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EXPLORING ALL THE WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

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Peter's Mother-In-Law: Identity Over Status

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Jesus loved this nameless, faceless woman as a reminder that He loves each and every person, no matter if they are the daughter-in-law of a King or an unimportant servant in a household.

Peter's mother-in-law is one of the most famous, unnamed women in the Bible, a

mere footnote in the annals of biblical history. Yet, God specifically calls attention to her in three of the gospels as Jesus enters Peter's home and heals her of a fever, which she then immediately rises to serve Jesus:

"Now when Jesus had come into Peter's house, He saw his wife's mother lying sick with a fever. So He touched her hand, and the fever left her. And she arose and served them." (Matthew 8:14- 15)

Not much is known about this enigmatic woman who chose to serve Jesus and his disciples once her fever left her. So, why does God focus on her, not as a name, but as a person important in Peter's life and more significantly, to Jesus's ministry? Why does God purposefully include her short, brief story in the Bible, and how does this extend to Jesus's capacity of love for everyone regardless of name or stature?

The great apostle Peter, as mentioned briefly in Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* (18.6.3), was originally a freed-man of Bernice (married to King Herod the Great's son, Aristobulus) before he became Jesus's disciple on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. A freed-man during Biblical times was different than a freed slave; they were considered privileged Roman workers - even if they were Jewish - who enjoyed certain privileges only reserved for Roman citizens. Peter, being a freed-man, was able to marry whom he pleased and could work for wages as an "employee". As such, Simon Peter (and his older brother Andrew) freely moved within the court of Herod the Great and worked as a laborer under Bernice before becoming a Jewish fisherman and, more importantly, a "fisher of men".

Incidentally, Herod the Great, Bernice's father-in-law, was a brutal leader who was notoriously known for having all the infants under the age of 2 executed when Jesus was born when the wise men would not disclose the place of His birth:

"Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men." (Matthew 2: 16-18)

King Herod the Great even had his own two sons – Alexander and Aristobulus (Bernice's husband) – assassinated because he was petrified that they were plotting to overthrow his reign (a common "delusion" of Herod). Their mother, King Herod's wife, was Mariamne I, one of the last Jewish princesses of the Hasmonean (Maccabean) dynasty which successfully revolted against Alexander the Great's splintered successors in 129 B.C, and whose country's independence is still celebrated worldwide during Hanukkah. King Herod

strategically married Mariamne I, so that he could form a powerful alliance with this Jewish nation, thus making him a “friend” of the Jews. He went so far as to rebuild the Jewish temple that was destroyed in 586 B.C. in order to garner the favor of the Jewish people.

Peter, being Jewish, was free to roam about King Herod the Great’s court and country. As a matter of fact, the legendary tradition holds that Peter married Alexander’s daughter who was Aristobulus’s unnamed niece and King Herod’s granddaughter, having been brought to Herod’s court to live with her two brothers when her father was assassinated by Herod. There, Herod the Great’s granddaughter met, and presumably married, Peter.

Incredibly, Peter is therefore related by marriage to Herod Agrippa, Herod the Great’s grandson, otherwise known as the King who beheaded John the Baptist (Jesus’s cousin) and was responsible for also having Jesus crucified under Pontius Pilate.

Glaphys, the late Alexander’s Jewish wife, is Peter’s unnamed mother-in-law in the Bible. She had a terrible reputation since she was considered an infamous pot-stirrer in Herod the Great’s already dysfunctional family. Glaphys was even partially responsible for her own husband and her brother-in-law Aristobulus’s death since she constantly gossiped, complained, and warred with her sister-in-law Bernice, holding it over Bernice’s head that she was of royal lineage from Cappadocia and Bernice was a mere “peon” of lowly birth. Glaphys notoriously had affairs and married several times after her husband Alexander’s death, eventually returning to her homeland of Cappadocia, which is the same nation (among others) to whom Peter addresses his letter - 1 Peter. Yet in between those later relationships, Glaphys lives with her daughter in Peter’s household, specifically during the time when Jesus visits them during his ministry.

Peter, as expected of a responsible Jewish man, took great care of both his wife and mother-in law in his home. Peter dotes on his beautiful, loving wife who essentially provides patience, reason, comfort and sympathy to perfectly offset his impulsive and moody personality. She is that modest woman of appearance and the honored “weaker” vessel whom Peter compliments in 1 Peter letter to the Dispersion:

“Do not let your adornment be merely outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel – rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.” (1 Peter 3-4)

Yet Peter’s life was not consumed nor defined by his link to Herod’s family, but was rather *enriched* by it. Peter expertly navigated his love for his wife from

Herod's lineage alongside his heavy involvement with Jesus's ministry, later becoming the Rock onto which Jesus would build His Church. Peter obviously was fully aware of John the Baptist's calling, who heralded the coming of Christ onto the scene in 30 A.D. Peter is well known for being the first disciple to emphatically state that Jesus is the "*Christ of God*" (Luke 9: 20). Yet before Peter's bold declaration, Peter begs Jesus to visit his home and heal his beloved mother-in-law from her illness. Peter effectively demonstrates his personal, filial love and respect for this woman by bringing in the Son of God into his home to care for her.

And what's even more striking is that Jesus does so without reservation. Obviously, Jesus knows this woman is related to King Herod the Great, the man who ordered the murder of innocent baby boys in hopes of wiping out Jesus's existence (Herod was justly paranoid due to numerous prophecies that Jesus would "overthrow" him). Jesus is also fully aware that Peter's family by marriage will be responsible for beheading his own cousin, John the Baptist, within the next few months under the manipulative direction of Herod Agrippa's wife, Herodias. Jesus knew full well that that John, while proclaiming Jesus's kingdom was at hand, simultaneously railed against King Herod and Herodias's illegitimate marriage and called for their repentance. Omnipresent Jesus *knew* of all these past, present, and future events and of Graphy's involvement with them.

Jesus also knows EVERYTHING about Peter's mother-in-law herself – her sullied reputation, her brutal familial relations, her "privileged" status as a descendant of the diminished Hasmonean dynasty, and her future illicit relationships with men. However, Jesus specifically makes the point, through Peter's mother-in-law, that names and relationships are unimportant and do not define people. Even more, Jesus accepts anyone who call on Him:

For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

In addition, what the family people are born into does not matter, as Peter's fellow apostle Paul famously states:

If anyone thinks they have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eight day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee, concerning zeal, persecuting the church, concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. (Phil 3: 3-6)

A person's place of birth, citizenry, relatives, or employment – or any lack thereof - does not make nor take away from their identity from Jesus.

What defines a person – as Peter states – is whom you say that Jesus is. Jesus loved Graphys as much as He loved Peter, despite all Peter's bumbling and sometimes heart-wrenching mistakes. Jesus loved this nameless, faceless woman as a reminder that He loves each and every person, no matter if they are the daughter-in-law of a King or an unimportant servant in a household. To Jesus, they are the same and of equal value. Graphys, in turn, obeyed and served Jesus with humility and grace in the midst of her anonymity. Take comfort in that, because all that matters is believing what Peter answered when Jesus asked him, "Whom do YOU say I am?" The answer: Jesus is the Christ.

Consider this: Are you allowing yourself to be defined by your job? Your mistakes? Your family? Your culture? Your unimportance by society's standards? Wouldn't you rather be defined as the child of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Will you allow yourself to be loved as that nameless, anonymous person whom Jesus healed no matter your history, and look to the bright, eternal future of becoming a child of God and the member of *His* family? Let Him come into your house and your heart, and know what it feels like to truly matter to the One who truly matters. And while society may not know your name, Jesus will always remember:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine." (Isaiah 43: 1)

May the Lord bless you and keep you, and remember that He knows your name. Amen.

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