

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

TAMAR: LESSON FOURTEEN

by Sandy Harber

"And she arose, and went away, and laid by her veil from her, and put on the garments of her widowhood. And Judah sent the kid by the hand of his friend the Adullamite, to receive his pledge from the woman's hand; but he found her not. Then he asked the men of that place, saying, Where is the harlot, that was openly by the wayside? And they said, There was no harlot in this place. And he returned to Judah, and said, I cannot find her; and also the men of the place said, that there was no harlot in this place. And Judah said, Let her take it to her, lest we be shamed; behold, I sent this kid, and thou hast not found her."

Genesis 38:19-23

Tamar returned home, took off her disguise, and put her widows weeds back on. Then she had to wait and see if her scheme had worked. Was she pregnant? It must have been an anxious time for her. She didn't want to stay in her father's house where she had no status. Surely everyone knew Shelah was supposed to marry her but had not done so. Perhaps she was regarded with pity or was the brunt of cruel jokes.

Meanwhile, Judah wanted to make good on his pledge. He sent his friend Hirah with the kid to find the temple prostitute who had his signet ring. Why didn't he do this himself? Why employ his friend on such a personal matter? The Bible does not explain. But we do know the outcome of the search was that Hirah could not find the sacred harlot Judah had slept with. He inquired about her near the area where Judah had met her. But she was not there and no one knew anything about her. Hirah was told that there was no temple prostitute in the area. He finally gave up the search.

When Hirah reported back to Judah he decided to let the matter drop. Let the prostitute keep his signet, bracelets, and staff. He didn't want to pursue the matter further because it might reflect badly on him if the story got out. The signet ring which Tamar demanded as a good faith pledge was distinctive. It was probably a cylindrical shaped seal which could be rolled over a clay tablet or pressed into sealing wax or clay. The seal was a means of signing documents. They were distinctive in order to identify the signer. Anyone, then, who saw the signet in Tamar's possession would know it belonged to Judah. The cylindrical seal was usually worn around the owner's neck hanging from a leather cord (this is the "bracelets" of v. 18). Another type of seal found in the area of Palestine by archaeologists was the stamp seal. This seal is flat on the bottom which is where the distinctive engraving is found. The seal is pressed into the clay or wax and serves the same purpose as the cylindrical seal.

In addition, Tamar had requested Judah's staff. As a shepherd, Judah would have carried his staff with him everywhere. Most likely Judah's staff was also distinctive, identifying him as the owner. Otherwise why would Tamar have requested it? Since Judah was well off it's likely that his staff was carved and/or polished. No doubt Judah would have preferred to have those personal items back. But he couldn't make a fuss without it becoming public knowledge that he paid a temple prostitute for her services. The Canaanites participated in this perversion on a regular basis as part of their religious rites. So, they would not regard his behavior as shameful. Therefore, it must be his family he was worried about.

His family would view Judah's actions as sin. He committed idolatrous and immoral acts. Compare his actions to those of his brother Joseph as recorded in chapter 39. Joseph was tempted to immorality by Pontipher's wife and he ran away rather than sin.

Regardless of the situation we are in, God expects us to respond in accordance with His commands, statutes, precepts, etc. There's no excuse for choosing sin. Judah may have been lonely and sad after losing his wife. Or, he may have believed that Baal would give him success with the shearing. Or, it may have been a moment of lust that took him over. We all give in to sin at one time or another. Our circumstances are not an excuse. But we have a great God Who had already arranged for our sin debts to be paid and He extends forgiveness. This is the God we worship. And we worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23).

"For God hath not called us to uncleanness, but unto holiness." I Thessalonians 4:7