

Tamar's troubles



There have been four men in my life. The first of course was my father, a good man. 'Tamar,' he used to say, 'when you grow up I will marry you to a rich and handsome man, and your sons will

grow up strong and find favour with God.' So he married me to Er, son of Judah, son of Jacob.

Er was not a good man. True, he was handsome, and he was rich, for his family had many sheep, but he was arrogant, and believed that everything he did was right. He would abuse the men working in the fields, and at night he would abuse me. When he began to think himself above God, God disabused him of that, and he died.

It is a tradition among our people that when a man dies, his widow must marry one of his brothers, and the first son of that marriage carries on the family line of the dead brother. So I was given to Er's brother Onan. Onan was not happy. There was no love lost between him and Er, and he had no intention of being the instrument by which Er's line would continue. He made sure that despite the fact that he came to me at night, I would never conceive. God was displeased by this dishonesty as well, so Onan also died.

Er and Onan had a younger brother, Shelah, and he should have been the fourth man in my life. Through him I should have provided heirs for both of his brothers. However Judah, father to the three brothers, claimed that Shelah was too young to marry, so he suggested that I return to the house of my father, as a widow, and when Shelah was of age, he would come for me to make the marriage.

I returned to my father's house, an object of pity, because although I had been married twice I had provided neither of my husbands with an heir. In vain did I protest that it was not my fault. But no one would listen to me. Days turned to weeks, weeks to months and months to years. Judah's wife Shua died, and more time passed; still Judah did not fulfill his promise to return to me to claim me as bride for Shelah.

Then one day I heard that Judah was coming to Timnah to shear his sheep. So I dressed myself in my gaudiest clothes and covered my face with a veil. I went and sat in the seat of the prostitute at the shrine at Enaim, which is on the way to Timnah. As Judah passed by he stopped to talk to me. I could tell he was interested, and when he said that he would give me a young goat if I would sleep with him, I knew my prayers would be answered.

As he did not have the young goat with him, I asked for his seal, cord and staff as a pledge, which he willingly gave. When he had finished I slipped away, and nobody was able to tell him who I was.

Three months later it came to Judah's ears that I was pregnant, and that I had been guilty of prostituting myself. He stormed up to my father's house, for the first time since Onan's death, and demanded that as I had dishonoured his family, I must be burnt to death. The

men he had brought with him began to drag me out, but I screamed at them to let me go, as I had a message for Judah. I gave one of them the seal, cord and staff, and while the other watched over me, the first man went to Judah with the message that the father of my child was the owner of these items.

I wish I had been there to see his face when they were given to him. He had the grace to come to me and apologise, for his actions and inactions, then he went away and left me alone, after telling my father that the fault was his, both in getting me pregnant and not giving me to Shelah, and that I was an honourable woman still.

Six months later I gave birth. It was a painful process, with both boys struggling to get out first. Perez and Zerah are the best of sons, and I know that unlike Er, Onan or even their father Judah, they will provide me with sons of their own to keep my name alive.

We know that Perez was the father of Hezron, and he was the father of Ram, he was the father of Amminadab and he.....well after many generations Mattan was the father of Jacob he was the father of Joseph, and he was the husband of Mary who gave birth to Jesus.