

TAMAR: A TALE OF CONTEMPORARY MARGINALISATION

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GENESIS 38.1–26 IS AN ACCOUNT OF A YOUNG WOMAN'S JOURNEY THROUGH MALE SPACE – ONE DETERMINED BY MARRIAGE, WIDOWHOOD, PROSTITUTION, VICTIMISATION, RESTITUTION AND MOTHERHOOD. Her story is embedded within the

account of Joseph. Being married to an eldest son, who dies, and later left at the mercy of a Levirate marriage in order to continue the patriarchal bloodline, her story is also one which reveals the profound impact of changing circumstances on her life.

We also live in a world where being born of a certain ethnicity, ability or gender can determine your life chances. Tamar was a young woman who suffered the untimely death of her first husband, and the negligence of her husband's brother in his Levirate marriage to her, where he practiced *coitus interruptus* and did not impregnate her as the emerging social customs of the day required. Known ever since as the sin of Onan – and striking terror into many young men who practice masturbation or those who use this emotionally jarring form of contraception, this young man was struck down by God for his selfishness in not giving a son to his dead brother's memory. Tamar's father-in-law finally intervenes and sends her back to her parents' house in disgrace.

This would not have been a comfortable place for Tamar to be. She would have been widely avoided as having brought misfortune and death to two husbands. Moreover, as a widow (and a motherless widow at that), she would probably have had one of the lowest ranks in her parents' household, cooking, cleaning, fulfilling the peremptory needs of others, being situated next in status only to the female children in the household, and condemned to wearing widows clothing as a sign of her grief and obedience. She could also have been subject to random attacks of violence just as one in two women in the UK today experience some form of violence in their household or work place over the course of their lifetime, including rape, beatings, stalking and harassment.¹ In 2002 it was estimated that there were 12.9 million incidents of domestic violence against women in the UK during the previous year.²

Returning to the story of Tamar we can see that she was unhappy with her lot. She hears that her father-in-law Judah is passing by during some sheep shearing and decides to go and petition him so that she can again be accepted into her former household's family. Waiting at the gates of Enaim on the road to Timnah, she sees her husband's younger brother Shelah, to whom she should have been given in marriage. However, being disguised

with a veil, Judah believes her to be a prostitute: a woman available to him as a newly widowed man to have sex with. Tamar knows that she is being used and abused, including the violation of customary law by not being given Shelah in marriage and so asks for Judah's signet ring and staff.

Her story – of being marginalised and brought to a place where she is then taken into prostituted sex – is a global story. Today, hundreds of thousands of young women globally are trafficked (an estimated 120,000 into the European Union). They are sold into the growing pay-as-you-go sex markets in the wealthy countries of Europe, North America and Oceania, Japan and the Middle East.

Now you may say, 'Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world, and there is nothing that can be done about it.' Today, whilst the patterns of sustaining reproduction and of maintaining the welfare of the clan that dictated Tamar's particular circumstances are now dying out, there are nevertheless many countries where women are not autonomous or equal in status to men. Throughout the world women are being forced to migrate away from their homes, looking for employment, opportunities, recognition, and sometimes safety.

When we say 'prostitution is the oldest profession' what does that say to us and to those caught in prostitution? It says that prostitution is a worthwhile and highly aspirational career choice, widely esteemed by the meritocracy, and all societally successful organisations. We know, however, that this is not the case. Any perusal of a careers guidance booklet at your local school would show by the absence of the P-word that this is not a direction which society believes leads to human flourishing and success. We need to face up to the truth. Prostitution is *not* a profession – no profession in the world entails worse health, worse payments, decreased social status and diminished prospects of keeping your children and your wider sibling relationships as you become embroiled in its web.³ The terrible quintuple murder of young women in Ipswich in December 2006 was an appalling shock for many. But those caught in prostitution do not only risk murder with a hugely escalated risk of violent death, but also are ubiquitously subject to unwanted pregnancies, to enforced abortions, to rape and to grievous bodily assault as part and parcel of their work.

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► Today, with the substantial increase in female migration, women are at a massively increased risk of being brought into the world of trafficking, a business which is posited on making money from the bodies and wrecked lives of the women and children who are brutalised within it.

In 2004 a young Lithuanian girl – let's call her Eva – took a holiday job in Sheffield selling ice cream. She was, like many, earning money for her next year's school fees, and her parents had happily signed her application for a visa with the firm whose two representatives, one male and one female, had called round. Within a fortnight she was in London, and after having her passport taken by a fellow Lithuanian, was sold by him for £4,000 to a man who forced her to work in a brothel in Birmingham. On the first day she had five clients and she received none of the money. Two weeks later she is sold on for £3,000 to someone who took her to a brothel in Leicester. Eva was not very compliant, cried a great deal and was therefore sold on in August (to London) and then September (to Sheffield) this time to an Albanian male for £1,500. This was the seventh time she had been sold. Her new owner brought her north to work her around his friendship group and around the market he was building through the internet, telephone selling and word of mouth. One night Eva was taken to a club by this man, who wanted to show her to his friends. After four hours Eva managed to escape from the club, with the help of four English girls who found her crying in the toilets. Eva then ran to a nearby police station. From that point, having been looked after, she took her tormentors to court with the help of the Crown Prosecution Service and police. Subsequently, the second case under the new anti-trafficking legislation successfully led to prosecution with hefty sentences coming down on the Albanians and Lithuanian men and women who feature in this sorry tale of abuse.

Two years later, and after a nationwide multi-agency initiative against trafficking through Operation Pentameter where 84 young women were rescued (12 of whom were minors), we learn that there are an estimated 4,000 to 10,000 women in this situation in Britain today. Those rescued during police operations stated that they had had their passports taken, endured threats and enforced participation in non-consensual sex, been frequently abused by alcohol and drugged drinks and suffered beatings, intimidation and rape, often dozens of times a day.

The evidence of abuse is often very difficult to obtain, but since CHASTE has opened some safe-bed spaces, which have been developed through our network, there has been increasing willingness of young women to testify against those who have abused them, and a corresponding increase in tell-tale items of evidence which can be pieced together against their tormentors.

But what of those who, just as Judah did, purchase sex in order to take the sting out of some loneliness, perhaps whilst away from home or to use some spare leisure time? What of those who pay for the ever cheaper, ever easier to access pay-as-you-go sex? Interestingly, Grahame Maxwell, the Deputy Chief Constable of South Yorkshire Police and Director of the new United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre, has said that any man who has sex with a woman who afterwards is revealed as having been trafficked will by definition have engaged in a non-consensual sexual liaison, and can be charged with rape. This approach is one step on the way to getting where justice, equality and human dignity require matters to be. For the first time in law, attention is starting to focus on the male client, who in previous years has been asked to 'Kindly move on, Sir,' as brothel raids and massage parlour visits by the police have taken place. Significantly, in 1999, Sweden adopted a clear legislative approach explicitly penalising those who purchase sex. CHASTE is researching various means such as these which aim at reducing actual demand in the sex industry. More must be done to reverse the 'pay-as-you-go' mindset that shows such blatant disregard for the lives it damages.

What is our responsibility to one another, both in terms of the fairness with which the world's riches are shared between us and the way in which we use/abuse one another because of disparities in access to wealth or means of getting hold of it? Tamar was massively exposed as a young widow whose married household had got rid of her, denouncing her as a bad omen. And the woman caught in adultery (John 8.1–11)? What was her story? We don't know. But she was the only one brought before Jesus for condemnation.

One hundred years ago Josephine Butler talked about the double standard of the tacit agreement in society which left men free to purchase, where everywhere else women were in chains. A recent exhibition at the Fawcett Museum in London displayed a testimony from the nineteenth century from a woman caught in prostitution, declaring that it was a man who purchased her, a man who kept her in a brothel, men who came to

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her to have sex with her, and men who once she was released prayed for her! It is not so horrendous now: women can at least be involved in the processes of release and rescue, but the point is well made. What kind of history is it that delivers the double standard of which Tamar was a part, and which leaves Judah and the man not caught in adultery and the many thousands of clients who access women who have been trafficked or who are in enforced prostitution, to walk free?

This was, of course, Tamar's story. The double standard which has maintained the woman as the prostitute, the fallen woman with 'a bad reputation', the foreign whore dependent on men's charity for their welfare and livelihood, and leaves the client in his comfort zone utterly unnoticed. This is the scenario played out in the account of Judah. So when word reaches him that his daughter-in-law has been 'playing the whore', and is pregnant, naturally Judah announces that she should be burnt.

Many of the women with whom CHASTE have dealt (now numbering over 87) are terrified of the rejection they will receive at the hands of their fathers. A young woman with whom we are currently working rang up her father to tell him of what had happened to her – how she had been forced to dance in lap-dancing clubs, to perform erotic moves with barely any coverings and to be touched intimately by men. A young woman whose husband had sold her to a trafficker just three days after their marriage! And her father – what did he have to say? 'Let me deal with this man!'; 'Are you safe?' 'I'm coming to get you!' 'My poor darling'? No. Instead, he said, '*You are no longer any daughter of mine – you are dead to me.*'

Thankfully, with the signet ring and staff to hand, Tamar was able to save herself from burning and was vindicated in front of Judah who conceded she was more righteous than him. Tamar went on to have twins and the line of Judah through which Christ's ancestry is traced is accounted for. A line with enforced prostitution, male jealousy, eviction from the virilocal household, disgrace, impoverishment and a woman's resourcefulness at its heart.

The women with whom CHASTE work have had a desperate journey – as desperate when articulated, and frequently more so, than any of the brief horror stories embedded in the Christian Scriptures in the Old Testament. The mass rape and dismembering of the concubine, the forced migrations from homelands, the

threats of death, the evictions from families, threats and marginalisation – all of this is worryingly present in our contemporary society thanks to the continued proliferation and expansion of the sex industry in our culture, with pay-as-you-go sex expanding an estimated 150 per cent in the last ten years amongst the 22 to 35 age group, the age of highest usage.

It is time, along with Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, Hannah Moore and the runaway slave Olaudah Equiano to say 'Enough!' 'The African slave,' they said, 'is he not a man and a brother?' It is time to take a long hard look at our culture and see the degradation of the image of God amongst us every time pay-as-you-go sex is entered into. The subtle undermining of reputation, the placing of particular women in a category of commodity, where it becomes permissible to pay for sex and then walk away from the act of consumption, is widespread, but needs to be revealed for what it is. Women caught in prostitution, caught in forced migration and with vulnerabilities exploited by others (both criminals and men with spare cash in their pockets), *are they not women and sisters too?*

Tamar revealed to Judah his rank hypocrisy through the revelation of the signet and the staff. What are the signs of signet ring and staff in today's massive exploitation of women for non-consensual and financially mediated sex? Perhaps it is the very telling of their stories, and the revealing of women trafficked for sexual exploitation and those caught in prostitution alike, to be women and sisters, mothers, daughters and friends, that is today's conduit for the revelation of their gross exploitation.

Is it now the beginning of their release, and the start of a fairer, more just and respect-rich life for us all? I pray to God this year that this may be the case as we engage for the first time in a formal way our churches in a UK wide Not for Sale Sunday – on the 20th May, praying that we shall start to seek justice in this shadow realm of leisure-commercialised sex which has grown in the slipstream of our society – with women and young children exploited whilst wealth cascades in the developed world. I pray to God that we shall see abolition of this trade in flesh through prostitution and trafficking, in our time. Like the West African slave trade it will take engagement and resilience, passion and commitment – *but change can be achieved and God's justice desires it to be so.* Amen.

For more information on Not for Sale or for the issues pertaining to the work of CHASTE go online at www.notforsalesunday.org and www.chaste.org.uk ■

NOTES

1. Sylvia Walby and Jonathan Allen, 'Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey', 2004, available through www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk
2. Ibid. In Russia and Romania, over 60 per cent of women are reported to experience violence in the domestic space according to recent survey work, and at the turn of the millennium a distressing 12,000 women each year in Russia were dying from violent attacks within their homes.
3. Liz Kelly and Linda Regan, *Stopping Traffic: Exploring the extent of, and responses to, trafficking in women for sexual exploitation in the UK* (Police Research Series, Paper 125; The Home Office; 2000).