

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

TAMAR: LESSON TWELVE

by Sandy Harber

"When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a harlot; because she had covered her face." Genesis 38:15

Judah noticed Tamar sitting there in the open on the road to Timath. She was dressed up like a Canaanite temple prostitute. He did not recognize his daughter-in-law because she had a veil over her face. The veil was part of the garments normally worn by the temple prostitutes so Judah would not have thought it strange the "harlot" was veiled.

Temple or "sacred" prostitutes were part of pagan religious worship in many parts of the ancient world, including Canaan. Since Judah had lived among the Canaanites for years he was familiar with the use of sacred harlots.

These temple prostitutes wore a veil to symbolize their position as the "bride" of the false god Baal (god of fertility). Temple prostitutes were also used in the worship of El, the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon. While El was recognized as the "father-god" of all the lesser gods, Baal became the most popular god. Thus, Baal became the ruler, or lord, of the other gods. The Old Testament abounds with references to Baal worship. The Hebrew people were tripped up time and time again by the idolatrous practices of Baal worship. This was true because of their failure to destroy all the inhabitants of Canaan under the leadership of General Joshua.

The temple prostitute was a special kind of harlot. She was a "consecrated woman," a priestess of a heathen religion, who engaged in fornication as an act of worship. It was believed that engaging in sex with a temple prostitute was an reenactment of the "divine marriage" (of the gods) and would ensure fertility and prosperity. Thus, men would visit the sacred harlots prior to planting their fields, or before the period of lambing or shearing the sheep.

What does it say about Judah, then, that he visited a temple prostitute on his way to shearing his sheep? His actions were more than mere immorality. He was engaging in idolatry. Did Judah not trust the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to prosper him? Was he hedging his bets by appealing to Baal through his act of worship?

Tamar hid her face behind a veil. Judah could not pierce her disguise and accepted her as she appeared outwardly - a harlot. But Judah could not hide behind any disguise that God could not penetrate. God saw the idolatry of Judah. The Bible does not record any other incident of idolatry in Judah's life. But God knew his heart and saw his actions any time he participated in the religion of the Canaanites.

Remember that Judah had married a Canaanite. Did she teach him Baal worship? Did he teach her about the true God? The chances are more likely that he was led astray by his wife, which is why we are warned to not marry an unbeliever.

How were Judah's children raised? Were they taught the truth of the God of heaven? Or were they raised in the fables of Baal worship? Did their upbringing in the Canaanite religion contribute to Er's "wickedness" in God's eyes? Is it possible Er died because he delved too deeply into Baal worship?

We don't know the answer, but God does. No one can hide from God. He can't be fooled by a woman hiding behind a veil. He can't be fooled by people attending a church service on Sunday but living for themselves the rest of the week. Hebrews 4:13 tells us that "all things are naked and open" to the eyes of God.

That's bad news if you are trying to hide behind a facade. But it's good news for those of us who are weak and suffering. God sees our plight. And He gives comfort and strength and wisdom where and when we need it. We can safely trust in Him, the only true and living God.

"The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good." Proverbs 15:3