would be considered poverty in a poor country. For the issues involved in determining e.g. relative, absolute and subjective poverty lines, cf. Ravallion 1992. Accessed online, October 14, 2009 http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2000/04/28/000178830_98101902174198/Rendered/INDEX/multi_page.txt

Oduyoye (1990:74-77) points to the impact of global forces that within a new colonization employ cheap labour and resources at the cost of the local inhabitants. She describes the impact of poverty on women and children in particular as follows:

Many are the economic widows and orphans who are being created by the poverty enhancing syndrome of globalization. Africa has known many traumatic displacements of her population. When southern African men left women and children to serve in the mines of Egori, they began a trend which continues to this day. Women and children who are expecting fathers and sons to return, to bring wealth or send a contribution for the management of the family have been regularly disappointed. These women and children have worked the land and themselves dry, trying to survive (Oduyoye 1990:76).

However when it comes to the biblical traditions, the biblical text does not specify poverty in terms of specific factors such as gender or race. For instance in the legal codes in the Pentateuch, which propose ways in which to alleviate the short-term effects of poverty in addition to preventing the creation of a permanent state of poverty (cf. e.g. the function of the Year of Release commandments in Deuteronomy 15 as well as Jubilee laws in Leviticus 25), the poor referred to by the Hebrew term *dalim* (דָּלִים) that is often used in parallel with *anawim*, אֲנָוִים translated as “afflicted,” “lowly,” “those who are oppressed”) are not specified in terms of gender. Also in the case of the numerous references in the Prophets to Israel’s social justice violations (Amos 2:6-7; 5:11; 8:4), the poor largely remains a faceless and also genderless mass.

Feminist biblical interpreters have pointed out that this distinction does not hold when it comes to references to the rich. In the prophetic traditions, women are disproportionately blamed for social justice violations. E.g. in Amos 4:1 the affluent women who are the object of the prophet’s discontent, who are said to “crush the needy” are called “fat cows of Bashan.” And in Is 3:18-25 the rich women are said to wear a whole array of trinkets and luxurious goods: ankle bracelets and armbands; headbands and headdresses; sashes and scarves; signet rings and nose rings; festal robes, mantles, cloaks, and handbags; perfume boxes and amulets; garments of gauze, linen garments, turbans, and veils. However, as Julia O’Brien (2008:29-30) rightly points out, these texts fail to mention that these affluent women probably received their money from their fathers/husbands who did their share of exploiting the poor.

One exception with regard to the link between gender and poverty would be the references to widows that obviously is a gendered term. In a society where women seldom had a right to inheritance, the lack of a male benefactor (e.g. father, husband, son) to support them would most definitely have placed women in a situation that we today would classify as poverty, defined by J May (2000:5) as “the inability of individuals, households or entire communities to command sufficient resources to satisfy a socially acceptable minimum standard of living.”

A further instance in which one may find a gendered reference to poverty occurs in Deuteronomy 15:12 when it is said that both Hebrew men and women, who are members of “your community,” who have fallen into such extreme poverty that they had to serve as slaves, after six years of slavery, in the seventh year should be set free. This law was to prevent the creation of a permanent debtor class (Hoppe 2004:28-29). Moreover it is significant that the liberation of these slaves was accompanied by generous provision – at least in the case of the male slaves. In v 13 it is specified that “when you send a male slave (cf. the masculine pronoun that is used in the Hebrew) out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed.” Nothing is said about provision to female slaves that may further reflect the inequality with regard to the patriarchal society in which the biblical literature originated.³

³ The explicit reference to “Hebrew” slaves moreover suggests that the same generosity would not extend to foreigners. Cf. also Deut 15:2-3 where interest may be charged from foreigners but not from members of

Despite this obvious bias concerning women that found its way into the biblical traditions that talk about poverty and gender, liberation and feminist theologians have pointed to the close association between poverty and God's very nature and being, i.e., that God is in a special way the God of the poor and the oppressed, the widow, orphan and foreigner (cf. e.g. Deut 10:18). For instance, in Ps 146:7-8, God is portrayed as the one who executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, and loves the righteous. It is very much a part of God's identity to care for everyone, particularly those on the margins.⁴ This understanding also finds its way into the New Testament when Luke 1:53 states that God fills the hungry with good things, right after it is said that God raises up the lowly and brings down the powerful from their thrones.⁵

2. THE POOR: WHO ARE THEY?

The portrayal of God as one who notices and intervenes on behalf of those who dwell on the margins of society and who are not able to fend for themselves does two things. On the one hand, it helps us to notice the broken reality of people who are poor and hungry in the biblical text as well as in our own. Texts that speak of a God who executes justice to the poor and the needy make a point of not overlooking those people whom society has relegated to the margins.⁶ And secondly, these texts challenge us to do something to make things right, to follow God's example in caring for the poor, feeding the hungry and pursuing justice whenever justice is perverted.⁷

But this call to care for the poor that is embedded in the divine image of God's justice runs the danger that it is so general that it loses any sense of real significance. So Frank Fromherz (2001:241) comments on the significance particular stories hold in our pursuit for justice. He says:

How can one possibly respond to a call to live in right relationship with *all* of creation or *every* human being? Justice is better understood not as a rigid and abstract principle, like a giant anvil dropped into the flower garden of our fragile lives, but rather as a call heard sometimes faintly and now and then poignantly as real stories are shared and collective narratives of sin and grace are encountered. Justice, in this view, is intrinsically relational and invites a turn to stories in order that we may recognize creaturely relations with particular creation – not “all of creation” in the abstract.

one's own community: “And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbour, not exacting it of a neighbour who is a member of the community, because the LORD's remission has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you.”

4 Norbert Lohfink (1990:111) notes that where the institution of the human kingship failed to care for the poor, God intercedes. Cf. also Knierim (1995:241).

5 Leslie Hoppe (2004:53) argues that this text that refers back to the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 where God is said to reverse the status of the poor who “will no longer sit on town dump but among royalty.” In these texts, the Lord is turning this world upside down, reversing the order of power and casting down the mighty from their thrones. Cf. also Miller (1994:215-216).

6 As Walter Brueggemann notes (1988:94-95), “the very mention of them is an act of social realism and social criticism. Marginal people really do exist.” Brueggemann proposes that “each named transformation” in the psalm “creates hope and possibility for those in parallel circumstances, and each bespeaks a criticism of the established world which had generated the oppressed, hungry, prisoners, and blind.” Cf. also Miller (1994:224) who proposes that to sing praises is a “powerful political act.”

7 A good example of the power of this image comes from the Confession of Belhar by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (now the Uniting Reformed Church). It says that God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged. Moreover, God calls God's Church to follow God in the restoration of justice (Smit 1984:53-65).

The fact that the poor, widows, orphans, and hungry all remain faceless and void of specificity is illustrated well by an interpretation from the midrash on the Psalms. The rabbinic interpreters noticed this problem in their question on Ps 146:7. They asked: “Who is meant by *the hungry*? when it says in Ps 146:7 “[*God*] who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives bread to the hungry.” According to the rabbis, the answer is “Elijah.” For “he was hungry, and God gave him bread to eat, as is said in 1 Kings 17:6, “*And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening, and he drank of the brook*” [Midr. Tehillim Ps 146.4 (Braude)].

The case of Elijah is indeed an instance of God providing for the hungry. However, there are other stories in which the claim that God feeds the hungry, and takes special care of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger becomes very real.

Inspired by the rabbi’s interpretative strategy of putting a face on the hungry, I will take up the stories of four women who, as will be shown in the rest of this paper, can be considered poor – according to Ravallion’s definition mentioned earlier, unable to “attain a level of material well-being deemed to constitute a reasonable minimum by the standards of that society” (1992:3). These four women who incidentally appear together as a group in the Genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 have a common denominator beyond being included as foremothers to the Messiah by the Gospel writer. From their respective stories in the Old Testament, it is evident that all four these women are not only characterized as having a low social status in society, but one further sees how this social status is responsible for the fact that they fall into a demographic that in their own, and perhaps also, bearing in mind the differences between the biblical context and our own time, in today’s society would be described as “the poor.”

By learning more about their stories, we will be reminded of the value of putting faces to the abstract categories of the marginalized. We love to talk about those groups of people: the poor, those who find themselves on welfare, the illiterate. But in the rabbis’ words: “who are they? The following stories encourage us to remember the stories, the names and the faces of our brothers and sisters who are poor and hungry.

3. PUTTING A (GENDERED) FACE ON POVERTY

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham... and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar ... and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth ... And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah ... (Mt 1:3, 5, 6, 16).

The book of Matthew starts with the genealogy of Jesus, which for three times fourteen generations focus on the ancestors of Jesus. At first glance, the androcentric device of the genealogy that almost solely focuses on the fathers of the coming Messiah seems to firmly construct the patriarchal character of the book to come. However, in a surprising move, five women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary) interrupt the main patriarchal narrative, opening, as Elaine Wainwright (1997:463) suggests, “a small fissure in the symbolic universe that the patrilineage constructs.” None of these women fit into your typical categories. Some are from very dubious backgrounds, almost all of them are foreigners, and every single one of them is involved in some kind of irregular union with men. It is indeed a question why Matthew would include these four women in particular in the lineage of Jesus when his counterpart Luke did not (cf. Lk 1).

As will be evident in the rest of the paper, the four women in Matthew 1 that precede Mary in some way or another can all be characterized as poor and marginalized, prone to violation

and exploitation, so foreshadowing what God will do in Mary who finds herself in a marginalized position: a peasant girl; an unwed mother. As Ellen Guillemin (2002:261) suggests, the stories of these mothers in conjunction with the “sufferings and triumphs” of Mary “are intimately related to the grieving, loving and life-giving God of the marginal, the oppressed, the suffering and the powerless.”

a. Ruth⁸

One of the best examples of how a story of a woman from the rich biblical traditions can help us put a (gendered) face on poverty is the story of Ruth, the third woman to be mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1, and the quintessential widow and foreigner who serves as the recipient of God’s care.

In the book of Ruth, the disenfranchised receives a face: Ruth, the foreigner who comes from Moab with her mother-in-law, Naomi, the widow who was left to fend for herself after her husband’s death, can rightly be described as being poor and hungry. Ruth’s status as foreigner in particular is emphasized by the repeated designation, “Ruth, the Moabite” that is to be found throughout the book (cf. e.g., Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 21; 4:5, 10) (Sakenfeld 1999: 59-60).

In Ruth 1:6, we find the important reference that God feeds the hungry, when it is said that Naomi had heard that God had considered God’s people and given them food. Although this claim is talking about God’s care for Israel, the leading theme of the book of Ruth is how a foreigner shares in this gift. Ruth’s story becomes a concrete illustration of how God feeds the hungry, the widow, and the stranger.

God’s provision of food is executed in two ways in the book of Ruth. First, as a poor non-Israelite woman, Ruth depends on the means of survival as provided for in Israelite law. According to the custom of that time, the have-nots from society were allowed to go gleaning, i.e. after the harvest, they could go pick up ears of corn and wheat that were left over (Deut 24:19-22).⁹

Thus, by means of the gleaning laws God’s provision of food is made real. Although times change and concepts like “gleaning” falls strange on one’s modern ear, the phenomenon of the marginalized people struggling for survival is timeless. Katharine Sakenfeld (1999:45) actualizes these gleaning laws in the following way:

Gleaning continues in various forms in the modern world as a means of survival for the destitute. In some countries, it is structured by law, routinized as a welfare safety net, or organized through food banks; but even there, people rummage through garbage cans to survive. In some poorer nations, conditions for the destitute in search of food are even more extreme.

This modern day example raises poignant questions about the fate of the poor and hungry in our own societies, particularly by what means God’s provision of food could be realized today.

Second, God’s provision of food to the poor, the hungry, the widow and the foreigner is executed through the kindness of one man. Called a man of valour, Boaz becomes an instrument in God’s hands to provide for the stranger and the widow. This is clearly seen in Ruth 2:14 and 18, where it is said that Boaz provided Ruth with food in abundance. He gave her more than she could eat, and after she had eaten her fill, she took what was left over home to feed another hungry widow, her mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz’ actions go beyond what is expected. Not only

⁸ The section on Ruth has first appeared in my book, L Juliana Claassens, *The God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2004), 34-36.

⁹ Cf. also Lev 19:9-10. Rolf Knierim (1995:240-241) notes that this is “an expression of justice as related to land and food, and of human stewardship of Yahweh’s land, with specific emphasis on the inclusion of the poor and sojourner in the right to food and with an explicit reference to the fact that nothing less than the identity of the God of Israel is at stake in this inclusion.”

does he provide Ruth with food, but his invitation to her to sit with the other workers functions as a gesture of inclusion into the larger community.¹⁰ Thus, although God's gift of food is a strong presence in the Old Testament, the story of Ruth indicates that human action is required in the realization of this gift, encouraging readers to find a way for their own actions to become a channel for God's blessings in the lives of others (Sakenfeld 1999:16).¹¹

b. Tamar

The story of Tamar (Gen 38) that one finds sandwiched in the midst of the larger account of Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37-50) is a prime example of just how vulnerable women who are considered poor can be. Tamar's story is a story of injustice but also a story of survival – one that quite likely will make our contemporary hearts cringe.

In Gen 38 we read the tragic tale of loss when Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, is widowed not once, but twice. According to the levirate custom of the time, after Tamar's first husband died, Judah is supposed to provide in Tamar's long-term welfare by giving her in marriage to his deceased son's brother. When this brother dies as well, Judah refuses to give Tamar any more of his sons.

At wit's end and as a widow with no one to support her, Tamar takes matters into her own hands, tricking her father-in-law by disguising herself as a prostitute who waits at the side of the road. Her father-in-law makes use of her services, and as an insurance policy, Tamar takes his "visa with identification marks" (his seal and staff) which she dramatically reveals when she is accused by her father-in-law and townspeople of being a prostitute when she finds herself with child – an act that constituted a death sentence (Bird 1999:103).

Tamar's actions are shocking indeed, breaking the strongest taboos of her society (and ours) by sleeping with her father-in-law (cf. e.g. the prohibition in Lev 18:15). However, when one thinks of Tamar as a poor, widowed woman who is denied her right to survival, one may consider how for many women in extreme situations, it is indeed a case of desperate times call for desperate measures. It is not uncommon that women who are desperate turn to prostitution to make ends meet.

In this regard, it is significant that as Susan Niditch (1998:26) points out that God is not mentioned in the story at all. Yet this atypical action on the part of a poor widow opens up an interpretative space for the presence of God in Genesis who is partial to marginal people "the god of the tricksters who uses deception to deal with the power establishment" (cf. also Guillemin 2002:259).

It is further interesting that Tamar who is (mis)taken as a "prostitute" serves as the "revealer" – the one who in the end is responsible for Judah to see what is right, to act in justice (cf. Van Wijk-Bos' designation of Tamar as "eye-opener" (1988:45)). In some sense we witness a glimpse of a "happy ending" – the perpetrator sees; order is restored; the widow who had to fend for herself now is blessed with two sons.¹² It is no wonder that Tamar's story is creatively linked with the story of Ruth (cf. the reference to Tamar in Ruth 4:12) with its core theme of the peaceable kingdom where every one is provided for – rich and poor, young and old, locals and foreigners.

Tamar's story challenges the reader to not only consider the ways in which the poor in our own community suffer at the hand of the system, but also how these individuals defy the

10 Boaz commands his labourers to leave behind extra ears for Ruth – a gesture, which Ellen von Wolde (1997:40) calls exceedingly generous, "an unprecedented initiative on the part of Boaz which causes surprise on both the part of the servants as well as the readers." Cf. also Sakenfeld (1999:46).

11 As Katharine Sakenfeld (1999:22) notes: "Divine provision of potential sustenance is a necessary beginning point, but only a beginning."

12 Johanna van Wijk-Bos (1988:47) writes as follows: "Death and threat of death have been overcome by life."

system in order to survive. In our ongoing reflection on the topic of gender and poverty, it will be necessary for us to think through issues such as the importance of agency, i.e., women's ability to make their own decisions, so being able to participate in their own future.

c. Rahab (Josh 2, 6)

Another story that puts a gendered face on poverty is that of Rahab, the single woman who had to rely on one of the few ways in which a woman without male support could make a living. In terms of a socio-historical reading, Leslie Hoppe (2004:43-44) characterizes Rahab as representative of "the urban lower classes, who had no reason to support the royal establishment." He writes: "As prostitute, she was among the debased and expendable elements of the city."

Rahab indeed can be described as a liminal figure in more than one way. She literally dwells in the city wall (Josh 2:15) – in the space between the double walls that fortified the city where social outcasts typically found a home (Bird 1999:108).¹³ During enemy attacks, though, these walls could crumble, making this liminal space a very dangerous place to inhabit. Indeed things have not changed much since ancient times. The poor and the marginalized still live in the worst and most dangerous parts of town.

Yet, Rahab's story offers a number of significant perspectives on the view from the other side. For instance, it is exactly her position as a prostitute that contributes to her situation of liminality also offers the space for new opportunities to emerge. Her home becomes the place where the Israelite spies "go into her" (vv 1, 3, 4) – the Hebrew filled with sexual innuendoes – to gain access and information. In her liminal position she moreover serves as the saviour of the men, outwitting the king as he comes searching for the Hebrew men. According to Hoppe's analysis (2004:44), Rahab's story "celebrates the small victory of these representatives of the lower social classes as they made the king of Jericho look foolish."

In return for saving the lives of the spies, Rahab asks in Josh 2:13-15 for the safety and wellbeing of her family (cf. the repeated reference to *hesed* חֶסֶד and *'emet* אֱמֶת denoting loyalty and faithfulness in vv 12-15) with the promise coming from the men: "Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."

Joshua 6:25 narrates the fulfilment of this promise when it is said that Rahab and her whole family dwelt in the midst of Israel until the end of her days. Moreover, it is noteworthy that she has a "life" beyond the narrow confines of the original story in Joshua. Besides her presence in the genealogy of Jesus, Rahab features two more times in the New Testament, in both Heb 11:31 and Jam 2:25 being heralded for her amazing faith (Sakenfeld 2002:24).

The story of Rahab lends itself to postcolonial critique (cf. e.g. Rowlet 2000; Dube 2006). One can read the story of Rahab in terms of the outsider/colonizer that comes in and co-opt the locals to work together with the imperial forces against their own interest. Moreover, it is interesting that even though there is no indication in the biblical witness that Rahab was married into Israelite line, the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 bestows on her a family making her part of the royal Davidic and subsequently the line of the Messiah. This imagined family raises the feminist critique that salvation for a woman is only situated in a man.

Nevertheless, this less than respectable woman, the quintessential "other" subverts people's expectations when this non-Israelite, enemy, outsider, woman is the one who in Josh 2:9-11 speaks "right" about God (Fewell 1998:72; Bird 1999:107). She knows Yahweh's name, the God of Exodus, the Saviour God who in one of the traditional confession of who God is, has defeated King Og and Sihon (Ps 104). Moreover, Rahab's story in itself is also a narrative of salvation. In this midst of macro story of Israel being saved by the God of the Exodus, Rahab's micro story serves 13 Danna Nolan Fewell (1998:72) argues that Rahab's "marginality is symbolized by her dwelling in the city wall, in the very boundary between inside and outside."

as a longing for the “happy ending” of where there is a future for the formerly disenfranchised.

Moreover, the discomfort we may feel when reading Rahab’s narrative in terms of a postcolonial or feminist critique may perhaps help us to contemplate the messiness of the stories of those who today can be considered poor. Most people constitute complex figures with mixed motives, who rarely can be placed within simple categories.

d. Bathsheba (2 Sam 11-12, 2 Kgs 1-2)

At first glance one would not consider Bathsheba to fall into the “poor” category. After all, she was married to a soldier that suggests that she was well provided for. The fact that Bathsheba likely was a non-Israelite (her husband is described as a Hittite) could suggest that her status as “foreigner” would make her more vulnerable. However, it is the glaring abuse of royal power according to which she is not only violated by King David, but also becomes a widow due to the king’s relentless attempts to cover up his tracks that best demonstrates the extent of vulnerability of the poor in the face of the powers-to-be. Encompassed by personal violence and national war-fare, Bathsheba emerges as a victim that finds herself in an extremely vulnerable situation: widowed, with another man’s child, without long term security or any future of which to speak.

In Matthew 1 it is interesting to note that Bathsheba is remembered as the “Wife of Uriah.” On the one hand this designation attests to the fact that the memory of the injustice did to her and her husband is preserved. However, ultimately the fact that the woman so typically is only named in terms of her husband suggests once more that Bathsheba’s experience in all this is overlooked and not considered important (Sakenfeld 2002:28-29. Cf. also her own name, literally meaning “daughter of Sheba” that depicts her in relation to her father. Even in her name, Bathsheba is inadvertently linked to the men in her life). As in the original story in 2 Samuel 11-12, we hardly hear Bathsheba’s voice at all except where she is mourning her murdered husband and dead child (2 Sam 11:26; 12:24).¹⁴

Viewing Bathsheba in terms of the category of a poor woman is further conceivable in reference to the striking parable told by Nathan to David in 2 Samuel 12. In this parable, the prophet presents the king with the case of a rich man who took the only pet-lamb of a poor man. Within this parable, the “little lamb” is obviously Bathsheba, the vulnerable wife of a “poor” (powerless) man who is violated/ exploited/ killed by someone in a position of power. When Nathan asks what David thinks the punishment for this injustice should be, the “just” king pronounces a death sentence on the perpetrator, in the process indicting himself when Nathan exclaims: “You are the man.” As Hoppe (2004:57) writes:

“There is no clearer protest against royal absolutism and the oppression of the poor under the monarchy than in this parable. It leads the reader to feelings of disgust at the behaviour of the king as it contrasts the rich man, who had flocks and herds, with the poor man, who had just a single pet lamb.”

Bathsheba, a poor widow who has been violated, symbolizes something of the powerlessness of the poor, i.e., the propensity to be taken advantage of by those in situations of power. The irony of a king who earlier in 2 Samuel 8:15 has been said to administer justice and equity to all people, who describes himself as a “poor man” in 1 Samuel 18:23, has fallen into the snares of the abuse of royal power as forewarned by Samuel in 1 Samuel 8:10-18.

However, despite the fact that Bathsheba has no voice in the initial account, her story becomes a story of redemption when David shows true penitence and God’s mercy realizes itself through the birth of Solomon that brings Bathsheba in the line of Jesus. We also see how 14 Jo Ann Hackett (1998:98) further points out that Bathsheba is depicted as almost entirely passive in this story; always being referred to in the third person with the exception of her first-person message to David in 2 Sam 11:5, “I am pregnant.”

Bathsheba grows in stature – in 1 Kings 1-2 the queen playing a leading role in the court politics that eventually decides who the next ruler in the line of Jesse will be (Sakenfeld 2003:75-77; Klein 2000).

4. IMPLICATIONS

To view the theme of gender and poverty in terms of the stories of the four women found in Matthew 1 has the following implications: First, the inclusion of these particular four women in Matthew's version of the genealogy of Jesus points to Matthew's understanding of the kingdom of God. The inclusion of these women, who are non-Israelite and moreover women with a shady past, foreshadows Jesus' ministry with its themes of compassion, love, and concern for the outcasts, the poor and the sick, acceptance of foreigners (Carter 2000:58-61; Wainwright 1991:61-69). In the stories of these four women, we indeed see something of what Katharine Sakenfeld (1999:9-11) identifies as a central theme in the book of Ruth that extends well to Matthew's vision, i.e., "the peaceable community," where everybody live together in harmonious and joyful community, where the poor are cared for, where widows survive, where all are able to enjoy basic and continuance sustenance.

Second, the action of using narratives to flesh out the details of the lives of these (poor) women who are referenced in Matthew 1 is important for our ongoing quest in trying to understand poverty in contemporary communities today. As it was important for us to move beyond the mere names mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus, evoking the back stories that presented us with a more complex and even shadowed picture of the various women, so it is important for us to move beyond an abstract description of "the poor" toward a more complex understanding of the people with whom we work. The very complexity of the biblical stories that is narrated with unflinching honesty serves as a reminder that our dealings with the poor are not always easy or straightforward.

In the movie, *Entertaining Angels* that describe the life and work of the Catholic Worker, Dorothy Day, when her co-workers complain about the prostitutes and the drunks that are finding their way into their home, Dorothy Day call the poor her "meeting-place with God." She says that if she can just give God a chance, she knows that God would fill her with love, fill her through these people. As she says: "I don't think that God will judge us on how successful we are in changing the world. I do think he judges us on how faithful we are serving his poor." Yet, Dorothy Day does not romanticize her encounter with the poor. In an angry tirade, a frustrated Dorothy tells God: "These brothers and sisters of yours, the ones that you want me to love? Let me tell you something. They smell."¹⁵

All the more, in the complex and multifaceted stories of women like Ruth (and Naomi), Rahab, Tamar, and Bathsheba, we are challenged to really see the faces of the many poor women in our own country; to get to know their stories; to share in their sorrows and hopes and joys; to gain insight into the complex motivations that govern their lives.

Finally, the stories of these remarkable women remembered in Matthew 1 – women who find themselves with their backs against the wall, but women who in some way find the strength and resources to survive, challenge us to play some small part in helping to realize the kingdom of God in our communities today. The stories of Ruth, Rahab, Tamar and Bathsheba encourage us to not only be receptive of the various ways in which poor women all around the world seek to make a way out of no way, but also to consider how individuals and communities may work together to both alleviate the short term effects of poverty as well as finding long term solutions with regard to the economic security and overall wellbeing of those individuals in our midst whose stories we are yet to hear.

¹⁵ Quoted in Sanders 2002:139.

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KEY WORDS

Poverty
Gender
Genealogy
Ruth
Tamar
Bathsheba
Rahab
Matthew 1

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