

4.

Peace without Violence against Women: The Rape of Tamar

2 Samuel 13:1-22

¹ Some time passed. David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. ² Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. ³ But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. ⁴ He said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Amnon said to him, "I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister." ⁵ Jonadab said to him, "Lie down on your bed, and pretend to be ill; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister Tamar come and give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" ⁶ So Amnon lay down, and pretended to be ill; and when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand."

⁷ Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." ⁸ So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. ⁹ Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. ¹⁰ Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. ¹¹ But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." ¹² She answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!" ¹³ As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I

beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you.”¹⁴ But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her.

¹⁵Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, “Get out!”¹⁶ But she said to him, “No, my brother for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me.” But he would not listen to her.¹⁷ He called the young man who served him and said, “Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her.”¹⁸ (Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times.) So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her.¹⁹ But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went.

²⁰Her brother Absalom said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.” So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house.²¹ When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.²² But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar.

Background Notes

To know more about the place of women and about rebellion in David’s time, one has to read 2 Samuel 20. It is important to understand the background to this story of the Rape of Tamar, and events before and after it. The story foreshadows the sorts of tensions that will trouble the house of David for some time.

Amnon was the firstborn, the rightful heir to the throne of King David. If anything negative happened to him, Absalom would benefit as the second possible heir. David is the prototype of humanity and is highly appreciated in various theological traditions. He expresses only anger and does not act upon his son’s misbehaviour. Tamar, as a proper and obedient virgin daughter of the king, behaved in the expected way in her dressing and response to the demands of her father and stepbrother.

She was not listened to or respected by Amnon as if she had human dignity. After being raped, Absalom, her brother silenced her and Amnon rejected her and chased her away, treated her not as a person with dignity. It is clear that it is a story that privileges men and in which women do not count. The story makes the other women in Tamar's life invisible and silent. A Latin American Biblical scholar, Elaine Neuenfeldt, connects patriarchal domination as a bedfellow to sexual abuse of women and girls as follows:

The story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is part of a context where violence against women, specifically sexual violence, is an instrument of superiority and power. The case of Tamar involves incest and rape in the field of the royal house. Men are involved in conspiracies, expecting for the right moment to act, and are men who after the fact had occurred ordered silence instead of denounce. Tamar's voice and her protest are related in the text, but her power of denouncing and acting are abruptly interrupted. The victim, the woman didn't shut up, but men, whom coexist with violence call for silence. David, the father and the king, in the end doesn't cry because of the violence in his house. He and the men that surround him lament the death of Amnon that is done in the middle of the conflict for power.⁹

Some scholars believe that this story was edited before or after the Babylonian captivity. Some of the exegetical questions are as follows:

1. What is this story about?
2. Who are the main characters of this story?
3. What do we know about each main character?
4. How much do we know about David's family?
5. What do we know about the people who told the story?
6. What meaning did the people of that time find in it?

⁹ Elaine Neuenfeldt, "Sexual Violence and Power: The Case of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:1-22." *Journal of Latin American Hermeneutics*, 2007, 1-10. At: <http://www.isedet.edu.ar/journal/violence.pdf>

7. How much did Tamar know about the law of marriage?
8. Was the story most concerned with unity, rights, or the institution of marriage in Israel?
9. When incest occurred, did it help the household of David to keep silence over this incident (or other similar incidents)?

Questions for Reflection

1. Does it make sense to maintain “peace” by not revealing our own or our leaders’ faults/transgressions?
2. If a text deals directly with sexual violence, like the Rape of Tamar, do we need special interpretive tools?
3. Have we violated people like Tamar in our own contexts?
4. By “violation” do we mean only sexual violence, or any kind of violence against women?
5. Is marginalization of women “violence”?
6. How do our own theologies address the problem of sexual violence against women?
7. What would you do to maintain integrity in your community after such an incident?
8. How does an abused woman reflect what God is? How does she reflect what justice and peace mean?
9. What resources do we have to address the problem of sexual or other kinds of violence?