

Chapter 5

Tamar, Daughter of David (2 Samuel 13:1-22)

Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor...

The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes;

in many-colored robes she is led to the king,

behind her the virgins, her companions, follow.

With joy and gladness they are led along

as they enter the palace of the king

Psalm 45:9a, 13-14

Seven (days) to yesterday I have not seen the sister,

and a sickness has invaded me.

My body has become heavy,

forgetful of my own self.

If the chief of physicians come to me,

my heart is not content (with) their remedies;

the lector priests, no way (out) is in them:-

my sickness will not be probed.

To say to me: "Here she is!" is what will revive me;

her name is what will lift me up.

Egyptian Love Poem¹

Introduction

The tragedy of Tamar, princess of Israel, plays a significant role in the David cycle of narratives. However, like the other *b^etuloth* stories which are examined in this thesis, her story is given only cursory attention in biblical commentaries

¹ Peter Kyle McCarter Jr., *II Samuel* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 320. Excerpt of an Egyptian love poem (Papyrus Beatty 1, verso C iv 6, trans. J. A. Wilson for Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 468-69).

and does not appear in the Church's three-year lectionary.² Another curiosity is that - in contrast to the fascination which medieval artists had with the daughters of Lot and Jephthah - few artists have been interested in depicting the daughter of David.³ The consequence is that people who are acquainted with Bible stories through art and literature may be unaware that the tragedy of Princess Tamar is part of the biblical tradition.

Tamar's story is also ignored or avoided by the great majority of those who preach and teach. In my church with male-only clergy, I have never heard a sermon which mentions the events of 2 Samuel 13; nor has it been the topic of any Bible study I have attended. "It is as if the silence counseled by Absalom (vs. 20) has extended through the centuries to the present."⁴ Although male to female violence has long been a major concern in most modern societies, the clergy in many churches have not utilised Tamar's story as an aid to the important prophetic task of acknowledging, identifying and finding ways to minimise and prevent domestic abuse.

² Consultation on Common Texts (Association), *The Revised Common Lectionary* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press), 1992.

³ Dorothee Sollé, Joe H. Kirchberger and Herbert Haag ignore Tamar in their handsome production of biblical women in art. Sollé, Kirchberger and Haag, *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mi: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994). Sara Kipfer notes that apart from a number of works by sixteenth and seventeenth century Dutch and Italian artists, there is a dearth of art depicting Tamar and Amnon. Kipfer, "Love Turns into Hate: The Rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13:1-22) in Baroque Art," in Society of Biblical Literature Newsletter (27 February 2009) [online]; available: <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=800>. There are also two illustrations and a misericord in Hereford Cathedral which exemplify the few extant medieval depictions of Tamar and Amnon. R. E. Kaske, "Amnon and Thamar on a Misericord in Hereford Cathedral," *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought and Religion* 45 (1990): fig. 1, 3 and 4.

⁴ Bruce C. Birch, "2 Samuel 1:1-24:25," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 2:1306.

Tamar's marginalisation contrasts with the ongoing attention her father has always received as an iconic figure in the imagination of millions throughout the ages.⁵ Among dozens of populist books extolling various women of the Old Testament, to my knowledge not one features Princess Tamar. In Lillian Klein's scholarly, albeit relatively brief, book on sexual politics in the Hebrew Bible, Tamar is ignored.⁶ Even Trevor Dennis's publication on women's voices in the Old Testament strangely fails to give Tamar a voice.⁷ Yet a close reading of 2 Samuel 13:1-22 provides a glimpse of an exceptional young woman whose spirited criticism of her brother Amnon's sexual advances surely deserves an place within the Hebrew Bible's gallery of admirable women.⁸

One can only guess at the reason that Tamar's worth has not been recognised over the millennia. Perhaps it is due to her failure to escape her brother's attack and her subsequent isolation, for unlike *b^etuloth* who have been accorded some recognition, Tamar neither becomes a mother nor dies dramatically. Just as her hopes for a fulfilling life are extinguished with the sexual and political abuse of power by the male members of her family, so too has her story been buried in

⁵ For example, twelve pages in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (IDB) are devoted to David, whereas a mere seven lines are accorded to Tamar. Amnon has nine lines. J.M. Myers, "David," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1962) 1:771-82; S. Cohen, "Tamar," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1962) 4:515-16; J. M. Ward, "Amnon," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1962) 1:114.

⁶ Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁷ Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1994).

⁸ I have accepted most commentators' opinion that incest is not the issue in this story. For a brief discussion on the question of incest in the case of Tamar and Amnon, see "Ambiguity," p. 385.

obscurity. It has taken the advent of feminist biblical scholarship to find a place for Tamar in the world of biblical narrative.

Narrative Analysis⁹

Narrative Context

2 Samuel is one of the Hebrew Bible's six books which record Israel's story of the monarchy, with 2 Samuel recording the 'warts and all' career of David's reign.¹⁰ After David is crowned king of Judah and later of Israel, he captures Jerusalem and makes it his capital. Following a series of victories over neighbouring nations, David hands over the army's command to Joab.¹¹

Subsequently David commits adultery with Bathsheba and then attempts to hide his paternity of her child by manipulating the movements of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. The ploy fails, so David arranges for Uriah to die in battle.

Following Nathan's condemnation of David's behaviour, the royal family descends into a vortex of deceit, rape, murder and rebellion. Two years after the rape of Tamar by Amnon, Tamar's full brother Absalom arranges for his servants to kill Amnon. Absalom goes into exile, but after five years of ambivalent estrangement from David, Absalom attempts to wrest the crown

⁹ For a semi-literal translation of the pericope, see "Appendix 8" pp. 511-521.

¹⁰ The six books are 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.

¹¹ Philip F. Esler, "2 Samuel – David and the Ammonite War: A Narrative and Social-Scientific Interpretation of 2 Samuel 10-12," in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context*, ed. Philip F. Esler, (London: SCM Press, 2005), 200.

from his father in a civil war which dominates the second half of 2 Samuel. Near the end of his life and after much bloodshed, David is depicted as an impotent old man who has mourned the deaths of three sons and lost his grip on the kingdom.

In the context of the wane of David's political power, the story of Tamar and Amnon introduces the so-called 'succession narratives.' While it is an important episode in the Davidic saga,¹² the 2 Samuel 13:1-22 pericope is also a discrete narrative unit with its own plot and structure.¹³

Story Outline

Preamble: (2 Sam. 13: 1-2)

Absalom has a beautiful sister Tamar. Her half brother Amnon makes himself ill over his unrequited passion for her (vs. 1)

Scene 1: (2 Sam. 13:3-5)

Setting: Amnon's house

Catalyst: Amnon's love for his sister Tamar

Complication: Haggard, Amnon is unable to "do anything to her" (vs. 2)

Response: Jonadab visits his friend and cousin Amnon, and encourages him to reveal the cause of his misery (vss. 3-4)

Jonadab advises Amnon to feign illness to bring David to his bedside to ask him to summon Tamar to prepare food (*habbiryah* הִירְבָּה) for Amnon to eat from her hand (vs. 5)

¹² Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 BCE* (Peabody Ms.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 182.

¹³ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, translated by Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 278-79.

Scene 2: (2 Sam. 13: 6-7)

- Setting: Amnon's house
- Catalyst: Amnon pretends to be ill
- Response: David arrives; Amnon asks for Tamar to come to bake heart loaves so he might eat from her hand. David sends for Tamar to come to prepare the food for Amnon (vss. 6-7)

Scene 3: (2 Sam. 13:8-18)

- Setting: Amnon's house: an outer room and inner room
- Catalyst: Tamar arrives and prepares the food; she presents the heart loaves to Amnon (vs. 8)
- Complication: Amnon refuses the food, dismisses everyone and orders Tamar to bring the loaves into his inner chamber (vs. 9)
- Response: Tamar obeys; Amnon grabs her and orders her to lie with him (vs. 10)
- Complication: Tamar refuses, remonstrates with him, and demands that Amnon desist because of the inevitable disgrace. She begs him to ask David for permission to marry (vss. 12-13)
- Response: Amnon refuses to listen and rapes Tamar (vs. 14)
- Consequence: None at this time
- Complication: Amnon immediately experiences intense hatred for Tamar and orders her to leave (vs. 15)
- Response: Tamar refuses to go, telling him that his dismissal of her is a greater evil than was his assault
- Consequence: Amnon refuses to listen, sends for his servant, asks him to put Tamar outside and to bolt the door; the servant obeys (vss. 16-17)

Scene 4: (2 Sam. 13:19-20)

- Setting: The street outside Amnon's house; Absalom's house
Catalyst: Amnon's rape and subsequent rejection of Tamar
Response: Tamar laments: putting ashes on her head,
tearing her garment and lamenting as she walks (vss. 18-19)
Complication: Absalom questions Tamar and demands her silence
Consequence: Desolate, Tamar is confined to Absalom's house (vs. 20)

Coda: (2 Sam. 13:21, 2)

David hears about the rape and is very angry. Absalom refuses to speak with Amnon and hates him for violating his sister (vss. 21-22)

Plot Analysis

Setting

Spatial Setting

The five scenes of 2 Samuel 13:1-22 are placed in and around the palace of King David and the houses of his sons Amnon and Absalom. "Spatially, this is a story of houses" as the characters move between three dwellings.¹⁴ Tamar leaves her father's palace for Amnon's house where he rapes her, but soon afterwards Tamar is forced from Amnon's house into the street where Absalom finds her. Finally Tamar is confined to a desolate existence in Absalom's house.

Spatially the story is presented in two sections in which there is movement from David's palace to Amnon's house and his inner room (bedroom) in Scenes One and Two, and followed - in the latter part of Scene Three and in Scene Four - by

¹⁴ Amit, *Reading*, 132. The exact locations of the first and last two scenes are not identified but it is probable that they are the homes of David and Absalom.

movement away from Amnon's room to the street and from there to Absalom's house. The setting for the central Scene Three is "the inner room" (*hacheder* **החדר**) of Amnon's house where the pivotal event takes place.¹⁵

Temporal Setting

The durative period of the four scenes of Tamar and Amnon's story is an unknown number of hours in one day, beginning with Jonadab's morning visit to Amnon (vs. 3c), and ending with Absalom taking Tamar into his house later in the day (vs. 20). This brief time span - during which direct discourse carries much of the plot - contributes to the narrative's intense emotional charge.

"Tamar's story focalizes the woman's emotions and her tragedy in a close up that carries the greatest emotional power."¹⁶

Social Setting

The family of David sits at the summit of Israelite society, but when Tamar is betrayed, violated and abandoned by her oldest brother and ignored by her father, the family begins to disintegrate. After enduring rape only to be thrown out of his house by one brother, Tamar seeks to express her grief but another brother prevents her from doing the one thing she has left, namely, the right to

¹⁵ Lescow, "Die Komposition," 110. Lescow places the settings in a chiasmic structure, naming one of the houses as Tamar's. It is more likely, however, that Tamar, as an unmarried daughter, would live in her father's house (the *beyt 'ab*) until her marriage.

¹⁶ Alice A. Keefe, "Rapes of Women/Wars of Men," in *Semeia* 61 (1993), 91. While I can see Keefe's point that Tamar's emotions are recognised through her words and actions, the narrator does not enter her inner world. He only enters the emotional life of the male protagonists. See "Suspicion," p. 421.

mourn for all she has lost.¹⁷ Socially she moves from her honoured status as a princess in a palace to a disgraced and ostracised ‘nobody’. In the broad context of the story of Israel’s monarchy, Amnon’s sexual violation of his sister is the catalyst for David’s family and kingdom to rupture into acts of betrayal, murder, sedition and warfare.

Events

Within this tale of a family torturing itself lie the elements of a classic Greek tragedy in which an earnest or sorrowful character is drawn into, or precipitates, an event with disastrous consequences.¹⁸ The key event in 2 Samuel 13:1-22 is an act of rape; its consequences are a life of desolation for the victim and the perpetrator’s early death orchestrated by a brother who in turn dies ignominiously in his attempt to defeat his father in battle.

The narrative, a sub-plot for the story of David and Absalom and the latter’s quest for political ascendancy, focuses on two of David’s other children: Amnon, son of Ahinoam, and Tamar, daughter of Maacah.¹⁹ Amnon, David’s

¹⁷ In ancient Israel, a sexually abused unmarried woman loses her social position and thus all hope for a woman’s only socially acceptable future: marriage and motherhood. Davidson, *Flame of YHWH*, 340.

¹⁸ William Little, “Tragedy” in *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 3rd edition, revised and ed. C. T. Onions, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 2: 2226.

¹⁹ See also 2 Samuel 3:2c, 13:37 and 1 Chron. 3:2. Amnon implies that Tamar and Absalom have the same mother and father by referring to Tamar as “the sister of Absalom my brother” (vs. 4b). Later, the narrator indicates that Tamar is a daughter of a king (vs. 18b). However, some scholars raise the possibility of another tradition in which Tamar is not Absalom’s sister, but his daughter. Peter Ackroyd, *The Second Book of Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 135; Jack M. Sasson, “Absalom’s Daughter: An Essay in Vestige Historiography,” in *The Land That I Will Show You: Essays on the History and Archaeology of the Ancient Near East in Honour of J. Maxwell Miller*, ed. J. Andrew Dearman and M. Patrick Graham (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 187-96. Although the alternative tradition

eldest son and heir apparent to the throne is miserable with “love” for his half sister Tamar. In the first complication of the plot, Amnon is unable to enact his desire. Consequently Amnon succumbs to his advisor Jonadab’s scheme to gain David’s cooperation by feigning illness, and an acquiescent David orders Tamar to prepare a ritual meal (*habbiryah* הִירְבָּה) for Amnon.

The second complication arises when Amnon refuses to eat the loaves which Tamar has prepared for him and orders Tamar to lie with him. She then initiates a further complication by vigorously remonstrating with him. Amnon ignores her protests, rapes her and then, filled with sudden hatred, orders her to get out. The fourth complication is Tamar’s second speech of protest. Again Amnon ignores her and instructs a servant to take her outside. Tamar’s public lament apprises Absalom of the outrage. Instructing Tamar to keep silent about the matter, Absalom confines her to his house. Just one word in verse 20 tells of her final situation: desolation (*sh^emamah* שְׁמָמָה).²⁰

When David hears the news he is angry but does nothing. Meanwhile Absalom, filled with a secret hatred for his brother, refuses to speak to him and bides his time.

explains a few textual anomalies, it does raise others. As this is an analysis of the extant text which presents Tamar as Absalom’s sister, the alternative arguments are not addressed here.

²⁰ “The same word is used of a deserted wife in Isa. 54:1.” Ackroyd, *Second Book*, 123.

Narrative Tension and Conflict

Saturated with tension, violence and misery, this is a tale in which the narrator employs no less than five complications to build an atmosphere of looming danger, distress and anger. From the moment the audience learns that Amnon is in agony because he cannot “do anything to her” (vs. 2c) there is an inexorable rise in discord. A close reading of the initial scenes reveals that the techniques of repetition and direct discourse are used to retard the pace of events and increase narrative tension.²¹

In Scene One the narrative moves at the pace of real time as Jonadab and the audience discover the initial and portentous complication, namely, that a wretched Amnon is unable to manage his obsession with Tamar. Jonadab’s advice to the prince, “pretend to be (make yourself) ill” (*hitpa’el* התפעל imperat. of *chalah* (חלה), vs. 5a), informs the audience that the strategy is a ruse which can only bode ill.²²

As Tamar enters Amnon’s house she sees him on his bed and - as the audience knows - lying in wait. The dénouement, however, is delayed by a curiously detailed description of Tamar’s preparation and baking of the loaves.²³ As in many other tales, the motifs of sexuality and food are connected; sexual tension

²¹ Charles Conroy, *Absalom, Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam., 13-20* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 38.

²² Note that Amnon “made himself ill” in vs. 2 is also the Hithpael form of *chalah* (חלה), but as in English, Jonadab’s use of the imperative changes the word’s meaning from a state of distress (vs. 2) to a directive to deceive (vs.5a).

²³ The bread-baking activity is discussed in “*Habbiryah*,” p. 379 and “Retrieval,” pp. 431-32.

grows as Amnon watches the object of his desire kneading the dough.²⁴ As Tamar presents the loaves Amnon refuses them, disrupting the narrative flow. By his order everyone leaves the room, and in the silence only Tamar remains.²⁵

Amnon now orders Tamar to move closer to him with the food, and as she takes the loaves to him, “time seems to thicken.”²⁶ Then without warning Amnon springs his trap, grabbing her (*chazaq* קָזַק) and urging her to lie with him. Just as unexpectedly, Tamar roundly chastises him. But danger hovers: how might a man - who has made himself ill anticipating this moment - react to this young woman’s spirited resistance? The answer is not a surprise: the prince summarily rapes her. The attack is described in a series of terse verbs: “overpowers” (*chazaq* קָזַק), “forces down” (*pi’el* of *’anah* הִנַּע) and “lays” her (*shakab* שָׁכַב).

In the rape’s immediate aftermath, another change takes place in the emotionally charged atmosphere: Amnon is no longer flooded with love, but with loathing. Without warning, his victim is ordered to get up and get out, but in a stunning outburst Tamar indignantly refuses to go, lashing Amnon with her words of condemnation. The sequence of order and refusal which takes place before the rape continues afterwards, but now the desire to stay or leave is

²⁴ In Hosea 7:4 and Jeremiah 7:18, the words “dough” (*batseq* בַּתֶּסֶב) and “knead” (*lush* לֹשׂ) are connected with sexual misconduct; the same connection applies here. Mark Gray, “Amnon: A Chip off the Old Block? Rhetorical Strategy in 2 Samuel 13:7-15. The Rape of Tamar and the Humiliation of the Poor,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 77 (1998): 45.

²⁵ Joseph used the same words to dismiss his servants when he wanted to be alone with his brothers (Gen. 45:1). A possible reason for Tamar’s decision to stay may be that parts of Tamar’s ritual may require privacy. See also “Identification,” p. 425.

²⁶ Mark Gray, “Amnon,” 49.

reversed.²⁷ When on Amnon's orders his servant puts Tamar outside and locks his master within, the narrative tension collapses. Tamar, her battle lost, walks the street lamenting until Absalom takes charge and silences her cries. The pericope concludes with a Coda laden with domestic despair: a duped father's silent anger, a brother's hatred for his victim, another brother's hatred for the perpetrator, and a sister shamed.

Discourse Analysis

Narrative Patterns

Structure Based on Narrative Content

The story of Tamar and Amnon can be structured as an inverted parallelism (or ring composition) with Tamar's initial speech at the fulcrum of the literary unit.

2 Samuel 13:1-22

- 1 Absalom's sister Tamar is the object of Amnon's 'love' (vss. 1-2a)
- 2 Amnon makes himself ill over Tamar, but does not act (vs. 2b)
- 3 Jonadab hears of Amnon's 'love' and gives advice to Amnon (vss. 3-5)
- 4 Amnon expresses his misery as 'physical illness' to alert David (vs. 6)
- 5 David sends Tamar into Amnon's house; Tamar goes in and
bakes heart-loaves for Amnon (vss. 7-8)
- 6 Amnon sends his servants out (vs. 9)
- 7 Amnon calls Tamar into the inner room and Tamar obeys
(vss. 10-11a)
- 8 Amnon grabs Tamar and says "Come! Lie with me" (vs. 11b)
- 9 Tamar protests, reasons and begs Amnon to speak to the
king "who will not deny me to you" (vss. 12-13)

²⁷ See "Spatial Setting," p. 354.

- 8₁ Amnon rapes Tamar and lies with her (vs. 14)
- 7₁ Amnon demands Tamar leave the inner room but Tamar disobeys
(vss. 15b-16)
- 6₁ Amnon calls in his servant (vs. 17)
- 5₁ The servant puts Tamar outside Amnon's house (vs. 18)
- 4₁ Tamar expresses her misery in a lament which alerts Absalom (vs. 19)
- 3₁ Absalom hears of the event and gives advice to Tamar to be silent (vs. 20)
- 2₁ David is very angry with Amnon, but does not act (vs. 21)
- 1₁ Absalom hates Amnon for raping his sister Tamar (vs. 22)

Remarkably, each line of the parallelism is initiated by one of the story's protagonists. It begins and ends with Absalom who, although a leading character in the remainder of 2 Samuel, only appears in person after the central event is over. David and Absalom both give instructions to Tamar - David before, and Absalom after the rape - but at the crucial midpoint of the ring-composition, Tamar makes a stand against Amnon with an impassioned speech aimed at averting Amnon's threatened assault.²⁸ The rape scene is given priority: in the twenty two verses of the narrative, eleven verses recount the events in Amnon's house.²⁹

²⁸ Almost all commentators, Phyllis Trible and J. P. Fokkelman among them, place the rape at the centre of the palistrophe. Trible admits that this does not quite work, but attempts to justify it. "Note that the structural collapse follows the rape. Thus defects in structure mark the injury to the characters themselves." Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 34, 95 (n. 24); J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of David* vol. 1 (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1981), 100. Theodor Lescow's structural analysis, however, demonstrates that it is possible to place Tamar's speech, which he calls a *psalmartige Klage* (psalm-like lament), at the centre of the palistrophe. Lescow, "Die Komposition der Tamar-Erzählung II Sam 13, 1-2," *Zeitschrift für die Alte-testamentliche Wissenschaft*, 110, 1. My analysis is similar to that of Lescow. Bar-Efrat also hints at the centrality of Tamar's speech when he writes, "Verse 14b is a direct continuation of v.11 as if Tamar's long speech had not occurred". Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 265. That is, Tamar's speech bisects Amnon's demand and action.

²⁹ Amit, *Reading*, 89.

In Scene One, the narrator focuses on Amnon's emotion of unfulfilled "love," while the Coda reveals his father's anger and his brother's secret hatred. In these events, Fokkelman identifies two rings formed by the brothers' suppressed emotions and words which profoundly change Tamar's life.³⁰ Having resisted strongly in the first ring she makes no attempt to do so in the second. Outmanoeuvred and defeated, Tamar recedes into the narrative background.

The narrator's pairing of the characters in a further example of symmetrical parallelism, and illustrates the linear movement from one character to another throughout the narrative. "All the links are connected to one another by the fact that the second character in each of them is the first in the succeeding one."³¹

Fokkelman arranges the links thus:³²

Jonadab/Amnon	Tamar/Absalom
Amnon/David	servant/Tamar
David/Tamar	Amnon/servant
Tamar	Amnon

³⁰ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 101-103. These rings appear a little contrived. Fokkelman sees the first half of the story as marked by love - which is not entirely evident - while the second half as marked by hate - which is indeed overtly evident.

³¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 278.

³² Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 102.

The diagram shows how each protagonist is linked with either Tamar or Amnon, the central pair. In the first pair, Jonadab ‘supports’ the lovesick Amnon, and in the final pair, Absalom ‘supports’ the devastated Tamar.³³

Both Tamar and Amnon are surrounded by men who are responsible for caring for them, but fail to do so. The situation does not in any way excuse Amnon’s behaviour, but Tamar is undeniably trapped, neglected and/or betrayed by the men around her. Jonadab, David and the servant all give Amnon the opportunity to abuse his sister, and then, because of their silence, Amnon is given two years of protection. Eventually Amnon pays with his life, but his sister endures a life sentence of confinement.

Motifs

Throughout the story of Tamar and Amnon are motifs related to damaged relationships, emotions, sexual violence, wisdom, morality, power and ritual.

The Motif of Deception

In 2 Samuel 13 the narrator, who holds privileged information about the thoughts and/or emotions of David and his sons, reveals how deception - a key element in the plot – is employed in the political manoeuvring of Jonadab, Amnon and Absalom.³⁴

³³ ‘Supports’ is italicised due to Jonadab’s and Absalom’s hidden agendas. See “Motif of Deception,” p. 364, “Motif of Wisdom,” p. 375, Motif of Power, p. 378, and “Ambiguity,” 386-87.

³⁴ Hagan, “Deception,” 308-310.

At the outset only the narrator is privy to Amnon's secret "love" for Tamar: an emotion which, along with his inability to "do ('*asah* עָשָׂה) anything to her" (vs. 2g), remains hidden from his family.³⁵ The only person to notice Amnon's distress is his advisor, Jonadab, who encourages Amnon to confide in him. Jonadab persuades Amnon to deceive his father with the ruse of illness. The strategy is effective, and Amnon tricks his father and sister into complying with his wishes. Too late David and Tamar realise their mistake.

After the assault, Tamar is ejected from Amnon's house crying out in anger, shame and grief and telling the world of the outrage against her. Absalom arrives, quickly sums up the situation, and decides on his own strategy of deceit by demanding her silence and keeping secret his hatred for Amnon until he deems that the time is right for revenge.

Jonadab sets the events in motion in Scene One when he cleverly prompts Amnon into deceiving David, but it is not until two years later when Absalom murders his brother (2 Sam. 13:23-33) that it is possible to surmise that the wily Jonadab is ally to Absalom: an ally who initially double-crosses Amnon.³⁶ Jonadab deserves censure but never receives it. Amnon deceives and is punished, yet his punishment is not for duplicity but for both violating and rejecting the possession of another man, David, who is also guilty of past

³⁵ When Jonadab helps the dejected and helpless Amnon to find a way for the latter to "do" Tamar, the result is the undoing of Amnon's sister which eventually leads to the undoing of himself, his father and his brother.

³⁶ See "The Motifs of Wisdom and Folly," p. 375.

duplicity (2 Sam. 11:6-25).³⁷ Tragically Tamar - the only person who has nothing to hide - becomes the victim of the men for whom deception appears to be a primary strategy for achieving their ends.

The Motif of Sibling Relationships

The Tamar-Amnon story (2 Sam. 13:1-22) begins with a “meticulous ordering of names, of relationships, [which] is in fact a clue to the storyteller’s underlying interests.”³⁸ The narrator is deeply interested in the sibling relationships which lie at the core of all that transpires at this time in the royal precinct.³⁹ The word “brother” occurs nine times in the text, while Tamar is named no less than eight times as a sister of Absalom and Amnon. Curiously, the narrator refers to the brothers as sons of the king, but never names them as brothers to each other. In contrast, Tamar is never spoken of as David’s daughter although there is an indirect reference in the description of Tamar’s garment as one worn by “daughters of the king” (vs. 18).⁴⁰

In the first scene, Amnon initially refers to Tamar as Absalom’s sister (vs. 4), but as Jonadab dictates the entrapment speech to Amnon, Tamar becomes “my sister” (vs. 5d). The double repetition of the words “in my/his sight” and “from

³⁷ Fuchs, “Who is Hiding?” 143-44; Dominic Rudman, “Reliving the Rape of Tamar: Absalom’s Revenge in 2 Samuel 13,” *Old Testament Essays* 4, no. 2 (1998): 327.

³⁸ Athalya Brenner, *I Am...Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2005), 138.

³⁹ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 28-29; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 112.

⁴⁰ See discussion on this curiosity in “Suspicion,” pp. 414-15. An alternative tradition that Tamar is Absalom’s daughter may explain this anomaly and is explored by Sasson. Sasson, *Absalom’s Daughter*, 189-96. However this alternative tradition is not apposite to this dissertation which is based on the extant narrative in which the narrator repeatedly states that Tamar is the sister of Amnon and Absalom.

her/your hand” (vs. 5h) becomes ominous as it underscores Amnon’s persistent desire to gain intimate access to Tamar.

After Amnon tries to seduce Tamar with the words, “Come lie with me my sister” (vs. 11d), Tamar’s vehement resistance causes Amnon to drop the endearment: “my sister.” Following his incestuous⁴¹ rape of Tamar, the prince’s sudden hatred for her is so extreme that his excessive desire for intimacy is abruptly replaced with an excessive desire to be rid of “this” (vs. 17a). In his eyes, their relationship is dead: Tamar is now nothing more than a pronoun.

Relational language returns in Scene Four when the narrator begins and ends Tamar and Absalom’s discourse with references to Absalom as her brother, while in his speech Absalom verbally surrounds “my sister” with references to “your brother” Amnon.

- 1 Absalom *her brother* said to her,
- 2 “Has Amnon *your brother* been with you?
- 3 Now *my sister* be silent
- 2₁ He is *your brother*. Do not set your heart on this deed.”
- 1₁ So Tamar lived desolately in the house of Absalom *her brother*.

In this palistrophe, Tamar is surrounded and trapped by both brothers, but Fokkelman views it differently: “Tamar stands in the centre and is, in the first place, surrounded and enclosed by her evil brother, but he is, in turn, surrounded

⁴¹ The incest is discussed in “Character Portrayal: Tamar,” p. 402.

and enclosed...by the good brother whose loving ‘my sister’ originates in the centre.”⁴² Amit agrees with this assessment of the brothers: “The worse Amnon looks, the more positive Absalom appears.”⁴³ My impression is, however, that Absalom’s ‘loving’ words are as ambiguous as Amnon’s professed love.⁴⁴ It is the goodness of Tamar, not the ‘goodness’ of Absalom which contrasts with Amnon’s evil.

In ancient Israel brothers share their father’s responsibility to protect their unmarried sisters,⁴⁵ but in Tamar’s case, both brothers fail her. The audience learns from this story “that there is love and lust, wisdom and machination, and that the one often masquerades as the other.”⁴⁶

The Motifs of Love and Hate

This is a story in which “there is an excess of love at the beginning, excess of hate at the end,”⁴⁷ as illustrated in the chiasm of the love/hate motif.

1 Amnon loves Tamar (vs. 1)

2 Amnon demands that Tamar bake him heart-loaves (vs. 6); Tamar brings

⁴² Fokkelman reproduces and acknowledges Bar Efrat’s palistrophe. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 112 [Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Literary Mode and Methods in the Biblical Narrative in View of II Sam. 10-20; I Kings 1-2* (in Hebrew, Jerusalem, 1975), 234].

⁴³ Amit, *Reading*, 131, 65, 89, 130. Conroy also have a favourable view of Absalom as the protective brother. Conroy, *Absalom*, 24.

⁴⁴ Regarding the uncertainty surrounding Absalom’s behaviour, see “Ambiguity,” pp. 386-87.

⁴⁵ John J. Pilch, *The Cultural Dictionary of the Bible* (Collegeville, Mn: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 36. It is also a brother’s responsibility to seek revenge if he has failed to keep his sister safe, as Dinah’s brothers do after she is raped (Gen. 34:25, 31). Gary Stansell, “Honor and Shame in the David Narratives” in *Honor and Shame in the World of the Bible*, ed. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1994), 71.

⁴⁶ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 61.

⁴⁷ David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 100.

- the *heart-loaves* to him (vs. 10); Amnon rapes Tamar (vs. 14b)
- 3 *Amnon hates* Tamar with *a very great hatred*
- 3₁ *Amnon's hatred* is greater than *love* with which he *loved* her (vs. 15)
- 2₁ *Absalom* demands that Tamar *not set her heart* on this matter
- 1₁ *Absalom hates* Amnon (vs. 22b)

The pericope's opening and closing verses provide additional evidence of the importance of the love/hate contrast. In the first verse, the narrator states that Amnon silently loves Tamar, and in the closing verse the audience is told of Absalom's silent hatred for Amnon. Both emotions, integral to the deception motif, are hidden from others and "will erupt in an unexpected outburst of violence which will destroy their victim."⁴⁸

As the characters are introduced, the narrator's decision to use the verb to love (*'ahab* אהב) poses a conundrum. Rather than using the verb to lust (*'agab* אגעב) to describe Amnon's passion (vs. 1c), the narrator chooses *'ahab* which, as in English, embraces a range of meanings.⁴⁹ However, *'ahab* is only attributed to a person in a "position of hierarchical superiority" to the recipient of that love.⁵⁰ Given the consequences of this love, the use of *'ahab* in relation to Amnon to indicate his superior position to Tamar is ironic indeed. With the men of her family ruled by their emotions, the responsibility falls to Tamar to impress on Amnon the dread consequences of his plot. If David - or even Absalom - had

⁴⁸ Rudman, "Reliving the Rape," 330.

⁴⁹ *'ahab* includes sexual, platonic and parental love, and the love of a suzerain for his vassals. Susan Ackerman, "The Personal is Political: Covenantal and Affectionate Love in the Hebrew Bible," *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 451-52.

⁵⁰ Ackerman, "Personal," 425.

been astute enough to detect Amnon's true ailment earlier, the princess would never have been subjected to the lust of a fool and thereby dealt the cruellest fate which could befall a *b^etulah*.

Since the narrator is not portraying Amnon's love as benevolent but as an obsession with Tamar because of her unavailability, there is no surprise when references to love vanish as soon as Amnon hears Jonadab's plan. As soon as he has achieved his aim, Amnon's previously debilitating love is replaced with an overwhelming depth of hatred.

Fokkelman graphically demonstrates that the words "hate" and "very" in verse 15 can be symmetrically arranged to form four pairs indicating that "the transition from love into hate is so complete that the element of love becomes totally driven out and may constitute no part of the structure."⁵¹

He hated her	He hated
Hatred	Hatred
Great	Great
Very	So that

The narrator's remarkably heavy use of repetition emphasises the intensity of loathing that completely displaces the initial love. Shockingly, it pours from the abuser rather than the person who would have every reason to hate, namely the

⁵¹ Fokkelman uses Hebrew transliteration rather than the English. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 107.

victim. Amnon's hatred is overwhelmingly passionate, but it is, as Fokkelman notes, a common psychological reaction in perpetrators of sexual violence.⁵²

Tamar's enormous distress is her response - expressed first through words and then in her lament. When others hear of the violence more emotions are exposed to the audience's view. David responds to the news with anger but no action, and Absalom silently nurtures his hatred while plotting revenge. After she is silenced by Absalom, Tamar is left *shamem* (active participle of שָׁמַם), a word which implies isolation and emotional emptiness (vs. 20e).⁵³

The words of emotion in the narrative describe an arc which begins with distress and unfulfilled passion, climaxes with Tamar's anguish and Amnon's overwhelming hatred, continues with David's anger and Absalom's simmering hatred, and dies away as the narrator pays minimal attention to the long-term misery of Tamar. Drained of the positive and life-giving emotions of genuine love and joy, this story becomes a dark drama which has tragic consequences for a king and his family.

The Motif of Sexual Violence

Violence, physical and sexual, is a much repeated motif in the Hebrew Bible.

The sexually violent scene in this pericope, however, is singular in biblical

⁵² Ackroyd, *Second Book*, 122.

⁵³ Hermann J. Austel, "Shamem," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:2408. *Shamem* also appears in Isaiah 54:1 and 62:4 to describe a childless woman and/or an infertile land.

literature because the victim's words and cries of protest before and after the rape are included in the narrative's discourse.

The words from the root verbs: *chazaq*, *'anah* and *shakab*, are used to describe Amnon's abuse of Tamar.⁵⁴ The Hebrew verb *'innah* (*pi'el* of עִנָּה) may also mean "to humble" or "to debase" but when it appears both in *pi'el* form and in conjunction with *chazaq*, the translated word is to "rape...the ultimate means of subjugation and domination."⁵⁵ In the context of Tamar's refusal to consent to sexual intercourse, this conclusion is irrefutable. Deuteronomy 22:28-29 states that a man who has sexual relations with an unbetrothed *b^etulah* must pay her father compensation and then marry and never divorce her.⁵⁶ But Amnon absolutely refuses to listen to Tamar's plea that they ask the king for permission to marry.⁵⁷ When King David - Israel's chief judge - hears of the rape he

⁵⁴ When Shechem assaults Dinah (Gen. 34:2c), the last two words also occur but in reverse order. The Genesis text begins with *laqach* (לָקַח, to sieze), while the 2 Samuel text begins with *chazach min* (מִן לָקַח, to overpower). In *vayish^ekkab 'otah* (וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה) "he laid her" (vs. 14d), the sign of the direct object (*'et* אֶת) is used in reference to Tamar rather than the preposition *b^e* which denotes consensual sexual intercourse. Birch, "2 Samuel," 1304. *Shakab* followed by *'et* means rape. This term is also used in Genesis 35:22 for Reuben's rape of Bilhah. Scholz, *Women's Hebrew Bible*, 88.

⁵⁵ Nissinen, *Homoeroticism*, 48; Sandie Gravett, "Reading 'Rape' in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 3 (2004): 281-82. Ellen van Wolde's detailed study of *innah* leads her to conclude that in most cases the *pi'el* of *innah* means "to debase" in a social context. However the word order and the downward movement implied by "laid" mean that 'rape' is the correct interpretation in this instance. Van Wolde, "Does 'Inna' Denote Rape? A Semantic Analysis of a Controversial Word," in *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 542-43.

⁵⁶ See "Character Portrayal: David," p. 399.

⁵⁷ Using the example of Adonijah and Abishag (1 Kings 2:13-18), Matthew and Benjamin argue that to ask the king for permission to marry Tamar would mean that Amnon is mounting a challenge to the throne. Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 181. But this does not appear to be what Tamar means when she says that "the king...will not keep me from you" (vs. 13). Her words imply that either royalty at this time is exempt from the laws of endogamy as it is for Egyptian royalty, or that David would defy convention to protect his daughter from scandal. Birch, "2 Samuel," 1304; Bar Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 264. Others conjecture that Israel may not

chooses to do nothing. In ancient Israel the rape of a virgin is the theft of another man's possession, his *b^etulah*, and thereby a challenge to the girl's father. "From the biblical perspective, rape is an affair between men."⁵⁸

While this may explain that Amnon has another motive for assaulting the princess, the narrator merely hints at it with the words: "David was very angry" (vs. 21b). It is no coincidence that at the time of Amnon's offence, David's rape of Bathsheba⁵⁹ and his murder of her husband Uriah (2 Sam. 11:1-17) are relatively recent events.⁶⁰ David is therefore compromised, for his son's rape of his (David's) daughter takes place in the shadow of his own crimes. The narrator focuses instead on the reactions of Absalom who instead of resolving the matter, suppresses it. Eventually Amnon's sexual violence leads to physical violence as Absalom initiates his secret scheme for vengeance and political power by murdering his older brother Amnon (2 Sam. 13:28-29).

The Motif of Shame

This motif is clearly articulated in Tamar's first protest speech through her use of the words *n^ebalah* (נבלה) sacrilegious folly⁶¹ and *cherpah* (חרפה) shame/

yet have incest laws during David's reign. Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 263; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 184.

⁵⁸ Propp, "Kinship," 41; Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 18.

⁵⁹ Today David's adultery with Bathsheba is regarded as rape, for the latter had no choice in the matter when David took her for himself. Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, 81, 282, n. 8.

⁶⁰ In the case of adultery, Israelite law also punishes the raped woman with death if she is raped in a town and fails to cry out for help. Until her husband's death, presumably Bathsheba is in danger of receiving the death penalty for not crying out.

⁶¹ According to Stansell (citing McCarter and Phillips), in this context *n^ebalah* means "sacrilege," namely the violation of the sacred social order as defined by the Torah. Stansell, "Honor and Shame," 71; Sarah Hart, "The Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13:1-19) Through the Hermeneutical Lens of Aotearoa New Zealand," in *Journal of Women Scholars of Religion and Theology: Seachanges* 4 (December 2004): 11, 13 [online]; available: <[http://www.wsrt.com.au/seachanges/volume 4/index.shtml](http://www.wsrt.com.au/seachanges/volume%204/index.shtml)>, 16 March 2005.

disgrace): social burdens which already lie on the house of David. Interestingly, instead of reminding Amnon that their father will be dishonoured by his children's sexual activity, Tamar says that it is she who will be shamed. Sadly her prophecy is realised: she does indeed suffer the "cultural horror of a life of permanent shame, unmarriageability and childlessness."⁶²

Thrown out of Amnon's house, Tamar mourns aloud to ensure that the servants and whoever else is in or around Amnon's house are alerted to what has taken place. On tearing her garment, Tamar has not yet conceded total defeat for she is enacting "a public ritual intended to invoke divine and human sympathy and support."⁶³ As the *b^etulah* places ashes and then her hand on her head (vs. 19), repetition of the phrase "on her head" symbolises the shame which continues to dog David's household (vs. 19b, f), just as Nathan prophesied (2 Sam. 12:11a). "Soon her father, like her, will weep and cover his head in dishonor as he flees Jerusalem (15:30)."⁶⁴ According to Stansell, ancient Mediterranean cultural values mean that "the sexual purity of mother, wife, daughter, sister is embedded in the honor of the male; accordingly it is the brother's responsibility to seek revenge in the case of seduction or rape."⁶⁵ It takes two years, but Absalom strikes, carrying out a vicious reprisal on Amnon for violating their virginal sister (2 Sam. 13:28-29).

⁶² Birch, "2 Samuel," 1305; Karla Shargent, "Living on the Edge: The Liminality of Daughters in Genesis to 2 Samuel," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 32.

⁶³ Solvang, *Woman's Place*, 165.

⁶⁴ Stansell, "Honor and Shame," 71.

⁶⁵ Stansell, "Honor and Shame," 71; John K. Campbell, *Honour, Family and Patronage* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1964), 172-73. Absalom's other motive for killing Amnon is access to the throne.

The Motifs of Wisdom and Folly

In the first scene the narrator's only description of Jonadab is that he is a "very wise man" (*'iysh chakam m'od* (אִישׁ מְכֻדָּאִם) and advisor to Prince Amnon. Immediately afterwards, however, his dialogue with the prince casts doubt on his description as wise. Although Josephus is fulsome in his praise of Jonadab's merits,⁶⁶ given the events which flow from the very wise Jonadab's plan it seems unwise to accept this tribute at face value. In Israelite culture, the concern of the wise is "the order of things...how society functioned," for the wise person's concern is that people "should be able to live the best and fullest lives."⁶⁷ Since Jonadab's deceitful idea does not match this honourable description of wisdom, scholars have variously interpreted the advisor's supposed wisdom as a satirical term⁶⁸ or as the craftiness and unscrupulousness of a skilled manipulator.⁶⁹

In the world of courtly politics a 'wise man' is employed to watch the swings of political fortunes and to advise palace officials accordingly (Gen. 41:33, Exod. 7:11). Through his knowledge of the world, an advisor is in a position to influence the leaders of the land to act in one way or another.⁷⁰ Bar-Efrat

⁶⁶ Josephus, *Antiquities*, (trans. Whiston) 7:8:1. Josephus describes Jonadab as "an extraordinary wise-man, and of great sagacity of mind."

⁶⁷ Anthony Phillips, "NEBALAH – a Term for Serious Disorderly and Unruly Conduct." *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975): 237-41.

⁶⁸ "In light of [Tamar's] words, not only Amnon but also Jonadab is a fool. Yet in this story victory belongs to the fools". Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 33.

⁶⁹ Shemaryahu Talmon, *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible: Form and Content* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 279; Gerald H. Wilson, "מְכֻדָּאִם", in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 2:132-33.

⁷⁰ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 61.

endorses the narrator's description of Jonadab as very wise because "his sagacity is displayed, amongst other things, by his ability to turn a disadvantage into an advantage."⁷¹ In applying this view of wisdom to Jonadab, Bar-Efrat concludes that the latter should not be held responsible for what happens to Tamar because his concern is merely to find a way for Amnon to meet his sister.⁷² Yet Jonadab advises deceit, which indicates that the plan itself is dubiously motivated. If he simply means to arrange an ordinary meeting between brother and sister deception of an indulgent father like David would be unnecessary. On the other hand, if Jonadab's secret aim is to advance the cause of Absalom by assisting Amnon to his downfall, then his 'wisdom' is a most effective form of manipulation.⁷³

Conversely, ineffectual behaviour is folly or senselessness (*n^ebalah נבלה*) which "consists in failing to observe life's essential rules. The fool is unable to see the order in things...and takes action which results in unruliness and disorder."⁷⁴ The word *nabal* most frequently appears in the Hebrew Bible as the antithesis of *chakam*,⁷⁵ and means an "outcast, someone who has severed himself from society through a moral transgression...by violating taboos that define the social

⁷¹ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 247. According to Talmon, this variation of *chokamah* proposed by Bar Efrat is more akin to the wisdom of craftspeople and artisans which is the "eudemonistic, success-oriented wisdom that deals with the techniques of human behaviour that ensure well-being and is not concerned with the spiritual contents of human life." Talmon, *Literary Studies*, 279; Wilson, "מִכָּה," 2:133.

⁷² Bar Efrat, "Narrative Art," 247.

⁷³ See "The Motif of Power," p. 378.

⁷⁴ Phillips, "NEBALAH", 237-38.

⁷⁵ Gerald H. Wilson, "מִכָּה" 2:133. Abigail and her husband Nabal epitomise the wisdom-folly contrast.

order.”⁷⁶ *N^ebalim* (נבלים) are also impulsive and often ruin their and others’ lives by allowing their passions to rule.⁷⁷

Amnon impulsively accepts and acts upon Jonadab’s advice, and Amnon goes on to violate a taboo. David also behaves foolishly because he is unaware that he is being deceived. Tamar, in her reproof of Amnon and warning that if he forces her he would be seen as one of Israel’s *n^ebalim*, is revealed as wiser than the men who manage her life.⁷⁸ Her wisdom is of an entirely different order from that of Jonadab, the so-called *’iysh chakam mo’d*, and by turning a deaf ear to reason, Amnon confirms that he is the fool his sister foresees.

The Motif of Power

In the context of the succession narratives and the family of David, the use and abuse of power is a recurring motif. The narrative depicts the power struggle driving the interrelated motifs of deception, love and hate, sexual violence and shame. Jonadab, as friend and advisor to the heir apparent,⁷⁹ reminds Amnon of his position in David’s family when he addresses him as “son of the king” (vs. 4a). His sub-text is that Amnon has royal rights and the authority to assert those rights, and Amnon is only too ready to make the most of them to gratify his desires; that this gratification includes the throne is not implied by the narrator.

⁷⁶ Regina M. Schwarz, “Adultery in the House of David: The Metanarrative of Biblical Scholarship and the Narratives of the Bible,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 345.

⁷⁷ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 183.

⁷⁸ Hagan, “Deception,” 310. For discussion on Tamar’s wisdom, see “Suspicion,” p.420, and “Retrieval,” p. 444.

⁷⁹ A court adviser may also be called a “king’s friend” (e.g. Zabud, son of Nathan in 1 Kings 4:5b).

Consequently Amnon is emboldened to use his position as the crown prince and oldest brother to exert his social and physical power over Tamar. Her brave attempt to talk Amnon out of his plan fails when he refuses to listen and uses his physical strength to subdue her. In reporting the rape, the narrator employs a string of verbs: “overpowered,” “forced down,” and “laid,” which emphasises the extent of Amnon’s abuse of power.⁸⁰

Amnon’s assault on Tamar challenges David’s authority over his own family.⁸¹ Indeed, when David learns of the incident his failure to act can be attributed to his compromised position in the wake of his own behaviour involving adultery and murder (2 Sam. 11:1-17). Absalom, incensed by his sister’s humiliation and his father’s failure to act against Amnon for the family’s honour, commences his ill-fated journey towards seizing intra-familial and political power.⁸²

⁸⁰ See also “Narrative Tension and Conflict,” p. 359, “Motif of Sexual Violence,” p. 371, “Character Portrayal: Amnon,” 392, and “Character Portrayal: Tamar,” p. 400, fn. 167.

⁸¹ On the strength of ANE cultural research, Don Benjamin believes that it is exclusively political power which drives Amnon to act. In his assessment, Amnon aims to challenge King David’s authority and claim the throne prematurely by raping the king’s daughter – an act which initiates a struggle between the brothers for the throne. “By raping Tamar, Amnon lays claim to the power, wealth, goods, and service which she represents and issues a political challenge to David.” Don C. Benjamin, *The Old Testament Story: An Introduction*. (London: SCM Press, 2004), 214; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 182-84. Frick postulates that Amnon has to fight for the kingship as there is not yet a law of primogeniture in Israel as an early state. Frank S. Frick, *The Formation of the State in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Models and Theories* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), 78-79; Frick, “Social Science Methods and Theories of Significance for the Study of the Israelite Monarchy: A Critical Review Essay,” *Semeia* 37 (1986): 20-21. Although these arguments have merit (I concur that Amnon challenges his father’s authority by violating Tamar), the pericope provides no narrative clue that the rape represents Amnon’s bid for the throne. (See also “Character Portrayal: Amnon,” p. 390). Further, Ahithophel’s advice to Absalom points to the rape of wives or concubines, rather than the rape of unmarried daughters, as the way to undermine a man’s power and position (2 Sam. 16:21).

⁸² Without doubt Absalom’s instigation of civil war (2 Sam. 15:1-12) and his later abuse of David’s concubines (2 Sam. 16:22) are overt and covert bids for the throne.

In terms of the power game Jonadab emerges as a ‘king-maker,’ for his influence over Amnon sets in motion a series of disasters for the royal family. When he reappears (2 Sam. 13:32-33), Jonadab informs David that he knows that Absalom has killed his brother to avenge the rape of Tamar. If Jonadab has been working as the ambitious Absalom’s covert agent all along, his influence within the royal family is considerable.⁸³

What is unexpected for the audience, and probably for Amnon, is Tamar’s use of a different kind of power which is expressed via her intellect, morality, knowledge of the law, verbal skills, position as a king’s daughter, and possibly through responsibilities as a priestess and healer.⁸⁴ Tamar’s powers, however, are quenched by the actions of one brother and the non-action of her father and another brother. The audience is given a final glimpse of her wandering desolately through the secluded rooms of Absalom’s house. By every reckoning her powers are destroyed....almost, but not quite.⁸⁵

The Motif of *Habbiryah* (הִירְבָּה)⁸⁶

In verses 5 to 9, there are several remarkable features regarding the description of the food prepared by Tamar.⁸⁷ The first of these is the abundance of rare

⁸³ See reference to the possibility of a pact between Absalom and Jonadab in “The Motif of Deception,” p. 364 and “Ambiguity,” pp. 383, 87.

⁸⁴ For a discussion of the idea of Tamar as priestess and healer, see “The Motif of *Habbiryah*,” p. 381, and “Retrieval: *Habbiryah*,” pp. 431-434, 437-440, 442.

⁸⁵ See “Conclusion,” p. 450.

⁸⁶ *Habbiryah* is discussed further in “Retrieval,” pp. 431-443.

⁸⁷ Hebrew narratives rarely describe the process of food preparation: Abraham and Rebekah in Genesis 18:4-8 and 27:14-17, and the woman of Endor in 1 Sam. 28:24 along with 2 Samuel 13:5-9 are among the Bible’s few descriptions. The 2 Samuel text is unique in that no less than

terms related to the cooking process (vss. 5-10) as described variously and in turn by Jonadab, Amnon, David and the narrator. Bledstein states that the unusual term *biryah* (בריה root *brh* ברה), which appears five times in various forms in 2 Samuel 13, is associated with eating and is “specific for breaking a fast in a time of grieving or illness.”⁸⁸ Jonadab names the procedure *habbiryah*: the breakfast, or more accurately, the healing ritual (vs. 5),⁸⁹ while Amnon does not use the noun *habbiryah* but instead refers to the baking of *sh^ettey l^ebiboth* (ערב תגים עה תאח אוס (sevaol traeh owt שמתאק his fast (*qal* imperf. of *brh* ברה) (vs. 6).⁹⁰ Amnon’s request for the special loaves must be implied in the word *habbiryah* because soon afterwards David uses *habbiryah* when he conveys Amnon’s message to Tamar, and from this one word she understands that she is expected to prepare heart loaves (*l^ebiboth*).

As the narrator describes Tamar preparing the food and presenting it to Amnon, the words *l^ebiboth* and *habbiryah* recur, with the narrator twice using *l^ebiboth* (vss. 8, 10b) and Amnon referring to the procedure as *habbiryah* (vs. 10a). Only in this text do the verbs *lbb* (לבב) and *brh* (ברה) mean “to prepare food.”

three times it repeats, with small but significant variations, a description of food preparation. Conroy thinks that it is “probably the most detailed description of baking in the Bible.” Conroy, *Absalom*, 30.

⁸⁸ Bledstein deduces this from the texts of 2 Samuel where *brh* appears (e.g. 2 Sam.12:17e). It seems that *brh* is used only in the context of illness or death. Bledstein, “Habbiryâ”, 19.

⁸⁹ Bledstein, “Habbiryâ”, 19.

⁹⁰ The term “heart loaves” (*l^ebiboth* תובבל), is similar to the word for heart (*lebab* בבל). Cartledge refers casually to “some scholars” who postulate that there was an ancient belief that the “heartly food in question would have stronger curative powers when prepared and served by the hands of a virgin.” Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 535.

Elsewhere *brh* cognates occur only in 2 Samuel 3:35, 12:17 and Lamentations 4:10. In these instances, *brh* means “to eat.”⁹¹

An hapax legomenon in relation to the meal procedure is the word *masreth* (vs. 9a), usually translated “pan” from which the loaves are poured (*qal* imperfect of *yatsaq* יצק).⁹² However, *masreth* is linguistically related to the word *m^esurah*, or measure of water (Ezek. 4:11, 16), so it is more likely to be a jug from which liquid is poured.⁹³ In an act similar to those described in Hittite cultic food rituals,⁹⁴ it is therefore possible that Tamar is using a *masreth* to pour fluid - probably a libation - in the presence of Amnon.

With this interesting collection of rare words, it is evident that more is happening in the bedroom scene than the simple preparation of a meal. By and large, scholars have regarded the narrator’s purpose in including the repetition of these details as a means of building tension.⁹⁵ Mark Gray’s hypothesis that the narrative’s focus on food is a metaphor for Amnon’s voyeurism and growing sexual arousal is credible because repetition is frequently used this way in the Hebrew Bible.⁹⁶ Yet the number of repetitions concerning this meal is

⁹¹ In the Samuel texts, David will neither eat (*brh* or *br’*) as he mourns Abner nor when his baby is dying. In Lamentations, *brh* refers to eating human flesh during a siege of Jerusalem

⁹² In the Hebrew Bible, *yatsaq* is associated with ritual offerings and anointing ceremonies (e.g. Gen. 28:18, 35 14; Lev. 2:1, 8 12, 15; 1 Sam. 10:10).

⁹³ Bledstein, “Habbiryâ”, 19.

⁹⁴ J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., trans. Albrecht Goetze (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955), 349.

⁹⁵ For example, Bar-Efrat, “Narrative Art,” 256, Conroy, *Absalom*, 21; Jenny Smith, “Discourse,” 32

⁹⁶ Mark Gray, “Amnon,” 45; Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 148; Susan Niditch, *Folklore and the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 1993), 5.

remarkable even for the Hebrew Bible. I consider that the most compelling explanation for this puzzling section of the text is Bledstein's proposal that Tamar is performing a sacred healing ritual.⁹⁷ Thomas Overholt endorses this view: "The plot seems to depend on [Tamar] being known to other characters in the story as a person within the royal house 'officially designated' to perform a healing ritual."⁹⁸

Motif of the Ceremonial Robes

Two items of importance in this story are the *k^etonet passim* (מִסָּפָה תְּנִתֵּךְ), the special garment worn by *b^etuloth* who are daughters of the king and mentioned at the end of Scene Three, and Tamar's robes (*m^e'ilyiyim* מִיִּלְיִים) which are noted at the beginning of Scene Four.

Scholars do not have a definitive description of the *k^etonet passim* since the term appears only twice in the Bible: here, and in Jacob's gift of a special garment to his favourite son Joseph (Gen. 37:3b, 23, 31-33).⁹⁹ Over time commentators have speculated variously about the nature of this garment. Speiser, Freedman and O'Connor see a linguistic connection between *k^etonet passim* and the Akkadian term *kitu pishannu* which appears in Mesopotamian

⁹⁷ Bledstein, "Habbiryâ," 16-19. The implications which Bledstein draws from the setting and description of the food ritual are discussed in "Retrieval," pp. 431-443.

⁹⁸ Thomas W. Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 1996), 61, n. 10.

⁹⁹ Given this connection between Joseph and Tamar, Pamela Reis quotes Alter's suggestion that, like Joseph's garment stained with blood, Tamar's gown is perhaps also bloodstained, but in her case it would be a sign that she has been raped. Pamela Reis, "Cupidity and Stupidity: Woman's Agency and the Rape of Tamar," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 25 (1977): 56.

documents. The latter garment is described as a “ceremonial robe which could be draped about statues of goddesses and had various gold ornaments sewed onto it.”¹⁰⁰ George Mendenhall’s ANE textual studies lead him to conclude that, like the *kitu pishannu*, the *k^etonet passim* is a garment “associated with the highest social or political status.”¹⁰¹

While Bledstein’s detailed discussion of Tamar’s garment acknowledges Speiser’s connection, she prefers an alternative description of the *k^etonet passim* based on an ANE mural from the 17th century BCE depicting a priest and minor goddess wearing flounced and striped garments.¹⁰² Bledstein’s supposition that Tamar is wearing a garment associated with a cultic function is supported by the text’s additional reference to the *m^e’iy^l*, “for thus were clothed the daughters of kings, the *b^etuloth*, in robes (*m^e’iy^liy^m*)” (vs. 18b-c).¹⁰³ The word *m^e’iy^liy^m* in this context is sometimes translated as “in earlier times,”¹⁰⁴ perhaps because the *m^e’iy^l* most frequently appears in the Hebrew Bible as the term for a priestly

¹⁰⁰ E. A. Speiser, “Genesis,” in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1964). 1:290; D. N. Freedman and M. P. O’Connor, “Kuttonet,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 7:386.

¹⁰¹ George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore, My.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 55.

¹⁰² Adrien Janis Bledstein, “Tamar and the Coat of Many Colors,” in *Samuel and Kings: A Feminist Companion to the Bible 2nd Series*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 74.

¹⁰³ Bledstein, “Tamar,” 72. It is significant that in addition to priests, royal males who wore *m^e’iy^liy^m* also had cultic roles. References to the *m^e’iy^l* include the robe given by Hannah to Samuel to wear while serving in the sanctuary (1 Sam. 2:19); Saul and Jonathon’s *m^e’iy^liy^m* (1 Sam. 15:7, 18:4) and the *m^e’iy^liy^m* worn by David, the Levites and singers in the Ark of the Covenant procession (1 Chron. 15:27). In Exodus and Ezra over a dozen references are made to the priestly *m^e’iy^l*, while Job - who apparently has a priestly role because he offers sacrifices to YHWH (Job 1:5) - tears his *m^e’iy^l* after which his friends tear theirs to grieve over Job’s suffering (Job 1:20, 2:12). The description of Princess Tamar’s clothing is the only instance in which a woman’s garment is called a *m^e’iy^l* (vs. 18b).

¹⁰⁴ The NRSV translates *m^e’iy^l* as “in earlier times.”

garment, and some translators may have found it too difficult to accept that Tamar wears a robe associated with the priesthood.

My conclusion is that the most recent analyses of the words *k^etonet passim* and *m^e 'iy^l* reinforce the impression that Tamar performs *habbiryah*, a religious ceremony, and that this is a ritual of greater significance than has been acknowledged in the past.¹⁰⁵

Ambiguity

A close reading of this story reveals the presence of ambiguity in every scene as the narrator uses uncertainty to provide this tale of incestuous rape with a brooding, disturbed ambience. From start to end, every character's words and actions raise problems, with scholarly opinion remaining divided over the motives of each.

Immediately following the preamble, the narrator describes Amnon's "love" for his sister as the cause of his haggard appearance, but "love" becomes suspect when the audience learns that the prince's misery is because he cannot "do anything to her." Then along comes Jonadab who in his great wisdom loses no time in giving suspect advice to Amnon. Especially difficult to discern is Jonadab's motive,¹⁰⁶ but if Jonadab is indeed manipulating Amnon while covertly in the service of Absalom, some of the ambiguities disappear.

¹⁰⁵ For further discussion on Tamar's gown see "Suspicion," pp. 414-15, and "Retrieval," p. 440.

¹⁰⁶ See also "Motif of Deception," p. 364, and "Motifs of Wisdom and Folly," p. 375.

However, because the narrative does not provide enough clues to confirm his actions as conspiratorial, my conclusion is that the narrator - perhaps to maintain focus on the main players in the script - prefers Jonadab's motives to remain elusive.

Amnon's conduct is similarly puzzling. When the narrator says that Amnon is in love with Tamar, Amnon appears to be miserable, confused and totally at the mercy of his emotions; but is he? Contributing to this uncertainty is the narrator's double use of *chalah* (חלה) in the reflexive *hitpa'el*.¹⁰⁷ Initially the audience learns that Amnon has made himself ill through repressing his love (vs. 2a), but on Jonadab's advice Amnon is able to make himself appear ill in order to deceive and gain access to Tamar (vs. 5b).

Amnon is therefore either a fearful and inadequate person masquerading as a spoilt, lustful lout, or a calculating and ambitious man who sees his access to Tamar as a show of strength against David and Absalom. It seems that the narrative leans towards the spoilt and inadequate Amnon, a description particularly perceptible in his inability to solve his dilemma over Tamar without Jonadab's intervention. Nor is there anything in the text to indicate that he has the ability to fulfil any political ambition. The wider context of 2 Samuel seems to support this view, for in the two years following the rape Amnon does not appear again until his father gives him permission to attend Absalom's party where he is murdered (2 Sam. 13:23-29).

¹⁰⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 104.

As with the other characters, David's motives are not easily accessible. In Scene Two he may or may not have been duped by Amnon's subterfuge, but in either case, sending Tamar alone to Amnon means that he fails in his duty to protect her from possible harm. His lack of concern for his daughter's welfare contrasts with his outpouring of agony when his sons die (2 Sam. 13:23-29, 18:9-33).

In the central scene, it is unclear if the narrator is more concerned with Amnon's assault on Tamar as an act of incest, or an act of rape. While the multiple repetition of "brother" and "sister" point to incest as his major concern, the virtuous Tamar's apparent certainty that David would allow the half-siblings to marry reduces this impression.¹⁰⁸ Reinforcing the idea that this is primarily a rape narrative, the narrator uses direct discourse for Tamar's protests and describes her ritualised mourning to underscore the horror, shame and suffering caused by sexual violence and the perpetrator's rejection of his victim.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps the narrator views incest, the assault and Amnon's repulse as equally criminal.

Aspects of Tamar's behaviour are also difficult to explain. Is she not suspicious when Amnon orders the servants to leave? Why does she not cry out during the rape? Does Tamar have aspirations to become Amnon's queen? These questions

¹⁰⁸ Davidson suggests that Tamar may be ignorant of the incest laws (Lev. 18:9, 20:17) or believes that royalty is exempt from them. Davidson, *Flame*, 444-45. It is possible that these laws are not yet formulated in David's time.

¹⁰⁹ Note, however, that the narrator does not preserve the words of Tamar's lament.

position Tamar as an enigma whose character portrayal and interpretation is a feminist issue.¹¹⁰

Uncertainty also surrounds David's great anger when he hears about "all these things" (vs. 21). Towards whom is the anger directed? The audience may assume that David's rage is about Amnon's behaviour which has destroyed Tamar's marriage prospects and possible future political alliances that an advantageous marriage would bring. However, David's anger may also have been with himself for being deceived by his heir, or because his own past crimes have made it difficult for him to chastise a wayward son.¹¹¹

Meanwhile ambiguity surrounds Absalom's behaviour. The narrator does not indicate how much Absalom knows about Amnon's problems and subsequent assault, but some knowledge is implied when Absalom does not wait for Tamar's answer following his question, "Has Aminon (אִינֹן)¹¹² your brother been with you?" (vs. 20b) Nor is it clear that Absalom hates Amnon simply because of Tamar's humiliation. Absalom's reassurance of his sister might also be interpreted as: "It's not so bad; he's your brother after all. It could have been worse. Don't fuss."

¹¹⁰ Reis, "Cupidity," 49-51. For Reis' negative opinion about Tamar see "Suspicion," p. 422.

¹¹¹ In verse 21, the Septuagint adds that David fails to punish his son "for he loved him, being his first-born." In the light of this information, David may also be angry about his own inability to punish Amnon because he loves him so much.

¹¹² The reason for Absalom's different pronunciation of Amnon's name is unknown: "Aminon" is excluded as a name in the Hebrew lexica, so it is probably regarded as a transcribal error. *Biblical Hebraica Stuttgartensia* notes that verse 20 in some ancient manuscripts have the usual "Amnon" (אִמְנוֹן).

Perhaps Absalom's true purpose is to silence all talk about Amnon because he, Absalom, is biding his time, first to see if David acts against Amnon, and then to find a way to get rid of a brother who stands in the way of his own ambition. It is also possible that he and Jonadab had earlier planned to trap Amnon by taking advantage of his obsession with Tamar.¹¹³ If this is the case, Absalom has a degree of certainty that David - an indulgent father who is already compromised by the murder of Uriah - will do nothing to punish Amnon. Absalom can then make his own deadly plans in a bid for the throne.

Irony

As Scene One opens Amnon is suffering from unexpressed love (*'ahab* אהב). Yet the narrative soon reveals that this love is not the self-giving love of a parent or spouse, but Amnon's *'ahab* is used ironically in place of 'lust'. It is an irony soon compounded by the five references to Tamar's "heart-loaves" (לבבות) baked for her 'ailing' brother just prior to his assault (vss. 6, 8, 10).

In contrast to the men in her family, Tamar reveals that she is prudent and principled. Poignant, however, is her protest that "such a thing is not done in Israel," for within minutes such a thing is indeed done in no less a place than the royal palace of Israel (vs. 12c).¹¹⁴ In Proverbs 2:1-2 and 8:1-9:6, young men are encouraged to learn from "sister wisdom" to avoid the seductive women. However, in an ironic twist to Proverbs 7:4-5, here Tamar is "sister wisdom" as

¹¹³ See "The Motif of Power," p. 378.

¹¹⁴ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative Art*, 151.

she seeks to safeguard herself from the seductive man.¹¹⁵ Tamar's name means "palm", an ancient symbol for victory and rejoicing,¹¹⁶ but Amnon, not Tamar, is the 'victor' and no one, not even Amnon, rejoices over his hollow victory.

Tamar's enactment of *habbiryah* for her ostensibly sick brother, however, poses what is possibly the most ironic situation in the pericope. As Bledstein's research indicates, there are marked similarities between the description of this meal and a number of Hittite impotence rituals.¹¹⁷ This means that if *habbiryah* is indeed a rite conducted to cure a man's impotence, Tamar has been completely misled and her brother - feigning impotence - is actually brimming with excessive sexual desire. Small wonder that when Amnon attempts his seduction Tamar gives him a tongue lashing!

A final instance of irony is evident in Absalom's instruction to Tamar, "Do not set your heart on this deed" (vs. 20c), yet for the following two years he himself dwells on Amnon's crime, plots his murder and carries it out at a harvest feast.

Character Analysis

Every character is introduced in the story's opening lines. Absalom heads the list for, with David, he is the focus of the broader narrative (2 Sam. 13-18). In this pericope, however, Jonadab, Absalom and David function as agents, and the

¹¹⁵ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 43; Bellis, *Helpmates*, 152. See "Suspicion," pp. 416-17.

¹¹⁶ Tracy Hansen, "My Name is Tamar," *Theology* 95 (1992): 376.

¹¹⁷ Bledstein, "Habiryâ," 22-28. See "Retrieval: *Habbiryah*," pp. 432-35 for information on these rituals.

only fully-fledged characters are Amnon and Tamar who are portrayed in stark contrast to one another.

Character Portrayal

Amnon

In 2 Samuel 3:2, Amnon is mentioned briefly as David's eldest son. When the audience next hears of Amnon in 2 Samuel 13, he is the principle protagonist in the first three scenes, and is introduced as a man preoccupied with an all-consuming love for the beautiful *b^etulah*, his half-sister Tamar. Amnon is initially portrayed as an indecisive and weak man who does not know how to deal with the overwhelming torment (*tsrr* טרר) caused by his passion.¹¹⁸

However, any audience sympathy that his plight may have aroused dissipates when the narrator states that Amnon's distress is due to his complaint that it is "difficult...to do anything to her" (vs. 2b). This inability to "do" is probably not referring to sexual impotence *per se* but to his lack of access to the princess with whom he is infatuated rather than loves.¹¹⁹ Additionally, as crown prince with his own house, Amnon probably has his own harem so it is less likely that he is simply seeking sexual relief. Thus Jonadab's advice implies that "he must

¹¹⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 243.

¹¹⁹ Commentators generally assume that Tamar's unavailability is simply because she is a *b^etulah* under the protection of David and/or Absalom. However there is some evidence that Tamar may also have status as a priestess and healer. If this is the case, Amnon may have more difficulty in gaining access to Tamar because of her special position and roles within the royal precinct. For the hypothesis that Tamar has status as a cultic healer, see "Retrieval," pp. 431-43.

change his illness, which is an expression of his impotence [regarding access to Tamar], into a means of power, by feigning illness.”¹²⁰

Whatever the obstacles Amnon regards as insurmountable might be, they are set aside by Jonadab’s proposed solution. Jenny Smith perspicaciously notes the familiarity with which Jonadab addresses Amnon and concludes that the narratorial purpose is to present Amnon as “effete and immature.”¹²¹ The moment the prince hears his advisor’s rapidly-conceived plan to bring Tamar to his side, he agrees to Jonadab’s instruction to “cause himself to be ill” (vs. 2a).¹²² The prince is so eager to escape his misery that he fails to consider the inherent difficulties in a scheme which proposes deception of not only his sister but also his father and Absalom, Tamar’s primary protector.¹²³

Amnon’s motive for finally making a move is unstated, but it may come from the relief of having at last unburdened himself to a sympathetic ear and in being handed a plan of action. Mark Gray describes Amnon as a “pathetically weak, degenerate, creature”¹²⁴ who, both before and after succumbing to his “love” and raping his half-sister, does nothing to link this assault with a bid to gain the throne. As the ongoing narrative speedily reveals, David and Absalom are the real contenders for power in this family saga.

¹²⁰ Dijk-Hemmes, “Tamar,” 140.

¹²¹ Without preamble, Jonadab asks Amnon a personal question about his emotional state (vs. 4a). Smith, “The Discourse Structure of the Rape of Tamar,” *Vox Evangelica* 20 (1990): 28.

¹²² For discussion on *chalah*, see “Narrative Tension and Conflict,” p. 358.

¹²³ Amnon is aware of Absalom’s closeness to Tamar, for he refers to Tamar as the sister of Absalom (vs. 4c), rather than referring to her as the daughter of David. Note that after Dinah is raped her full-brothers are the avengers as Jacob hesitates on the side-lines (Gen 34:13-31).

¹²⁴ Mark Gray, “Amnon,” 47.

When David appears at Amnon's bedside the prince acts out his role - surely an easy task since he has actually been unwell. He asks David to send Tamar so that he may watch her prepare food and eat from her hand, an action usually reserved for a spouse or lover.¹²⁵ The prince chooses to use the word *lebiboth* or heart-loaves instead of the rare term *habbiryah* used by Jonadab.¹²⁶ Given David's sexual history, Amnon may be baiting his father by alluding to matters of the heart. It is possible that *lebiboth* and *habbiryah* are associated with a healing ritual and used interchangeably. If *habbiryah* is indeed a ritual to treat impotence, it is a condition which would be of great concern to a young man aspiring to the throne¹²⁷ and it is unlikely that David would delay its implementation.¹²⁸

During Tamar's preparation of the food Amnon's behaviour alters. He is now a wily voyeur and strategic hunter who waits for the right moment to spring. Having successfully deceived his father, Amnon has no problem deceiving his sister. From this moment he controls the situation and every verb he utters is in

¹²⁵ For example, when Boaz hands a morsel of food to Ruth (Ruth 2:14b), "he plays the role of spouse." Amy-Jill Levine, "Ruth," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, exp. ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 87.

¹²⁶ Bledstein, "Habbiryâ," 15.

¹²⁷ Bledstein, "Habbiryâ," 17. See further discussion on *habbiryah* in "Retrieval," pp. 431-43. In 1977 Ackroyd notes, without referencing a source, that if a virgin prepared food near an ill man, it was believed to have "special merit" for healing, and he cites the attempt to revive an elderly David with the presence of the young woman Abishag (1 Kings 1-4). Ackroyd, *Second Book*, 121. Dijk-Hemmes also names *habbiryah* as a healing food. Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar and Limits," 140.

¹²⁸ Some years later David's fourth son Adonijah judges his old father unfit to be monarch when David's impotence becomes known (1 Kings 1:4-5). Impotence is of great concern in the ANE as evidenced by the many clay tablets bearing potency ritual records unearthed at archaeological digs. Robert D. Biggs, *SA.ZI.GA: Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations* (Locust Valley, New York: J. I. Augerstin, 1967).

“an imperative or a volitive form (vv.10, 11b, 15b, 17).”¹²⁹ First the prince orders his servant to send everyone away. Amnon, all the while continuing to play the role of an invalid, then commands Tamar to come to his bedside.

When he suddenly grasps Tamar saying, “Lie with me, my sister,” Amnon’s real purpose is exposed: he wants sexual intercourse. Instead of showing hospitality and instead of fulfilling his duty to protect his sister,¹³⁰ he prepares to corrupt her. He does not care about wooing her, nor does he request her cooperation for, as a prince of the realm surrounded by submissive servants and used to someone obeying his every command, he expects acquiescence. Until the moment he hears Tamar’s vehement opposition, Amnon’s communication has been confined to demands: a polite demand of his father and blunt demands of the servants and his sister. Amnon, who has been willing to listen to Jonadab, now refuses to listen to anything Tamar has to say.¹³¹ He is bent only on the immediate discharge of his passion, and with total disregard for his sister’s prospects, he turns to violent action.¹³² The combination of the words of force: “overpowered,” “forced down” and “laid” (vs. 14), leaves no doubt that Amnon rapes Tamar,¹³³ a rape which is reported in “direct and brutal terms.”¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Conroy, *Absalom*, 30.

¹³⁰ John J. Pilch, *Cultural Dictionary*, 36.

¹³¹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 109; Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Louisville Kn.: John Knox Press, 1990), 286; Robert P. Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (Exeter, Devon: The Paternoster Press, 1986), 286.

¹³² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 265. The verb *nabal* (foolish) can also mean ‘to act disdainfully’. Amnon is a fool in more ways than one.

¹³³ See “Motif of Sexual Violence,” p. 371

¹³⁴ Birch, “2 Samuel,” 1304.

Immediately after the rape, Amnon's malevolent narcissism is fully exposed by his all-consuming hatred (*shin'ah g^edolah m'od* הַלֹּדֵג דָּאֵמ הַשֵּׁנִי) towards his sister (vs. 15a). It is a hatred which is so forceful that the illusion of a man in love is obliterated: the audience is shown a person capable of both "physical (and) mental viciousness."¹³⁵ The narrator gives no reason for Amnon's sudden loathing for Tamar, but perhaps it arises from the startling veracity of her warning and advice and an offender's urge to project his own shame onto his victim. Tamar's presence reminds him of his deed,¹³⁶ and he can only see her as polluted goods. Without repentance or a desire for atonement, Amnon's hatred may also be fuelled by fear, for in a society where family honour is paramount the prince is surely aware of the impending reprisal which Absalom is honour-bound to enact.¹³⁷

No longer 'in love' with his sister and captive to his own dark emotions, Amnon proceeds to treat his victim like the lowliest of servants, harshly ordering her to "Get up! Go!" (vs.15). Just as Amnon's desire deafens him to Tamar's arguments before the rape, now his hatred deafens him to her appalled reply. Amnon calls in his servant and tells him to "Put outside, I beg you, this from my presence" (vs. 17). In addressing the servant he uses the polite *na'* (נָא) which he also employed when asking David for Tamar to attend him (vs. 6b). In referring

¹³⁵ Amit, *Reading*, 89.

¹³⁶ Matthew B. Schwarz and Kalman J. Kaplan, *The Fruit of Her Hands: A Psychology of Biblical Women* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 76; Richards and Richards, *Every Woman*, 133.

¹³⁷ See "The Motif of Shame," p. 373; Modern examples of 'honour killings continue to appear regularly in the news. For example, "3 women slain in dishonour," *The Advertiser*, 7 September 2000; "Blood boils over 'honour' killings," *The Weekend Australian*, 6-7 October 2008

to Tamar as a mere “this,” Amnon wants to humiliate Tamar further by indicating to his servant that his sister is culpable for what has transpired and deserves less respect than a servant.¹³⁸ In his eyes Tamar has become a mere object, a worthless ‘nothing’ to be used and then discarded.¹³⁹

It now appears that Amnon does not know how - or is too fearful - to proceed from here since he does nothing after evicting Tamar from his house. His name means ‘reliable’ or ‘faithful,’¹⁴⁰ but the story demonstrates that, devoid of the character traits which would recommend him as a future monarch of Israel, Amnon is neither reliable nor faithful. Tamar’s prediction that he will be a *nabal* in Israel is fulfilled, for he does nothing to redeem his name and two years later he walks into Absalom’s trap and to his death.¹⁴¹

“Amnon by his violence violates the faithfulness a man should bear for a woman, a brother for a sister, a son for a father, a prince for his king”.¹⁴² Amnon, it appears, has no redeeming characteristics.¹⁴³ In portraying Amnon as a dissolute and narcissistic villain whose horrible demise might almost be justified, the narrative continues a grim trajectory which has its origins in his lustful father’s acts of adultery and murder (2 Sam.11:1-17).

¹³⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 104.

¹³⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 106.

¹⁴⁰ “Amnon” is from the verb root *aman* (אמן). Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 534.

¹⁴¹ R. A. Carlson, *David the Chosen King: A Tradition-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel*, translated by Eric J. Sharpe and Stanley Rudman (notes) (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wirkell, 1964), 165.

¹⁴² Harry Hagan, “Deception as Motif and Theme in 2 Sam. 9-20; 1 Kings 1-2,” *Biblica* (1979): 309.

¹⁴³ Amit, *Reading*, 13.

Jonadab

Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah, is a narrative agent. He appears twice in 2 Samuel 13 (vss. 3-5 and vss. 32-33), and on both occasions he is a provider of information. Although Jonadab's appearance in this pericope is brief, his role in instigating the train of events is crucial. From his dialogue with Amnon, Jonadab's character traits of perceptiveness, boldness, inquisitiveness, and ability to rapidly sum up a situation are easily identified.

More ambiguous is the description of Jonadab as "a very wise man."¹⁴⁴ Given the events which flow from his plan, however, it seems unwise for an audience to accept this accolade at face value. Jonadab's wisdom has been variously interpreted as the amoral cleverness of a court advisor,¹⁴⁵ the craftiness of a skilled manipulator of others,¹⁴⁶ or satire. In the light of his advice to Amnon to deceive both father and sister, the interpretation that Jonadab is a devious manipulator of others seems to be the most apt.

As David's nephew and with access to the royal houses, Jonadab is probably more aware than most of David's moral failings and this knowledge may have emboldened him to influence Amnon. Jonadab appears to understand the kind of action which would appeal to the desperate prince, and when he encourages Amnon to deceive David he probably has already worked out what might happen when Tamar encounters her brother on his 'sick-bed.'

¹⁴⁴ See also "The Motifs of Wisdom and Folly," pp. 374-75.

¹⁴⁵ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 248, Cartledge, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 535.

¹⁴⁶ Birch, "2 Samuel," 1303; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 262.

When he sees Amnon in his distressed state, Jonadab begins with words of avuncular solicitude, “language one would use to coax a difficult child.”¹⁴⁷ Amnon - who apparently cannot think for himself - is easily coaxed, so his “friend”¹⁴⁸ Jonadab dictates the precise words Amnon is to use when David responds to his son’s call. Traces of contempt are noticeable in Jonadab’s advice, for not only does he take the risk of proposing a plan to deceive the king, but Jonadab disrespectfully says “your father” instead of “the king” when he mentions David.¹⁴⁹ Despite Bar-Efrat’s suggestion that Jonadab is “simply contriving an innocent assignation,”¹⁵⁰ it is his advice that Amnon should deceive his father which marks him as dangerous character in the story.

Although Jonadab disappears from the story as soon as he delivers the plan, in the extended narrative Jonadab self-assuredly reappears to give David the first accurate version of the mayhem at Absalom’s feast followed by more advice to the now-grief-stricken king (2 Sam. 13: 32-33). Ultimately it seems that this “very wise man” escapes accountability for his role as the catalyst of an event which destroys Tamar and sets in train Amnon’s murder and civil war.

David

In the broad narrative of the books of Samuel, David and Absalom are fully-fledged characters, but in this pericope their roles are secondary to those of the

¹⁴⁷ Jenny Smith, “The Discourse Structure of the Rape of Tamar,” *Vox Evangelica* 20 (1990): 28.

¹⁴⁸ Surely “friend” is a satirical description given the consequences of Jonadab’s advice.

¹⁴⁹ Smith, “Discourse,” 28.

¹⁵⁰ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 249.

main protagonists. As narrative agents, however, David and Absalom's reactions to the rape of their daughter and sister have immense consequences both for the royal family and for the nation as a whole.

David, as head of an Israelite household, has authority over his adult sons and unmarried daughters.¹⁵¹ Yet David's role in the story of Tamar and Amnon is ambivalent to say the least. The narrative structure - in which David's two brief appearances appear asymmetrically in the pericope's concentric pattern - illustrates the king's equivocal place in the story.¹⁵²

In his first appearance, David visits his eldest son in person without noticing - or by choosing not to notice - anything amiss with Amnon's request. David sends Tamar a message to attend her brother.¹⁵³ His instructions are polite (*na' is* included) yet so brief it seems that David simply wants to pass on the message without delay. His interest is not in his daughter but for what she can do to help his ailing son.¹⁵⁴

Perhaps David's order for Tamar to attend Amnon can be viewed as a father not knowing about his son's proclivity or simply not knowing his son at all, for in the light of Jonadab's astuteness the king merely hands on a message and asks

¹⁵¹ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 1961), 119.

¹⁵² See "Narrative Patterns: Structure," lines 5 and 21, pp. 360-61.

¹⁵³ The narrator reports David's message in direct discourse, but it is not clear that when David "sends" (*shalach* שָׁלַח) home to Tamar that he actually speaks to her (vs. 7).

¹⁵⁴ Bledstein's theory that Tamar is an official cultic healer at court, discussed in "Retrieval," pp. 431-443, offers a possible explanation for David's unhesitating response.

no questions. Of course with David's history of adultery and murder the king is in no position to criticise his son, so he may choose to turn a blind eye to what is really ailing Amnon. It is this subtle complicity which aligns David with Amnon rather than with Absalom or Tamar. Daube criticises King David for this "utterly irresponsible" act,¹⁵⁵ but if David is truly blind to his son's deception and if Tamar does have an official role as a healer, the king's order for her to minister to her brother is appropriate. David's culpability lies in failing to understand his son and to see through his subterfuge.

David makes a brief second appearance when he hears of "all these things" that have transpired between Tamar and Amnon, and "he burned greatly with anger" (vs. 21).¹⁵⁶ Perhaps his enraged paralysis stems not only from having been duped into ordering Tamar to attend to Amnon, but also because Amnon's behaviour surely reminds the king of his own past sin and Nathan's prophecy that "I (YHWH) will raise up trouble against you from within your own house" (2 Sam. 12:11a).¹⁵⁷ David "must choose between coming to the innocent's help at heavy risk to himself and abandoning her. He does the latter, guiltier thereby than Amnon: he has the last say and it spells social death."¹⁵⁸ While the question of who is more culpable is debatable, the king's inaction does imply a degree of

¹⁵⁵ David Daube, "Absalom and the Ideal King," *Vetus Testamentum* 48, no. 3 (July 1998): 317.

¹⁵⁶ The Septuagint removes the ambiguity when it adds, "And he did not rebuke Amnon his son because he loved him, since he was his firstborn."

¹⁵⁷ Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 264, Cartledge, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 517. Frick and Matthews and Benjamin assert that Amnon's motives are political and "reigning monarchs play no direct role" when households compete for succession supremacy - thereby excusing David's inaction. Frick, *Formation*, 79-80; Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World*, 181.

¹⁵⁸ Daube, "Absalom," 317.

moral cowardice and thus some responsibility for the grievous injustice perpetrated against his daughter.¹⁵⁹

The rape of a half-sibling also poses a legal dilemma for the king, Israel's chief justice.¹⁶⁰ According to Israel's rape laws, David should at least demand a heavy fine from Amnon and/or insist that the couple marry for life (Exod. 22:16-17; Deut. 22:28-29).¹⁶¹ The law, however, bans brother-sister incest (Lev. 18:9, 17; Deut. 27:22). So the king is angry but places no penalty on his son, and in saying and doing nothing he becomes complicit in the crime.¹⁶² His rage is "the mask of his own powerlessness."¹⁶³

In 2 Samuel 12 and 13, the narrator records the early signs of King David's social and political impotence. The remainder of the book continues to document the gradual disintegration of David's family, his dynastic ambitions, his imperial prestige and his own body.

¹⁵⁹ Exum, *Tragedy*, 305. Later David suffers for his unjust treatment of Tamar as he mourns for his murdered son by tearing his garments and lying on the ground (2 Sam. 13:31). Rudman, "Reliving," 336.

¹⁶⁰ "The king served as a kind of supreme court." Harrelson, "Court of Law," 1:713.

¹⁶¹ After Reuben rapes Jacob's concubine (Gen. 49:3-4), Jacob takes away his first-born son's birthright. See also "The Motif of Sexual Violence," p. 372.

¹⁶² J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Political Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 145; James Poling, "An Ethical Framework for Pastoral Care," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 42 (1988): 145. Josephus, like the Septuagint, states that the reason for David's inaction is his affection for Amnon. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 7:8:2.

¹⁶³ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 100.

Tamar

The narrator introduces the princess as the beautiful sister of Absalom who is secretly loved by another brother, Amnon. As expected of a daughter, Tamar is dutifully obedient when her father asks her to minister to Amnon. David does not inform Tamar that Amnon is ill: it is enough to ask her to go to her brother's house and perform *habbiryah*.¹⁶⁴ She is also dutiful in her food preparation for the invalid, and when the servant dismisses the other attendants - a princess cannot be ordered to leave by a servant - she obeys Amnon's instruction to enter his bedroom.

Suddenly the princess finds herself trapped in Amnon's grasp as he demands that she lie with him.¹⁶⁵ Her options are limited: Amnon is stronger, so she could either acquiesce or scream for help. The princess refuses to submit, but given the unquestioning obedience of Amnon's servants before and after the rape there is little hope that screaming would save her.¹⁶⁶ Instead, Tamar is confident enough to defy her seducer, audaciously reprimanding him, expressing her outrage, and revealing her keen awareness of the dishonourable aftermath of illicit sexual intercourse. This course of action is inherently more dangerous because of its potentially negative effect on the inflamed and

¹⁶⁴ Bledstein, "Habbiryâ", 31.

¹⁶⁵ The verb *chazaq* (חָזַק) can be translated variously, including "grasp" (when followed by *בְּ* as in verse 11c), "be strong" and "overpower" (when followed by *בְּ* as in verse 14b when Amnon rapes Tamar). Holladay, *Hebrew Lexicon*, 99. It is significant that חָזַק also appears in the death narratives of both Amnon and Absalom. Absalom uses *chizqu* (חִזְקוּ "be strong") when he orders his men to kill Amnon (2 Sam. 13:28c), and Absalom dies when his head is caught (grasped) by the oak tree (*vaychezaq ro'sho ba'alah* וַיִּחַזְקוּ קִוְיָו (2 Sam. 18:9c). these three children of David are caught and die by a force they cannot escape: physical death in the case of the brothers, and social death in the case of Tamar.

¹⁶⁶ Contra Pamela Reis, who criticises Tamar for failing to call out. Reis, "Cupidity," 50.

unreasoning ‘lover,’ but for Tamar, with little time to make a decision, it offers her a possible avenue of escape.

The daughter and granddaughter of kings,¹⁶⁷ Tamar understands the law and the consequences of breaking the law. She knows about the shame that Amnon’s proposal will bring to her, to the royal family and to Israel. Unhappily, her belief that “such a thing is not done in Israel” is incorrect, for recently her father has done such a thing to an Israelite woman (2 Sam. 11:4). However her real purpose in making the statement is to remind Amnon about the crucial place the law has in Israel. Despite her vulnerable position alone in Amnon’s inner room, and despite knowing Amnon’s superior physical strength and position of power in his own home, Tamar trusts in Israel’s law and has the intelligence to give “clear-sighted counsel.”¹⁶⁸

Tamar’s words of rebuke spoken in a moment of great danger demonstrate a degree of emotional strength and confidence that is unexpected in a young woman. She also has what I will call ‘social imagination;’ that is, the princess’s speech consists of a step progression of imperatives which if ignored will have dire social consequences. Thus Amnon hears Tamar exclaim, “Do not force me” (*’al t’anneny* לֹא-יִנְנַעַת) for it is against Israel’s code of conduct, and “Do not

¹⁶⁷ Maacah, mother of Tamar and Absalom, is the daughter of King Talmai of Geshur (1 Chron. 3:2). Tamar’s speech indicates that she probably had some formal education. Hillel I. Millgram, *Four Biblical Heroines and the Case for Female Authorship: An Analysis of the Women of Ruth, Esther and Genesis 28* (Jefferson Nth. Ca: McFarland and Co. Inc., 2008), 238.

¹⁶⁸ Hagan, “Deception,” 310.

commit this sacrilege” (*nabalah* הַלְבֵּן) (vs. 12).¹⁶⁹ She then tells Amnon that he would become known as one of “the sacrilegious fools” (*n^ebalim* מִיִּלְבֵּן) of Israel, and asks him to consider the terrible effect of such a liaison on her: “Where can I take my shame (*cherppah* חֶרְפָּה)?” (vs.13a)¹⁷⁰ Yet throughout her speech Tamar remains respectful, carefully referring to Amnon as “my brother” even as she chastises and warns him.¹⁷¹

Tamar politely (using *na’* נָא) puts a final request to him to consider a compromise. Perhaps due to Amnon’s lack of response so far she becomes more circumspect, stating that “the king” would not prevent their marriage (vs. 13d). Her proposal is sensible in the light of the law which merely punishes the rapist with a fine and compulsory marriage to the victim if she is unbetrothed (Deut. 22:28-29). Yet Tamar ignores the legal problems associated with a brother-sister marriage. One supposition is that Israelite royalty sees itself exempt from exogamous codes;¹⁷² another is that the Levitical incest laws are not yet in place during David’s monarchy so endogamous marriage may have been practiced without penalty during his reign.¹⁷³ Whatever the situation, Tamar’s proposal is also an appeal to David’s legal authority: Tamar knows that “she belongs to her

¹⁶⁹ If *habbiryah* is indeed a religious ritual, the translation of *n^ebalah* as “sacrilegious” is appropriate.

¹⁷⁰ She is correct, for eventually all Israel knows (vs. 31b), and the royal family’s honour is further eroded.

¹⁷¹ Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 536.

¹⁷² Propp, “Kinship,” 44.

¹⁷³ Conroy, *Absalom*, 17 fn. 3; Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 263.

father, not to herself.”¹⁷⁴ The passion and power of her speech however, is not compelling enough for Amnon to relent.

In the immediate aftermath of the rape, Tamar is ordered to get up and get out. Despite the shock of her ordeal and the humiliation of the contemptuous dismissal usually reserved for slaves, Tamar is not cowed. She is defiant and angry enough to refuse to leave, for she has the intelligence to recognise that the instant this incident becomes known,¹⁷⁵ all possibility of salvaging the situation will disappear. The princess recognises that this dismissal is even worse than the rape itself, for marriage to a rapist is preferable to the alternatives of further humiliation for the royal family and life without prospects for a defiled *b^etulah*.¹⁷⁶

Even after her eviction, this Israelite princess demonstrates that she is not easily defeated. Tamar chooses to do what is her right in Israelite law, that is, to publicly proclaim the crime against her in a “ritualised public lament.”¹⁷⁷ Her wits still intact, the princess has already seen that to quietly disappear, hoping that she is not pregnant and that Amnon’s servants will not broadcast the news too broadly, is a poor alternative to seeking justice with a “hue and cry.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Exum, *Tragedy*, 125, 145; James Poling, “An Ethical Framework for Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 42 (1988): 302.

¹⁷⁵ Tamar knows that the rape will inevitably become known because Amnon’s house is full of servants.

¹⁷⁶ Washington, “Lest He Die,” 212.

¹⁷⁷ Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church’s Response* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press), 1995. 18; Goitein, “Women as Creators,” 23-27.

¹⁷⁸ Daube, “Absalom,” 316. In ancient Israel, a raped woman might well lament as for the dead because her life has no further value.

The shame she bears precludes her from returning to her father's house,¹⁷⁹ so when Tamar walks away from Amnon's house she cries out, places ashes on her head and tears her ceremonial robe.¹⁸⁰ Tamar knows that with the loss of her virginity her special status has gone,¹⁸¹ and that "sexually defiled women are ineligible for marital relations."¹⁸² Israelite law would punish any attempt she might make to hide the crime in order to become a bride, for if or when a prospective bridegroom discovers her non-virginal state, she would be stoned to death. (Deut. 22: 20-21).

If David follows the law and demands that the rapist pay him compensation, marry, and never divorce his victim (Deut. 22:28-29), then there is hope that the princess might retrieve some of her status. However, Tamar knows that Amnon in his loathing would refuse to marry her and that his indulgent father would acquiesce to his son's wishes. She is in an impossible situation, one for which mourning is an appropriate response. Then, as if this were not enough, Absalom demands her silence and not to dwell on her ordeal. Tamar, traumatised by one brother, is now told what to feel and relegated to silence and isolation by the other.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Van Wolde, "Innâ," 540.

¹⁸⁰ Other biblical references to the tearing of clothes and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes include 2 Samuel 15:32; Esther 4:1, 3; Isaiah 58:5b; Jeremiah 6:26, Daniel 9:3 and Jonah 3:6.

¹⁸¹ For further discussion on the possibility of Tamar's priestly role, see "Resistance," pp. 431-443.

¹⁸² Carolyn Pressler, "Sexual Violence and Deuteronomic Law," in *A Feminist Companion to Exodus and Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 105.

¹⁸³ Further on in his essay Rudman contradicts his assessment of Absalom as Tamar's comforter. Rudman describes Jonadab's response to David after Amnon's death as "cold words of comfort" (2 Sam. 13:33a), but Jonadab's words are almost identical to those used by Absalom to Tamar (vs. 20e). Rudman, "Reliving," 337. See also "Suspicion," pp. 417, 419..

On every measure Tamar is a foil to the men of her family. Where they are secretive, deceptive, immoral, selfish and murderous, she is honest, thoughtful, ethical and courageous. The three men are accustomed to giving commands; Tamar is accustomed to obeying commands. Yet she has the moral strength to resist Amnon's immoral demand. Tragically, her powerful speeches fail. Despite her valiant attempt to protect herself and Amnon from disgrace and shame, the rape and Amnon's subsequent rejection of her constitute the turning point in the princess's life,¹⁸⁴ and from that time she is condemned to a barren, confined and lonely life in the shadows, her *sh'e'ol* on earth.

Absalom

Like his father, Absalom makes only a brief appearance in this pericope. Nevertheless he is an important figure. He is the first character to be introduced and he dominates the final scene and the coda, thereby apprising the audience of his enigmatic character and preparing it for his later exploits.

As Scene Four opens, the distressed and weeping Tamar is making her way along the laneway. Suddenly Absalom appears, questioning her. Although the narrator does not indicate that Absalom has prior knowledge of the assault, at the sight of Tamar in a torn robe and covered in ash he must guess the situation because he asks her if "Aminon" has been with her. Without waiting for an answer, Absalom peremptorily demands his sister's silence and adds, "He is

¹⁸⁴ Keefe, "Rapes," 91.

your brother. Do not set your heart on this thing” (vs. 20b). He chooses against naming the offence, fails to express solicitude for Tamar’s wellbeing, and does not wait for her response. Instead of outrage as the brother of a rape victim, Absalom plays it down.¹⁸⁵ By instructing Tamar to be silent, Absalom denies his sister the opportunity to express her grief.¹⁸⁶

In the light of Absalom’s response, it is remarkable that numerous scholars consider him to be the ‘good brother’ whose words are kindly and comforting, “controlled...discreet...and patient.”¹⁸⁷ Daube names Absalom “the faithful champion of his sister,” while Rudman reads into Absalom’s speech that despite the attack, Tamar is still part of the family and Amnon remains her brother. “Absalom’s address is the only kindness which Tamar experiences.”¹⁸⁸ This interpretation of Absalom’s words as comforting is difficult to justify, for the subtext implies that, rather than caring for her welfare, he is already making self-serving plans and does not want her to jeopardise them.

Absalom, according to the order of events in 2 Samuel 13, makes decisions regarding the fate of Tamar before David has even heard the news.¹⁸⁹ Absalom

¹⁸⁵ William M. Propp, “Kinship in 2 Samuel 13,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 1, no. 55 (1993), 43.

¹⁸⁶ Richards and Richards, *Every Woman*, 133.

¹⁸⁷ Sasson, “Absalom’s Daughter,” 180; Amit, *Reading*, 64-65, 89-90, 131. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 110-2, Conroy, *Absalom*, 24. See also “the Motif of Sibling Relationships,” p. 367. Poling is ambivalent for he sees Absalom as both loyal and devious. James Poling, “An Ethical Framework for Pastoral Care,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 43 (1988), 305.

¹⁸⁸ Daube, “Absalom,” 322; Rudman, “Reliving,” 330, 333.

¹⁸⁹ Dinah’s brothers take matters into their own hands only when their father fails to initiate retribution (Gen. 34: 5, 7, 13, 25-26). Brenner believes that Absalom could have looked discreetly for a husband for his violated sister, but instead condemns her to isolation. Brenner, *I Am*, 142.

does not arrange for Israel's assault laws to be enacted; instead he denies her justice and unilaterally decides the fates of Tamar and Amnon.¹⁹⁰ According to Jonadab, Absalom utilises Tamar's humiliation to justify the murder of Amnon; what is not revealed but later becomes manifest is that this act also gains Absalom political advantage (2 Sam. 13:32d). In this story the audience sees the first signs that David's third son is a calculating man who would be king.

YHWH

Where is Israel's God in Tamar's story? YHWH, the figure who dominates the Hebrew Bible, is never mentioned in this pericope. Of the four stories discussed in the dissertation, this is the only one in which the narrator does not offer God's perspective.

Yet the wider narrative attests to YHWH's continuing presence in the background of every event and influencing the lives of his people, the Israelites. Some time earlier, divine punishment was predicted for David by the prophet Nathan. The narrative implies that the rape of Tamar is part of the dread outcome of that curse (2 Sam. 12: 10-4) and that Tamar's protests and arguments are doomed before she opens her mouth. In this sense Tamar is the deity's victim.

¹⁹⁰ Deuteronomy 22:28, 9. This law demands that the rapist pay a marriage gift (*mohar* מֹהָר) of fifty shekels to the girl's father and his punishment is that he can never divorce her. There is a penalty of death for the rape of another man's wife, but not for the rape of an unmarried girl.

Point of View

For so short a text, points of view in the narrative are remarkably diverse. There are elements of ambiguity in the thoughts and behaviour of all four male protagonists, but because of his apparently sympathetic perception of Amnon's plight, Jonadab's viewpoint is the most enigmatic. However, when as a trusted aide he boldly encourages his lord to deceive his father and sister to achieve a dubious aim, Jonadab's sincerity and motives become questionable. This man's true purpose in setting Amnon on course towards an early death remains hidden.

Amnon's viewpoint is repeatedly given narrative space - either through direct discourse or through the narrator's privileged knowledge of the protagonist's inner life.¹⁹¹ Indeed, the recurrent glimpses into the inner world of Amnon are unusual in a biblical narrative.¹⁹² Of particular interest is the intense language used to describe Amnon's emotions. He is so tormented (*tsrr*) that his deteriorating condition is serious enough to attract Jonadab's attention. From Amnon's perspective, however, his obsession with Tamar overrides any law or social convention which forbids it. Consequently Amnon ignores Tamar's impassioned stance - and her wellbeing - and succumbs to his lust. After the rape, the narrator uses repetition to emphasise the intensity of the prince's sudden hatred towards Tamar, but does not provide a reason for his violent

¹⁹¹ "The reliable narrator's explicit statement of what the characters feel, intend, desire" provides the most certainty about a character's motives, attitudes and morality. Alter, *Art*, 117.

¹⁹² Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 276.

rejection of her. As soon as Tamar is ejected from his house, Amnon disappears from the pericope.¹⁹³

Tamar's viewpoint contrasts completely with that of Amnon. For the first eleven verses the audience knows little about Tamar other than her skill in performing *habbiryah*. Then at the story's midpoint (vss. 12-13) Tamar, with startling clarity, expresses her point of view about Amnon's proposal. She believes his proposal is wrong, shameful and foolish, and she is adamant that he must not violate her. Her final appeal - that David would allow them to marry - is most probably a desperate search for an escape route from a perilous situation.¹⁹⁴

After enduring the rape, the strength of Tamar's protest increases because she views Amnon's dismissal of her as "this greater evil" (*hara'ah hagdolah hazo'd* הַהַלֹדְגָה הַעֲרֵהזֹאֵד) (vs. 16a). For her the words "send out" (*shilchu* שִׁלְחוּ) (vs. 17c) mean the end of her slim hope that Amnon might marry her.¹⁹⁵ Through her words the princess fights Amnon's power. Tragically she loses the fight, but after she is sent into the street Tamar chooses to protest noisily to ensure that her point of view is made known in the community. Until Absalom silences her,

¹⁹³ Perhaps Amnon returns to his moribund state, unable to make decisions or act without direction from others until the day of his death at Absalom's feast (2 Sam.13:23-29).

¹⁹⁴ Contra Reis, who argues that Tamar has engineered this tryst so that she can become Amnon's queen. See "Suspicion," p. 422.

¹⁹⁵ In Hebrew, *shalach* also means "divorce." Propp, "Kinship," 42-43.

Tamar has opinions and voice, both of which are denied to other victims of rape in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁹⁶

As the story draws to a close, the narrator briefly presents the feelings of David and Absalom, revealing that they, like Amnon, are men of dark emotions. David is very angry about “all these things” (vs. 21), but it is left to the audience to deduce that it is Amnon with whom he is angry. The final perspective of the narrative belongs to Absalom whose hatred for his older brother is nurtured in silence and secrecy.

Narrator’s Purpose

The broad perspective of the books of Samuel provides a fair indication of the narrator’s purpose in recording the events of 2 Samuel 13:1-22. This perspective indicates that the narrator aims to illustrate not only the few triumphs but also the many vicissitudes of the monarchical system, highlighting the evil desires and deeds which lead to deep divisions and wretchedness within the royal household, and civil war in the nation of Israel. What 2 Samuel 13:1-22 brings is the first confirmation of Nathan’s prophecy to King David after the latter commits his crimes of adultery and murder. Nathan warns: “Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house... Thus says the Lord, ‘I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house’” (2 Sam. 12:10a, 11a).

¹⁹⁶ The voiceless victims of rape in the Hebrew Bible include Dinah in Genesis 34:1-31 and the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19:22-26.

Unless Tamar's story is understood as a part of the punishment of the house of David, it is difficult to identify what the narrator wishes to convey to his audience through this story. Unlike the story of Dinah who invites trouble by leaving her father's house (Gen. 34:1-2) Tamar's cannot be a cautionary tale, for the obedient princess does nothing to deserve the calamity which befalls her. Like the equally exemplary Job (Job 1:1-5), Tamar's misfortune falls like a mighty rock on all she values and hopes for but, unlike Job, when she is denied access to Israel's God to debate her case, she is denied justice.

Although other stories of rape in the Hebrew Bible are briefly told, the narrator of 2 Samuel 13 chooses not to gloss over Amnon's attack on Tamar. Perhaps the narrator is reluctant to do otherwise because he wants to ensure that Amnon bears some of the culpability for the near-ruin of David's family and the civil war which follows Amnon's death.

All in all, this event is significant in the life of the brilliant, yet deeply-flawed, King David. The king's biographer does not resile from presenting the many contradictions, both positive and negative, of David's character, and this story adds to the growing evidence that the aging king is increasingly inadequate as a man, warrior, father and chief justice of Israel. What the narrator of this pericope apparently does attempt to limit expression of, however, are hints of religious heterodoxy within the house of David. It is these controversies which will feature in the following feminist re-reading of the text.

A Feminist Re-reading

Suspicion of Patriarchal Biblical Authority

The pericope of 2 Samuel 13:1-22 is yet another biblical narrative about a woman whose victimisation reinforces the view that in the ancient world male hegemony over almost every aspect of political, social and religious life is unassailable. Although the woman in this story is the daughter of a king, educated in Israelite law and confident enough to speak her mind, Tamar's fate demonstrates that even she cannot forestall the juggernaut of patriarchal oppression.

With a few possible exceptions¹⁹⁷ the narrators of the Hebrew Bible are almost invariably male and therefore focus their attention principally on the lives of Israel's men and their relationship with YHWH. Accordingly, Amnon is the primary protagonist in this story which in turn is but one chapter in the life of YHWH's devotee David, whose fleeting appearances in the pericope contribute to the conflict between two of his sons over their sister and, covertly at this stage, over royal succession.¹⁹⁸ Tamar, in contrast, is a casualty of the self-serving behaviour of the men in the royal household: they make the decisions which serve their androcentric agendas, and she suffers in consequence of those decisions.

¹⁹⁷ It is possible that Ruth, Esther and Song of Solomon etc. are written, wholly or partially, by women. Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces," 18-19.

¹⁹⁸ R. N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1 and 2* (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1968), 19.

The incestuous rape is itself a sign of the disorder and fracturing of royal family and nation. Tamar's violated body... functions in the narrative as the field of representation upon which brokenness in the order of human relationships and sacred meanings within Israel is made manifest.¹⁹⁹

As Propp observes, the narrator is embedded in the androcentric viewpoint of his time, for although equipped to critique the political, religious and social machinations of the monarchy, he is unable to censure his world's patriarchal hegemony.²⁰⁰ Consequently the narrator accepts and underscores the right of David and his male descendants to lead, command and demand obedience from most men and all women - a right bestowed on them by YHWH via the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 7:8-16).

In a foretaste of Sirach's pronouncement, "Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace,"²⁰¹ David gives his wicked son Amnon more care and respect than he ever gives his righteous daughter.²⁰² The king's greater regard for a son than for a daughter is evident from the moment he enters the narrative. Failing to seek clarification from Amnon about his motive regarding Tamar's service, David not only fails to protect Tamar, but he actually sends her into a hazardous

¹⁹⁹ Keefe, "Rapes," 88.

²⁰⁰ Propp, "Kinship," 51; S. Johanna Wurst, in conversation in Adelaide, South Australia, January 2008.

²⁰¹ Sir. 42:14. (The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha).

²⁰² In 2 Sam. 13:26-27, David does try to shield Amnon when Absalom asks his father to send Amnon to the shearing festival. However, given the murder and mayhem which follows, David is not wary enough.

situation.²⁰³ As a *b^etulah*, she is in a transitional or liminal life stage, traditionally seen as a time of danger.²⁰⁴ It is a father's duty to guard his *b^etulah* from risk during this vulnerable period.²⁰⁵ By repeatedly presenting David as "the king" (vss. 6c-d, 13, 21), the narrator emphasises David's position of great power and therefore his great responsibility for the state and for his family.²⁰⁶ If even the king does not look after the welfare of his own daughter, what hope is there for other daughters in Israel?

David – as king and chief justice - chooses not to bring Amnon to account for the rape or to punish him in any way. Later, when Amnon and then Absalom are killed (2 Sam. 13: 36-37; 18:33), David is overwhelmed by profound grief for his two sons. When Saul, Jonathon and Abner are killed some time before the king's world began to collapse (2 Sam. 1:11-27, 3:31-39) the king mourns deeply for them. In contrast, when he learns that Tamar has suffered the worst fate that can befall a *b^etulah* he does nothing: no fatherly call, no word of comfort, and no offer of support, no marriage arrangement or promise of redress.²⁰⁷ There is no heartrending cry, "O my daughter Tamar, my daughter, my daughter Tamar! Would I had suffered instead of you, O Tamar, my daughter, my daughter!"²⁰⁸ Nor does David weep over Tamar's torn and (probably) bloodied *k^etonet passim* as Jacob weeps over Joseph's (Gen.37:34-

²⁰³ Unlike Dinah, Tamar does not put herself into a perilous situation, but her father does.

²⁰⁴ See discussion on "liminality" in Chapter 2: "Retrieval," p.117, fn. 60.

²⁰⁵ Turner, *Ritual*, 95.

²⁰⁶ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 150.

²⁰⁷ Laffey, *Wives, Harlots, Concubines*, 123.

²⁰⁸ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville, Tn.: Abingdon Press, 1993), 144.

6).²⁰⁹ His failure to mourn for his violated daughter's "death in life"²¹⁰ signals that David has abandoned her. "How appropriate that the story never refers to David and Tamar as father and daughter! The father identifies with the son; the adulterer supports the rapist; male has joined male to deny justice for the female."²¹¹

Neglected and hidden away, Tamar is David's daughter nonetheless. It is David's duty to right the wrong done to her, or rather the wrong done to himself, since in patriarchal cultures rape is an offence against a woman's male guardian.²¹² Even if Amnon were punished it would be relatively mild, for Tamar is not betrothed or married. "The law codes consider rape a minor offense, providing the woman is unattached."²¹³ An examination of the Deuteronomic laws concerning forcible violation of women leads to Pressler's sobering conclusion: these texts do what rape does. They eliminate women's will from consideration and erase women's rights to sexual integrity.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 100. It is my presumption that the rape leaves some blood, but the narrator does not mention blood - he may not be interested in drawing parallels with Jacob and Joseph.

²¹⁰ Shargent, "Living on the Edge," 35.

²¹¹ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 41. Contra Tribble, David is not only an adulterer, but also a rapist. See "Motif of Sexual Violence," p. 372.

²¹² Michael Parsons, "Luther and Calvin on Rape: Is the Crime Lost in the Agenda?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2002): 124. See also "Motif of Sexual Violence," p. 372.

²¹³ Propp, "Kinship," 41; Pressler, "Sexual Violence," 103, 108. Only the rape of a married woman incurs the death penalty (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:23). In other words, a husband's rights have more value than a father's. The exception to the law is the death penalty for a priest's unbetrothed daughter who "if she defiles herself by playing the harlot, profanes her father" (Lev. 21:9). See the discussion on rape in "The Motif of Sexual Violence," pp. 371-72.

²¹⁴ Pressler, "Sexual Violence," 103, 112.

So Tamar receives nothing from David, losing not only the hope of marriage and its status but also any current or future roles (e.g. cultic roles) which would bring her due honour.²¹⁵ An unmarried woman who has been raped can never again appear in public or take part in society;²¹⁶ nor can she look forward to motherhood and the social respect it elicits.²¹⁷ Her life crushed because of one man's lust and deceit, Tamar has been given a life-long sentence: "murder by rape."²¹⁸

The narrator gives no reason for Amnon's post-rape hatred for his sister.²¹⁹ While Cartledge attributes Amnon's attitude to his immaturity and inability to admit responsibility,²²⁰ a more apposite explanation is that Amnon blames Tamar for tempting him. This attitude is in keeping with that expressed elsewhere in biblical and apocryphal literature where women's sexuality is viewed as dangerous for young men (e.g. Prov. 5:3-6; 7:4, 5, 10-27; Sirach 25:24).²²¹ The horrible irony of the event in 2 Samuel 13 is that the brother fails to

²¹⁵ Athalya Brenner, "Tamar 2," in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 164. If she had not been raped, Tamar's future may have been a political marriage to a head of state, just as David's marriage to Saul's daughter Michal served a political purpose (1 Sam. 18:21-22).

²¹⁶ Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, Mn., 1997), 24-25. Social outcasts often turn to prostitution. Even a widow has a very difficult time; hence the Levirate laws (Gen. 38:6-11) and the prophetic call to Israel to remember the plight of widows and orphans (e.g. Isa. 1:17, Jer. 22:3). Josephus appears to play down Tamar's suffering by declaring that after Amnon rapes her, Tamar "continued as a widow with her brother Absalom a long time." Josephus, *Antiquities* (trans. Whiston) 7:8:1.

²¹⁷ John Pilch claims that in ANE cultures "a woman has no standing until she bears a child, especially a son." Pilch, *Cultural Dictionary*, 37; Pressler, "Sexual Violence," 105; Shargent, "Living on the Edge," 35.

²¹⁸ Rudman, "Reliving," 332.

²¹⁹ See the discussion in "The Motif of Love and Hate," pp. 369-70.

²²⁰ Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 538.

²²¹ The poet of Proverbs advises the young men to seek "sister wisdom" to "keep you from the loose woman...with her smooth words" (Prov. 7:5).

heed his sister whose values and words show that she is the only wise protagonist in the entire story. It is she who becomes the victim, not of a woman, but of a loose man with his smooth words.²²² Only men have the power to improve conditions for women like Tamar, but these men do nothing, captive as they are to the androcentric mind-set of their world. Indeed, “patriarchy cannot be depended upon for justice.... the passive negligence [of David] silently invites the violence that follows but that could have been avoided.”²²³

The key element in the text which appears to be influenced by patriarchal bias is the intellectual, physical, moral, social and political abuse of power. Every male character in the pericope abuses one or more of these forms of power; each one denies Tamar justice. For example, during the extended prelude to Amnon’s attack on Tamar, a cast of supporting actors conspire, wittingly and unwittingly, to establish the conditions for Amnon to carry out his scheme. Even the narratorial decision to leave Tamar unnamed during the central scene in which the rape takes place (vss. 11-18) is telling, for a nameless woman’s protest is less powerful.²²⁴ As Athalya Brenner concludes, “She is a pawn in the power politics between her brothers and between them and their king-father.”²²⁵

²²² Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 44; Bellis, *Helpmates*, 152.

²²³ Fewell, “Feminist Reading,” 84.

²²⁴ Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 33-34. Tribble’s observation regarding the negative effect of namelessness has influenced the *midrash* (my reconstructed story of Tamar in Appendix 9): during the rape scene Tamar refuses to name Amnon

²²⁵ Brenner, “Tamar 2,” in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000), 164.

Paradoxically, Amnon's abuse of his power may be due to his own perception of personal powerlessness. Fokkelman appears to empathise with Amnon's helplessness when he writes that the prince is "sucked down" into an "inescapable whirlpool...Once he has *seen* [Tamar], he is lost, just like his father in 11:2."²²⁶ Finkelhor's studies in family violence demonstrate that despite the power that an abuser holds in his family situation, rage and lack of control stems from his perception that he lacks power or is losing his power.²²⁷ Early in the narrative, it is evident that Amnon is indeed in this bind, for his despair stems from his inability "to do anything to her" (vs. 2c). Social researchers have found that there are higher rates of violence against women in patriarchal societies where men are expected to dominate, but due to their life circumstances, they may feel frustrated and helpless. The fear arising from such perceptions leads some men to become violent towards those who have even less power: their wives or partners and their children.²²⁸ Although Fokkelman does show sympathy for Amnon's vulnerability, nevertheless he does rightly join the narrator in unambiguously condemning Amnon.²²⁹

The fact remains, however, that Amnon has committed a crime and no-one - other than his victim - confronts him with his sin. The narrator portrays Tamar's

²²⁶ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 106.

²²⁷ David Finkelhor, "Common Features of Family Abuse," in *The Dark Side of Families: Current Family Violence Research*, ed. David Finkelhor et al., (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1983), 19.

²²⁸ A. Nicholas Groth with H. Jean Birnbaum, *Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender* (New York: Plenum Press, 1979), 8-13.

²²⁹ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 106-107. I believe that the narrator communicates his disapproval of Amnon's immoral behaviour by detailing Amnon's deception and Tamar's ethical arguments and emotional pleas.

obedience and speeches as wise and appropriate, but these admirable attributes do not restore her, just as the men who surround her do nothing to help her cause. If succession issues are excluded from the equation, Absalom's revenge murder of the perpetrator can be seen as his effort to restore family honour. Amnon's death, however, does nothing - and nor is it meant to - for Tamar herself. The narrator and his male protagonists regard her only as 'soiled goods' and a lost cause.²³⁰

Ultimately Tamar's own tenacious and fighting spirit is to no avail: no-one is interested in protecting her integrity and rights and - when these are ripped away - no-one alleviates her anguish. One brother has abused her, another silences and isolates her and the father ignores her. Tamar is abandoned by her male protectors, including her father's 'male' God, YHWH.²³¹ Yet it is not long since YHWH did intervene for Uriah - a wronged man, not a wronged woman (2 Sam. 12:11). According to Esler, when David's sons rape and murder, God's punishment "discloses something fundamentally important about this divine patron - he has an abiding concern for justice."²³² Sadly this concern for justice does not extend to Princess Tamar.

Abandoned by the divine forces, blameless, abused and rejected, Tamar cries out for acknowledgment of her ordeal. "Her wailing disturbs the patriarchal/fratriarchal order" and thereupon her protest is immediately

²³⁰ See notes on honour killings in "Character Portrayal: Amnon," p.393, fn.137.

²³¹ See "Zelophehad's Daughters: Suspicion," p.234, fn. 157.

²³² Esler, "2 Samuel," 204.

suppressed.²³³ This suppression is also serious from a legal perspective. Where is the voice demanding redress for Tamar? By denying his sister her only recourse to justice, namely, to publicly lament her plight, Absalom compounds the offences against her.²³⁴

Regrettably, in this story neither the king nor his sons demonstrate that their physical or political power is linked with discernment. The connection in the Hebrew Bible between wisdom and royal power is nowhere more evident than in the book of Proverbs²³⁵ and in the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, but in this pericope the only wise person is Tamar. Although limited by gender, her power lies in her rank as a princess and in her possible status as a priestess-healer who offers the fruits of her training to her brother.²³⁶ Both of Tamar's respected positions are ruined in a matter of minutes by Amnon's sacrilegious intervention to halt the ritual, by his total disregard for Tamar's reasoned protests and by his sexual assault. As Van Dijk-Hemmes dispiritedly concludes, "She in no way succeeds in breaking through the power-structures. She can only unmask them."²³⁷

²³³ Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar and Limits," 144.

²³⁴ Matthew and Benjamin, *Social World*, 178. In the law of ancient Israel, a wronged man has the right to stand in the city gate and demand justice. McCown, "Gate," *Interpreter's Dictionary*, 2:355. Certainly no man demands justice in the gate on behalf of Tamar.

²³⁵ For example, Proverbs 1:1; 8:15, 16; 25:1-28; 31:1-31.

²³⁶ The text is reticent about female priestly healers because biblical narrators only endorse males as priests and only male prophets as healers. The Bible has a paucity of information about women healers because their work is generally confined to the domestic sphere. Wainwright, "Healing," 94. See discussion about Tamar as a priestess-healer in "Retrieval," pp. 432, 436-38.

²³⁷ Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar and Limits," 145. Tragically for women, the unmasking of gender-based power structures has only occurred in more recent times as commentators became aware of such structures.

The patriarchal power structures of Hebrew Scripture are unquestionably comprehensive. Jonadab, Amnon and the unwitting David join forces to trap and bring down Tamar, while Absalom's demand for silence imprisons her. The male protagonists are passionate, but their emotions overflow for themselves and between each other. The fact that the description of these emotions applies only to the male characters implies that the narrator is a male who assumes that his audience holds the same interests and values. While claiming privileged knowledge in relation to feelings of love, anger and hatred in Amnon, David and Absalom, the narrator refrains from describing the inner world of Tamar's emotions: her turmoil is conveyed only through word and action. The inference is that the male narrator cannot - and will not - attempt to enter the world of a woman's unknown emotions. Tamar is presented as 'other' and remains outside of the narrator's androcentric world.²³⁸

This means that over time, male biblical commentators generally only mention Tamar in passing.²³⁹ Those that do discuss her behaviour, however, do not always praise her. John Calvin, for example, blames the princess for proposing an incestuous marriage, but believes that she repents because she later laments over her sin.²⁴⁰ More recently feminist exegetes have brought a new perspective and Princess Tamar has finally received recognition for her exemplary and

²³⁸ When "we have the reliable narrator's explicit statement of what the characters feel, intend, desire...we have certainty," Alter, *Art*, 117. It is noteworthy that this is the only one of the four pericopes in which the narrator enters the inner world of a protagonist.

²³⁹ Whybray exemplifies the commentators who mention Tamar only briefly in the context of a discussion about David and his sons. Whybray, *Succession Narrative*, 22, 24-26, 31-32.

²⁴⁰ Parsons, "Luther and Calvin," 135-37.

honourable role in the narrative. The single dissenting voice has been that of Pamela Reis who claims that the princess is to blame for her own downfall.²⁴¹

According to Reis, Tamar, in her eagerness to become Amnon's queen and further her ambition, jumps at the opportunity provided by Amnon's illness. However, because of her "implacable stupidity" in choosing to argue against Amnon, she fails to seduce Amnon into marrying her.²⁴² Further, Reis believes that Amnon's subsequent hatred may be due to his recognition of "their mutual guilt in the crime of incest, making him all the more resentful of Tamar's apparent insensibility to the transgression."²⁴³

In the light of Bledstein's research which suggests that Tamar has a role as a cultic healer, Reis's arguments condemning Tamar are easily refuted.²⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the fact that Reis is able to mount a believable case against Tamar as a selfish and stupid woman demonstrates how a biblical text can be interpreted androcentrically by someone - a woman, no less - who is determined to be unsympathetic towards a female character in the story.

Ambiguity plays an important role in the Tamar-Amnon story.²⁴⁵ There is no narratorial criticism, veiled or otherwise, of Absalom's self-serving role in silencing Tamar, of David's failure to berate or punish his firstborn son, or of

²⁴¹ Reis, "Cupidity," 43.

²⁴² Reis, "Cupidity," 43, 50.

²⁴³ Reis, "Cupidity," 53.

²⁴⁴ See the discussion about Bledstein's theory in "Resistance," pp. 431-443.

²⁴⁵ See "Ambiguity," pp. 383-386.

the king's decision to ignore his daughter's suffering and unjust punishment. All in all, the many examples of ambiguity in the text might well reflect the narrator's own uncertainties about the subject matter. Perhaps Tamar's possible connections with women's religious activities contribute to narratorial uncertainty regarding the editing process, and this is manifested in the retention of multiple uncertainties in the pericope. Just as the Miriamic tradition is partially "squelched" by the narrator of Israel's greatest story, the Exodus from Egypt (Exod. 15:20-21),²⁴⁶ it may also be the case that Tamar's story has been redacted to suit a great story: that of King David. Narratorial ambivalence about Tamar's possibly 'irregular' position as a cultic healer in the royal court may also explain the curious fact that the narrator always refers to her as sister to David's sons and only obliquely as a king's daughter (vs. 18c).²⁴⁷

Through the years compilers of the Hebrew Bible produced a religious history of Israel which was androcentric and unchallenged in its androcentricity. More than a century has passed since women began to critique male perspectives of the Bible. Now with more women appropriating 2 Samuel 13 as a feminist challenge and applying a hermeneutic of suspicion to the text, Tamar is at last receiving the recognition that she deserves.

²⁴⁶ Dijk Hemmes, "Traces," 39-40.

²⁴⁷ William Dever discusses the biblical writers' suppression of what archaeology has made plain, namely, the broad appeal of alternative religious practices - which Dever calls "folk religion" - in ancient Israel. William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 184.

Identification²⁴⁸

Given the difficulties encountered by students of the Hebrew Bible as they attempt to grasp the cultural milieu and daily lives of women who lived thousands of years ago, Rachel Srubas's poem - which introduces the Tamar *midrash* - is a powerful means of bringing Tamar's story into the consciousness of women today.²⁴⁹ In the first two verses Srubas reaches into the past to speak directly to the abandoned, anguished and despairing girl outside Amnon's door. In the final verse the poet connects with this long-ago girl through the eating of a cooked meal and praying for a future time in which the poet's unceasing search of the streets of Jerusalem leads her at last to Tamar. For the sad and lonely Tamars of today who read Srubas's words, her determined quest means that they too matter, and that they too can be sought, found and restored.

A *midrash* is another means of connecting women of the ancient past to the present: particularly to women who have suffered and/or continue to suffer similar experiences today. The process of transforming an omniscient narrator's tale into Princess Tamar's autobiographical account has surprised me because the extremity of her emotions swamped the writing. It is as if Tamar's unexpressed feelings escaped their narrative confines and burst forth to give her new energy and extra courage.

²⁴⁸ This section on "Identification" is based on the *midrash*, Appendix 9, pp. 513-521.

²⁴⁹ Rachel M. Srubas, "Tomorrow Tamar (After II Samuel 13:1-22)," *Theology Today* 61 (2004): 225-226.

The first imagined scene, however, is serene: the calm before the storm. Tamar introduces herself as a virgin anticipating an advantageous marriage and as a young cultic healer dutifully and proudly putting her knowledge and skills into practice. The role of a healer connects her with a deity whose protection and power gives her the self confidence to enter Amnon's rooms to conduct the ritual. This part of the reconstruction, however, is likely to divide the audience. While some women can relate to the innocence and sense of security which are gifts of a safe and loving home, others in the audience will have known only a life of wariness and anxiety with no recollection of ever feeling secure and trusting. This forward-looking, positive and guileless *b^etulah* whom we see walking to her brother's house is thus either a delight or an enigma for those who observe her.

In the pivotal scene inside Amnon's bed-chamber the audience watches and listens with trepidation. The proceedings prior to the *dénouement* reveal that Tamar, despite her privileged status and training, is nevertheless naive and vulnerable. Although the narrator does not give a reason for Tamar's failure to become suspicious when Amnon tells all the servants to leave, in the *midrash* privacy is one of the requirements for the ritual's efficacy. Although this is unverified, it is - along with Tamar's naïveté - a possible explanation.

Sadly Tamar, who may be able to command her maids and other servants with ease, is soon to learn that she cannot control a prince of the kingdom, a man

who has excessive and unearned power. Her silent pleas to her deity to intervene when she realises that she is caught in a trap which is about to destroy her life surely resonates with some audience members whose own anxious prayers in dangerous situations have also been met with silence. Indeed, some who have experienced the terror of imminent danger in a similar situation may relate to Tamar's desperate desire to say something in order to avert the disaster and empathise with her physical, emotional and spiritual suffering when all efforts fail.

Tamar's experience of tumultuous feelings and searing pain as Amnon rapes her is so intense that when at last she rolls away on the floor the audience might imagine that she would remain senseless after the trauma she has suffered. But that is not what happens. Although still in shock, Tamar rallies when she hears her assailant speak for the first time since he tried to seduce her on entering his room. His voice is filled with loathing, spitting out his order to get up and get out. She realises with horror the dreadful import of Amnon's rejection: once she leaves his room, no remedy will be possible and all hope of salvaging something out of the nightmare situation will be gone. The rush of adrenalin that this thought brings electrifies Tamar. Rising with the small hope that her brother may remorsefully respond, Princess Tamar demonstrates that after all she is a king's daughter who, despite her ordeal, can still summon the presence of mind, courage and passion to boldly criticise and refuse Amnon's order.

As she is pushed out of Amnon's house, however, the *midrash* describes Tamar's benumbed state, her body's reactions and her tumbling thoughts. Despite the shock and pain she rallies enough to continue her protest in the only way she can – in the lament ritual. There may be something of revenge in this public display, but Tamar barely knows what she does. All she has is some faint and irrational hope that someone - anyone - may find a way to bring back something of her old life.

When Absalom asks her if Amnon has been with her, the princess is unable to respond. Indeed, his order for her to be silent is unnecessary because, like many rape victims, she cannot speak about the crime. She is churning with different emotions, and her only recourse has been to wail in wordless anguish.

Absalom's instruction not to take the incident to heart is bewildering and callous. Once silenced, the *b^etulah* crumbles, consumed by shame and longing for death. Over time her on-going silence leads to depression, one of the many debilitating effects of victimhood.

In the end Tamar is not left without hope. The *midrash* moves towards the extended narrative about Absalom whose young daughter Tamar (2 Sam. 14:27b) gives her aunt a reason to speak out again at long last.²⁵⁰ In time the younger Tamar ensures that the story of Princess Tamar, healer, wise woman of courage and survivor of abuse, will be told for generations to come.

²⁵⁰ 2 Samuel 14:27 and Job 42:13-15 are both notable texts in that the daughter of Absalom and the daughters of Job are named while their brothers remain unnamed.

Naturally this “narrative amplification” and “creative revisioning” of Tamar’s story is just one among many *midrashim* bringing light to shine into forgotten corners of ancient texts.²⁵¹ The light, however, can expose unpalatable and distressing truths. In the Tamar *midrash*, the first truth is that no matter what status a woman may hold in life, even royal status, she is utterly vulnerable when alone in the presence of an unprincipled and physically more powerful assailant. The second truth is that throughout history despite - or because of - vengeance wrought by a man on a victim’s behalf, all too often, “all power to act or even to speak is taken away from her. It becomes men’s business.”²⁵²

My personal experience does not include physical or sexual abuse. However, as a nurse in an Aboriginal community in Central Australia in the 1970s, caring for and listening almost daily to the shards of information from abused women sensitised me to their suffering. Regrettably it did not occur to me at that time to connect their experiences to those of the biblical women whose stories foreshadowed theirs.

Rape is but one of the abuses suffered by women in the world’s deeply-established patriarchal social and political systems. In Christian churches of the West, male power structures continue to treat with caution or even suppress women’s vocational callings. My own experience of this repression as a student

²⁵¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Will to Choose,” 135.

²⁵² Cooper-White, *Cry of Tamar*, 1.

of theology and member of the Lutheran Church of Australia is on-going. I and many others still experience the anguish caused by church rulings which defend gender discrimination regarding the public ministry.²⁵³ Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes asks women to examine the effect of the stories of patriarchal dominance on themselves and other women, and to note how these stories undermine women's self-image:

The presence of a centuries-old and almost universal image of women as victims which is supported and propagated by culture-ideology, forms a source of women's impotence to resist violence (Römkens 1980: 290).²⁵⁴

Needless to say innumerable women have suffered Tamar's fate. Of these, the few who have had heard Tamar's story may identify with her and may say with Tracy Hansen, herself a survivor of child sexual abuse:

This story has been a source of great consolation to me...An incident that could easily have been dismissed in the patriarchal culture as a minor domestic tragedy has been preserved and handed down in the biblical tradition, and is there for us today.²⁵⁵

Hansen writes about the on-going emotional healing she has experienced through reading Tamar's story and the hope she felt on discovering that

²⁵³ The Lutheran Church of Australia cites 1 Corinthians 14:34-8 as a command by Christ himself against the ordination of women. *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions of the Lutheran Church of Australia*. Adelaide, Sth. Aust.: Lutheran Publishing House, 1989.

²⁵⁴ Dijk-Hemmes, "Tamar and Limits", 136-37.

²⁵⁵ Hansen, "My Name," 4, 370-76.

Absalom names his daughter Tamar.²⁵⁶ Many people, women in particular, would benefit from the reading, recounting and talking about stories like Tamar's within their religious communities and beyond. Liturgies of lament, sacred dance, art and music may also join the storytelling in the vital work of healing for survivors of abuse.²⁵⁷

Absalom might command her silence and biblical scholars may have given her story little attention, but Tamar's courage in the face of unchecked power to defend what is good and name the evil has heartened those who have been privileged to listen to her voice and recognise that honour can be present in shame, and greatness can exist in the midst of obscurity.

Retrieval of Strands of Resistance Narrative

In this the last of a feminist narrative examination of four texts featuring unmarried daughters, Tamar is the woman whose narrative role is the most surprising. Not only is Tamar the first and only *b^etulah* to boldly criticise the perpetrator of a crime, but there appears to be good evidence, thanks to Adrien Bledstein's careful research, that Tamar has more than one important role in the palace.²⁵⁸ Although biblical scholars have so far shown little interest in

²⁵⁶ Hansen, "My Name," 375.

²⁵⁷ In 2002, Norman C. Habel wrote a study guide for abused people (unpublished), inviting them to journey with Job and Jesus through the valleys of death and despair towards a place of healing. The guide, *My Journey of Healing with Job, Jennifer and Jesus*, has been used at Lutheran Church of Australia retreats for sufferers of spiritual and other abuse.

²⁵⁸ Bledstein, "Habbiryâ," 15-31.

Bledstein's work,²⁵⁹ I believe she has sound evidence to show that there is a lot more to Tamar than an ability to bake for invalids.

The retrieval of resistance strands is presented in two parts. The first explores the partially-obscured role that Tamar may have held: that of a royal priestess-healer. The second commemorates the unexpected, namely, the presence in an ancient and androcentric text of an extraordinarily assertive, perceptive and analytical monologues of a young woman who is faced with great personal danger.

Habbiryah: Evidence of a Cultic Healing Ritual²⁶⁰

In reading Bledstein's research into the religious activities of women in Hittite and Mesopotamian cultures, it is intriguing to find there a number of connections with Tamar's bread making activity.²⁶¹ Bledstein proposes that Tamar's culinary activity implies that the princess is engaged in a religious ritual rather than merely baking bread for an ailing brother. Reinforcing this proposal is Ackerman's reference to a Mesopotamian text describing "a healing ritual associated with the Ištar cult, in which a cake baked in ashes...is prepared

²⁵⁹ Athalya Brenner, for example, refers only briefly to the possibility that Tamar cooks for Amnon with "an accompanying magic healing ritual". Brenner, *I Am*, 139-40. Overholt and Sasson mention Bledstein's work in footnotes. Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology*, 61, n. 10; Sasson, "Absalom's Daughter," 188-89, fn. 28.

²⁶⁰ For the background discussion, see "The Motif of *Habbiryah*", pp. 378-381.

²⁶¹ Bledstein, "Habbiryâ," 22. "Jerusalem...was originally a joint Hittite and Amorite foundation." F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations: From the Exodus to the Fall of the Second Temple* (Exeter, Devon: The Paternoster Press, 1963), 29. "Hittite cultural influence, reaching the Israelites indirectly via the Canaanite and Aramaean kingdoms...can be detected in many instances." H. A. Hoffner, "The Hittites and Hurrians," in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 214.

in honor of the goddess.”²⁶² Similarly, the record in Jeremiah 7:18 of a ritual in which women knead dough to make loaves for the Queen of Heaven - probably either Astarte or Ishtar/Inanna - has some links with Tamar’s activities. Although the word for cake in 2 Samuel is different from the word used in Jeremiah, the words for “knead” (*lush* לָשׂוּ) and “dough” (*batseq* בַּתֶּסֶב) are identical in the two texts. Even if the reason for the women’s cake baking differs between the two texts, the semantic connections strengthen the supposition that Tamar’s bread baking is a component of a religious ritual.²⁶³

From this it can be deduced that Tamar has probably been trained to conduct certain healing rituals in the palace precinct. “The plot seems to depend on [Tamar] being known to other characters in the story as a person within the royal house ‘officially designated’ to perform a healing ritual.”²⁶⁴ Reinforcing the inference that Tamar may be involved in a women’s religious activity, the anthropologist and biblical scholar Carol Meyers is not alone in claiming that “the combined evidence from archaeology and ethnography, as well as allusions in texts and information from the records of other ancient Near Eastern peoples, attest to women’s household religious activities.”²⁶⁵

²⁶² Susan Ackerman, “‘And the Women Knead Dough’: The Worship of the Queen of Heaven in Sixth-Century Judah,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day, 109-124 (Minneapolis, Mn: Fortress Press, 1999), 115.

²⁶³ Ostriker notes Umberto Cassuto’s substantial list of verbal matches between Canaanite and Hebrew words, indicating the importance of cross-cultural influences in the ANE. Ostriker, *Feminist Revision*, 35.

²⁶⁴ Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology*, 61, fn.10.

²⁶⁵ Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis, Mn.: Fortress Press, 2005), 26. See also Bird, *Missing Persons*, 118-19.

The supposition that Tamar's activity is a religious activity is supported by similarities between the biblical description of Tamar at work and two Hittite accounts in which virginal women conduct bedside healing rituals.²⁶⁶ One of these accounts, a ritual against impotence, quotes the words of Pissuwattis, the Arzawa woman, "I bring sacrifices to Uliliyassis... On the first day I prepare ...three sweet sacrificial loaves of flour" along with rations of other food and "a pitcher of wine."²⁶⁷ After other rituals and prayers to the god, a virgin's task is to carry the food and wine to the house.

The broken sacrificial loaves which are lying on the rations, I shall take a little of them and give it to the male sacrificer. He will put it into his mouth, and he will drink (for) Uliliyassis three times. When night falls, the sacrificer will lie down in front of the table; they will set up a bed for him in front of the table.²⁶⁸

There is increasing evidence available that in ancient Israel and throughout the ANE, women - some of whom are priestesses - primarily practise religious rituals concerned with reproduction on behalf of women.²⁶⁹ However, as in the Hittite instance above, a 'wise woman' can provide a service to both men and women - particularly in healing rituals.²⁷⁰ Following Albright's Ayre Lectures in 1941 in which he outlines advances in ANE studies,²⁷¹ further research has

²⁶⁶ Pritchard, *ANE Texts*, 349.

²⁶⁷ Pritchard, *ANE Texts*, 349.

²⁶⁸ Pritchard, *ANE Texts*, 349.

²⁶⁹ Meyers, *Households*, 62-63.

²⁷⁰ Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring, "Introduction," in *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*, ed. Judith Hoch-Smith and Anita Spring (New York: Plenum Press, 1978), 2, 20.

²⁷¹ Albright states, "In Solomon's day the royal princesses of Ammon, Moab and Sidon could worship their own deities in sanctuaries in and around Jerusalem". William Foxwell

confirmed that there is indeed a significant heterodoxy of religious practice in early Israel.²⁷²

A more nuanced reconstruction of the religion of ancient Israel... would suggest that despite the biblical witness neither the priestly nor prophetic cult was normative in the religion of the first millennium. Rather, a diversity of beliefs and practices thrived and were accepted by the ancients as legitimate forms of religious expression.²⁷³

Phyllis Bird concurs with Ackerman, adding that openness towards women's cultic involvement in the earliest periods of Israel gradually diminishes during the monarchic period due to male Israelite religious leaders' increasing opposition to the growing influence of Canaanite and Aramaean cults with their "fertility rites which involved female cult personnel."²⁷⁴ Shmuel Yeivin's more censorious opinion of the religious culture during the time of David is that "it was the rather lax religious tolerance of the early kings of Judah and Israel, which gave foreign cults a foothold in their realms."²⁷⁵ Nonetheless, all scholars agree that religious pluralism was accepted in pre-exilic Israel, and especially so in the royal precincts.

Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 4th ed. (Baltimore, My: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 119.

²⁷² Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 23

²⁷³ Ackerman, "Women Knead," 109.

²⁷⁴ Bird, *Missing Persons*, 42.

²⁷⁵ S Yeivin, "Social, Religious and Cultural Trends in Jerusalem Under the Davidic Dynasty," *Vetus Testamentum*, 3 (1953): 163.

Ceremonies performed by a virgin for the healing of impotence are variously reported in ANE texts. Robert D. Biggs's translation of hundreds of potency incantations recorded in ancient Mesopotamia, particularly in Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian accounts, indicates that the problem of impotence is viewed with deep concern, and much effort is expended in treating this condition.²⁷⁶ Perhaps because potency incantations are associated with women's activities such as 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery', the biblical narrator and devotee of YHWH generally avoids references to women's rituals except to record the prophets' condemnation of them.²⁷⁷

Biggs' translations of Mesopotamian incantations detail exacting procedures involving the application of salves and poultices while other treatments include instructions for the preparation of food and drink to be consumed by the impotent man. Biggs adds, "The incantations are ostensibly recited by a woman,"²⁷⁸ and they always involve the invocation of the relevant deity. In a number of inscriptions the incantations and ritualised actions are designed to heal a man who lusts after a woman but is not able to have intercourse with her. One of the examples provided by Biggs is translated as follows: "(If a man) desires 'a woman of his heart' and looks at the woman, but his 'heart' does not rise for him' AMT 76, 1:6 (the complaint is attributed to 'Hand of Ghost')."

²⁷⁶ Biggs, *SA.ZI.GA*, 1967.

²⁷⁷ From time to time, prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea condemn various women's religious practices as hostile to the worship of YHWH (e.g. Jer. 7:16-20, 44:15-19; Ezek. 13:18; Hosea 2:5-9).

²⁷⁸ Biggs, *SA.ZI.GA*, 2.

²⁷⁹ Biggs explains that in these rites, the term “rising of the heart,” means “sexual potency,” and this meaning has since been accepted by most Assyriologists.²⁸⁰ In the light of Biggs’ research, and with significant similarities between Tamar’s ritual and the Hittite impotency ritual, one can hypothesise that Jonadab’s advice to Amnon to feign illness is a euphemism for feigning impotence. The repetition of the term “heart loaves” (*lebiboth*) (vss. 6f, 6g, 8e, 8f) contributes to the possibility that Amnon is pretending to be impotent specifically to receive the services of Tamar.

Tamar’s food preparation may be part of a religious ritual from an Aramaean cult brought to the palace in Jerusalem by one of David’s foreign wives,²⁸¹ or it could be an aspect of the worship of YHWH which is either excluded from written records or suppressed during a later period.²⁸² Whatever the explanation, Tamar’s involvement means that at some stage she may have been inducted into the mysteries of women’s cultic activities specialising in sexuality and reproduction.²⁸³ There is valuable archaeological evidence that Sargon’s daughter Princess Enheduanna of Akkad (c. 2360 BCE) holds the double office of high priestess to the moon-god of Ur and the heaven-god An at Uruk, while Nin-shatapada, daughter of King Sin-kashid, is the high priestess of Durum

²⁷⁹ Biggs, *SA.ZI.GA*, 2.

²⁸⁰ Biggs, *SA.ZI.GA*, 2. According to Biggs, the “heart” is a euphemism for “penis”.

²⁸¹ John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Rash Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament*, 2nd revised ed. (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1965), chapter 4 (152-209).

²⁸² Bledstein and Bird endorse the latter notion. Adrien Janis Bledstein, “Tamar and the Coat of Many Colors,” in *Samuel and Kings: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2nd Series, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 78; Bird, *Missing Persons*, 107-108; Ackerman, *Warrior*, 145.

²⁸³ Bird, *Missing Persons*, 107.

(c.1800 BCE).²⁸⁴ It is therefore entirely possible that Princess Tamar is also a priestess in the palace of King David.

The healing ritual hypothesis also answers other difficulties posed by the text. For example, Reis asserts that Tamar's decision to remain in the room when Amnon orders everyone to leave is because she has her own designs on Amnon.²⁸⁵ However, if *habbiryah* is a component of a rite to cure impotence, secrecy may be required for its efficacy. Amnon's plan could include his taking advantage of a ceremonial requirement for privacy in order to proposition Tamar.²⁸⁶

As already noted,²⁸⁷ there are sound reasons to interpret *habbiryah* as a cultic healing ritual. It is also logical to conclude that if Tamar's ritual is associated with the worship of an Aramaean god or goddess, and given the deep suspicion with which the prophets always view these rituals, a post-exilic author-redactor might see the expediency of removing from the text the more obvious signs that King David's daughter performs such rituals. The narrator's focus is, after all, on Amnon's assault as the catalyst for enmity between David's sons. Therefore

²⁸⁴ Millgram, *Four Biblical Heroines and the Case for Female Authorship: An Analysis of the Women of Ruth, Esther and Genesis 28* (Jefferson Nth. Ca: McFarland and Co. Inc., 2008), 238; William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 59.

²⁸⁵ Reis, "Cupidity," 48.

²⁸⁶ "Often...secrecy is part of the traditional ritual procedure used in approaching the gods for help, while at the same time shielding a person's private affairs from the inquisitive eyes of his neighbours." Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink, *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 17. See also reference to Bedouin women's secret traditions in the thesis' conclusion: "Conclusion," 453.

²⁸⁷ See "The Motif of *Habbiryah*", pp. 378-81.

it is possible that rare terms used in the description of Tamar's work (e.g. *habbiryah*, *l'biboth* and the pouring from a *masreth*) are remnants of partially-erased references to an early tale from David's court in which a religious ritual is described in greater detail than in the extant text.

Having sifted through the above information from a variety of reliable sources, I believe that there is enough evidence to propose that Tamar, the daughter of a princess of Geshur, is a practitioner of a religious ritual which is most likely to be of Aramaean origin. As already mentioned,²⁸⁸ ANE archaeological records discovered and researched over the last century reveal that it is not uncommon practice for an ANE king's daughter to be appointed high priestess of the national cult. On this basis, Bledstein argues her theory that Tamar is appointed by King David as a priestess of YHWH.²⁸⁹ While she makes a strong case for this possibility, another hypothesis is that Tamar has been trained for a priestly office associated with the worship of an Aramaean deity. This particular cult and its practices could have been brought to the palace by her mother, Princess Maacah, daughter of King Talmi of Geshur, to become synchronised with - or tolerated alongside of - the worship of YHWH.²⁹⁰

Since most commentators agree that Israelite scholars must have gathered, recorded and edited the history of their nation over decades and centuries, it is

²⁸⁸ See above in this section, p. 436.

²⁸⁹ Bledstein, "Tamar and the Coat," 78.

²⁹⁰ The book of Kings repeatedly attests to the widespread practice of Canaanite religion in Israel during the pre-exilic years (e.g. 1 Kings 11:1-4, 14:9, 16:31-33).

understandable and even expected that later redactors, in devotion to YHWH, should choose to modify details of a pagan rite from the pages of Israel's sacred history. After searching the relevant ANE literature, Marc Zvi Brettler concludes,

Thus it is not simply that the biblical authors were blind to women's rituals or thought they were irrelevant...there was likely a substantial body of ritual, including incantation prayers, which was simply abhorrent to them, and was not recorded for that reason.²⁹¹

In the same vein, Phyllis A. Bird states that, "Women's rites may even be unknown to men, who have no part in them,"²⁹² and Jo Ann Hackett adds that in pre-exilic Israel, "women could have performed priestly or quasi-priestly duties only in the peripheral religious culture."²⁹³ Bird's research also leads her to conclude that when the religion of YHWH is centralised and more closely aligned with the monarchy, cultic roles which may once have been assigned to women are gradually either limited or removed.²⁹⁴ This means that in the early years of Israel's monarchy before the Yahwist cult is well-established, women's heterodox cultic activity is probably tolerated or even valued. Later, either before or after the exile, Yahwist redactors excise parts of the ritual from

²⁹¹ Brettler, "Women and Psalms: Toward an Understanding of the Role of Women's Prayer in the Israelite Cult," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson and Tikva Frymer-Kensky (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 55.

²⁹² Phyllis Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 13.

²⁹³ Hackett, "1 and 2 Samuel," 94.

²⁹⁴ Bird, "Place of Women", 14.

Tamar's story. *Habbiryah* is one of a few obscure terms which may be innocuous enough to leave in place.²⁹⁵

While 2 Samuel 13:5-9 contains some interpretative difficulties over the rare terms relating to the food and its preparation - difficulties which may have been aggravated by later redaction - the repeated reference to Tamar's garments is another noteworthy textual feature because it is related to the discussion concerning *habbiryah*.

As noted in the discussion on motifs,²⁹⁶ both the *k^etonet passim* and the *m^e'iy* are garments associated with religious and/or priestly activities. This connection underscores the perception endorsed in this dissertation that Tamar's performance in Amnon's room has religious significance. In other words, Bledstein can say with a degree of confidence that *habbiryah* is a cultic ritual, and that the identification of the *k^etonet passim* and the *m^e'iy* as garments associated with royal and cultic roles is good reason to propose that Tamar is a "royal priestess whose duties included some sort of divine inquiry/ritual purification for ill members of the royal house".²⁹⁷

Through the visual image of the *k^etonet passim*, the destruction of Tamar's life is symbolised by the tearing of the once magnificent garment, now stained with ash and probably with blood. The garment is testimony to how much she has

²⁹⁵ See "The Motif of *Habbiryah*," pp. 379-80.

²⁹⁶ See "Motif of the Ceremonial Robes," pp. 381-383.

²⁹⁷ Bledstein, "Tamar and the Coat", 78.

lost, especially the loss of her religious role and the status which accompanies the role. This means that the series of offences perpetrated by Amnon against Tamar are indeed acts of sacrilege.²⁹⁸ If the cultic ritual hypothesis is correct and Tamar is a royal priestess-healer, her remarkably bold condemnation of Amnon's proposal is entirely fitting for a woman in her eminent position. Even Tamar's proposal of a sibling marriage is better understood in the light of her religious status, for a virginal priestess has everything to lose if she is about to be discarded as a rape victim.

If the original record of Tamar's role as a healer-priestess in the royal household were not virtually expunged by Judaism's textual redactors, it is likely that ANE and biblical scholars would have given her story more attention than it has received to date. Certainly the Hebrew Bible has several narratives which feature admirable women like Deborah (Judg. 4:4-10; 5:1-31) and Hulda (2 Kings 22:14-20). As female prophets they have been esteemed in Israel's history because their activities are acceptable within Israel's cultic law.²⁹⁹ In contrast is the manifestly negative portrayal of Queen Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon. It is possible that one of Jezebel's roles is that of a priestess of a Tyrian cult (1 Kings 16:31; 19:2).³⁰⁰ As Gunn and Fewell point out, blame is

²⁹⁸ McCarter translates *n'balah* as "sacrilege" not because of the cultic significance (of which he is unaware), but as a "a violation of the sacred taboos that define and maintain the social structure". McCarter, *II Samuel*, 327-28.

²⁹⁹ Bird, "Place of Women," 9.

³⁰⁰ According to Josephus, the Greek poet Menander (342 – 291 BC) wrote of Jezebel's father Ethbaal as a royal priest of the Tyrian Astarte cult. Josephus, *Complete Works* (trans. Whiston) "Against Apion," 1:18. Ethbaal is mentioned in 1 Kings 16:31b only as "king of the Sidonians."

readily heaped upon Jezebel as a foreign woman apostate.³⁰¹ Jezebel's notoriety could have been the consequence of - or it could have contributed to - the Hebrew Bible's many denunciations against Canaanite religious practices.

With the notoriety of Jezebel's malevolent and murderous behaviour towards Elijah and Naboth (1 Kings 19:1-3, 21:1-16), a problem may have arisen for the compilers of 2 Samuel 13 in deciding for or against retaining details of a pagan cultic ritual by none other than the daughter of David, Israel's greatest king. This difficulty is apparent in 1 Kings 11:1-8 where evidence of non-Israelite religious activity within the royal household of Israel is retained. Rather than condemning the king for permitting foreign cultic practices within his house, the narrator places most of the blame for this situation on Solomon's wives and concubines who "turned away his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11: 4).³⁰² The narrator's silence about the religious activities of David's foreign wives is striking, yet almost certainly his wives would continue to worship their national gods and their practices tolerated or accepted in the royal court.³⁰³

In her "excavations" of the early chapters of Genesis, Ilana Pardes concludes that the priestly writers apparently cannot attribute to Eve the power-filled role of naming her son Seth.³⁰⁴ Similarly, if Tamar is indeed a priestess healer of an

³⁰¹ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 174; Tina Pippin, "Jezebel Re-Vamped," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 196-99.

³⁰² Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 174.

³⁰³ Susan Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 181.

³⁰⁴ Pardes, *Countertraditions*, 57.

Aramaean cult in David's palace, it may be too powerful for the narrator of 2 Samuel to reveal that information in Israel's Holy Scripture. Consequently in the light of his Yahwistic ideology, I propose that the narrator attempts to conceal the cultic activity of the daughter of YHWH's most favoured servant David (2 Sam.7: 14-15; 1 Kings, 11:12-13).

In the light of this research, I therefore contend that Tamar's ritual in 2 Samuel 13 is an important instance of resistance narrative.

The Protest Monologues³⁰⁵

The strands of resistance found in Tamar's two 'monologues' to Amnon are brilliant among the jewels of ancient literature which biblical scholars of the past virtually ignored. Today scholars overwhelmingly honour Tamar, whose uncompromising defiance of Amnon's directive and her attempts to uphold the laws of Israel are rare examples of the verbal skills of an intelligent, rational and outspoken woman in the ancient world who faces her nemesis with dignity and courage.³⁰⁶

Furthermore, Tamar now receives scholarly recognition as a woman whose integrity challenges the status quo. The first brief instance of Tamar's resistance to Amnon's control is passive, and it comes before she has uttered a word.

When told by Amnon to come closer to feed him with her own hand, the

³⁰⁵ I have named Tamar's speeches in verses 12-13 and 16 'monologues' to emphasise the fact that Amnon does not respond to either speech.

³⁰⁶ Alice L. Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines: The Old Testament in Feminist Perspective* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1990), 123; Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 288.

narrator states that although she moves into his inner room, she does not feed him “by hand” as he has demanded.³⁰⁷ Immediately afterwards Amnon grabs and propositions her, and Tamar responds with her first resistance speech.

The structural analysis of the text establishes that Tamar’s initial speech is the story’s centrepiece.³⁰⁸ Refusing to cajole or flatter her assailant, her eloquent, well-reasoned and righteously indignant monologues reveal that Tamar is not easily intimidated. While she may lack the political power of a prince, nevertheless the princess has the self-confidence of one who is accustomed to the respect and deference of others. She demonstrates that she has both a sense of moral propriety and an understanding of her rights. As soon as Tamar perceives Amnon’s secret intention she plays an important role in revealing her brother’s true character, and briskly articulating her opposition to Amnon’s assumption of male superiority and dominance.³⁰⁹

When her monologues are viewed in the light of Tamar’s ‘wise woman’ attributes, the princess is even more impressive. According to Claudia Camp, the role of a wise woman in ancient Israel includes “sagacity, faithfulness [and] a commanding presence.”³¹⁰ Amnon’s contempt for his sister notwithstanding,

³⁰⁷ This moment in verse 10 is surely of little interest to the narrator, but it exemplifies a biblical woman’s use of passive resistance in an age when the power and privileges of patriarchy are never questioned.

³⁰⁸ See “Structure,” pp. 360-61. This challenges Brenner’s assertion that Tamar is marginalised in her own story. However, Brenner does make a valid point given the narrator’s primary interest is in the battle of the brothers. Brenner, “Tamar 2,” 164.

³⁰⁹ Dijk-Hemmes, “Tamar,” 145.

³¹⁰ Claudia V. Camp, “The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1981): 26.

Tamar's words reveal that, although she is young and a *b^etulah*, she is a woman who is used to asserting her royal authority; her two speeches are prime examples of the courage of a resilient and defiant woman of ancient Israel who indignantly refuses to submit to abuse of power.³¹¹

Tamar's first monologue also touches upon a cornerstone of the Mediterranean world namely, the honour/shame culture. When Tamar asks her seducer, "And I, where could I take my shame?" (vs. 13a), her use of the word "shame" in this sentence where she emphasises that she is speaking about herself alone differentiates it from the widespread view in ancient times that shame is a collective burden borne by the collective *beyt 'ab*. Tamar thinks ahead, recognising that if Amnon does violate her she will be set adrift to suffer her shame alone.

After she is raped, Tamar delivers a second monologue in which she insubordinately censures her assailant with an announcement that his move to expel her from his house will compound the suffering caused by the rape itself. "As she was not taken in by his desire, so she is not immobilized by his hate."³¹² Tamar's spirited defiance of her attacker reveals an outstanding quality: of all honoured biblical women only Tamar speaks out against the abuse of women, and she does it with eloquence and passion. She represents the protests and anguish of the thousands of rape victims in the Hebrew Bible whose suffering is

³¹¹ Other defiant and/or strong women include Sarah (Gen. 21:10), Rachel (Gen. 31:14-15), Tamar (Gen. 38:14-25), Jochebed (Exod. 2:2-10) and Deborah (Judg. 4:4-10).

³¹² Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 288.

exposed but who have no voice.³¹³ Tamar is their unofficial spokeswoman, and her cry against injustice in Israel is one of few which have broken the silence shrouding crimes against women.³¹⁴

A striking example of her determination to challenge rather than submit is evident in Tamar's action after she has been raped. Her high-status social and religious positions are lost and her powers are crushed, but she will not disappear without a final gesture. Is it perhaps a gesture of revenge? With her anguished lament sounding through the city streets, with the tearing of her gown, and with the hand that did not feed Amnon placing ashes on her head, "she makes a public gesture of humiliation, which also serves to indict Amnon."³¹⁵ As she exposes his sin to the world, Tamar exemplifies the subversive power of the oppressed.³¹⁶

Because of her status as a daughter of Israel's most famous king, Princess Tamar's monologues and her lament have been preserved in Jewish scripture. Tamar's words on the page indicate that Absalom's attempt to silence her has failed. Instead of silence, Tamar's story has become a testimony to one woman's courageous stand against abuse. The energy which emanates from her

³¹³ Among the voiceless rape victims are Dinah (Gen. 34:), the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19), Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11) and the women taken as spoils of war (e.g. Num. 31:18).

³¹⁴ Other biblical women have also, through action rather than words, broken through the bonds of patriarchy in search of justice. Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah, is an excellent example of a woman using her ingenuity to achieve her goal (Gen. 38:12-26).

³¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 288.

³¹⁶ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin Education, 1972), 34-35; Davies, 96.

words, her qualities of self- belief, “her full respect of her own worth,”³¹⁷ and her confidence as she confronts the predatory Amnon, even the way in which she expresses her grief, all make her an icon of courage, resistance and dignity.

Conclusions

Given the presence of so many textual ambiguities in 2 Samuel 13:1-22, the diversity of scholarly views regarding the story is unsurprising. What is most surprising is that very few scholars have made use of Adrien Bledstein’s 1992 research which explores the text’s affiliation with cultic practices in ANE literature.³¹⁸ Yet the hypothesis that Tamar is a priestess and healer explains a number of hermeneutical difficulties. It also underscores Amnon’s offence as not only sexual abuse but also as an act of sacrilege.

Along with a number of other women’s stories in the Hebrew Bible, the uncovering of strands of resistance narrative gives the audience a glimpse into a world that is almost, but not quite, lost. In exploring Tamar’s story, it has been exciting to find summaries of Bledstein’s research and to discover the fragments of information which appear to link the princess to a religious role in David’s

³¹⁷ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art*, 106.

³¹⁸ See “Retrieval,” p. 430.

palace. Consequently I endorse Bledstein's well-researched claim that 2 Samuel 13:1-22 provides evidence of what appears to be an incompletely excised section of an orally transmitted story or textual narrative about the priestess-healer status of Princess Tamar.

On the basis of Bledstein's claim, therefore, it is my contention that the narrator/redactor of this pericope removes most of what could have been a women's tradition describing a non-Yahwist healing rite – a rite which possibly is brought to Jerusalem by Tamar's mother from the court of King Geshur, an Aramaean. Possibly the narrator finds Tamar's involvement in a foreign cult too much to tolerate.³¹⁹ David's sins are many and can be forgiven, but in the eyes of the narrator, religious syncretism inside the king's household must be abhorrent to a Jew for whom David's devotion to YHWH enshrines him as the greatest of Israel's monarchs. Even if this hypothesis - the idea that David's daughter might be a priestess of an Aramaean cult and therefore unacceptable for the narrator of 2 Samuel 13 - is shown to have too many loopholes to hold scholarly attention, the proposal that some of Tamar's story has been excised from the script is still explicable on a pragmatic level. That is, 2 Samuel is essentially a story about David and his sons, and too many details about Tamar's ceremonial role might well be viewed as an unnecessary addition to the narrative.

³¹⁹ Since biblical writers and editors suppressed folk religion in general, it is unsurprising that the cultic practices of a daughter of David should also be suppressed. Dever, *Did God*, 184. In a generalised hypothesis on this theme, Dijk-Hemmes surmises that "religious traditions which originated with the male leadership elite of Jerusalem were... canonised," and in the process women's religious traditions were erased. Dijk-Hemmes, "Traces," 28-29.

So who benefits from the story-events? While Jonadab's fate is unknown, the other four protagonists do not end well: David's integrity takes another beating, and "Tamar is trapped in a story of male possession and competition."³²⁰ Nor are there benefits for Amnon and Absalom, who are both murdered within a decade of Amnon's assault as Israel flounders in civil war. All in all this is a tale of wretchedness. Only patriarchy 'wins,' if 'winning' is an appropriate word. Despite her best efforts Tamar, with all the excellence in women that she represents, fails. And in failing, the message has been that in an androcentric world it matters not how highly placed a woman might be in society, her gender means that she is 'other': objectified, victimised, and/or disregarded.

If Tamar is indeed a cultic priestess-healer, the significance of the losses that she suffers through the neglect and abuse of the male members of her family is greater than has previously been recognised. For the remainder of her life a young and beautiful woman of royal and cultic lineage is hidden from public view without opportunity to seek redress, without status and without a role. The tragedy is ironically compounded by a situation in which the healer is herself now beyond healing.

Yet there are one or two sparks of hope on the horizon. One is that Absalom has a beautiful daughter whom he names Tamar. This Tamar represents renewal and optimism for the future (2 Sam. 14:27). The other is that the narrator has given

³²⁰ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, 144.

Tamar a voice, and her challenge to Amnon calls for today's audiences to appreciate her mature moral judgment, her ability to foresee the social damage which can be created by one evil act, and her integrity.

Tamar's achievement is unmistakable in her cry for justice as her voice is raised in spirited protest on behalf of every shamed, voiceless and powerless woman in every age who has been subjected to terror, humiliation, abuse, torture and/or murder. We see and hear Tamar draw upon a subversive power which fails to save her but which today can be utilised to heal, inspire and save others. While there is much to mourn about Tamar's end, there is much to honour and inspire in the righteous defiance of this exceptional young woman.