


A tale of two Tamars: Domestic violence in the Hebrew Bible

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Dates:

Received: 24 Nov. 2022

Accepted: 01 June 2022

Published: 07 July 2022

How to cite this article:

Karman, Y., 2022, 'A tale of two Tamars: Domestic violence in the Hebrew Bible', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43(1), a2442. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2442>

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Jacqueline Vayntrub argues that the date-palm root helps us see the link metaphor between two Tamar figures in Genesis 38 and 2 Samuel 13. However, it is more appropriate to see its fruit as the link metaphor, although in a negative way. Their bitter experiences of domestic violence are not as sweet as the date-palm fruit. Tamar's basic right to progeny and motherhood is violated. In the case of David's Tamar, the culture of silence does not allow her to voice her pain and the perpetrator is granted impunity from the inaction of the administrator of justice. To show how domestic violence occurs in both texts and how they imply things important for the paternal authority and the victim to do, I will do a close reading and some word study.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article expands the issue of sexual violence against women, not only physically but also the violation of their basic rights to a decent life because of the unequal power relations based on gender. This study provides a biblical basis for public theology and sociological understanding of domestic violence.

Keywords: date palm; basic rights; victim; gender; impunity; public confession.

Introduction

In a recent article, Jacqueline Vayntrub relates a botanical image in the Genesis Apocryphon to two different Tamar figures in Genesis 38 and 2 Samuel 13 as desirable women who behave like the date-palm (*tāmār*).¹ Vayntrub (2020:310) explains that the botanical image does not centre on its fruit (the image of fertility) but rather on its roots (the image of kinship). In my interpretation, as the date-palm fruit 'contains a high amount of sugar and is very nutritive' (Zohary 1962:288), the image of the fruit is more appropriate, although in a negative way, for reading both Tamars together. Their bitter experiences of violence are not as sweet as the date-palm fruit.

The story of David's Tamar is one of Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* (1984:1–2) in the Hebrew Bible, 'tales of terror with women as victims ... Sad stories do not have happy endings'. Using Trible's definition, the story of Judah's Tamar would not belong to 'texts of terror' because of its happy ending. According to the Mishnah, the two stories of two different Tamars should be read out, but only the first one is interpreted (*Meg* 4:10).² I interpret both narratives critically and intertextually to reveal gender-based violence in which the perpetrators are men in the family. Pietersen (2021) has well demonstrated from the Old Testament narrative and legal texts as to how women live in a culture that makes them disempowered and vulnerable to violence. In this article, I will take it further into domestic violence, which I define as violence perpetrated by family members in unequal gender relations, especially men against women. In the Israelite patriarchy, the highest authority in the family is the father or husband. A girl is under her father's authority until her marriage; a wife is under her husband's authority. The recognised kinship is the lineage of the father (patrilineal) and only male names are listed in genealogy.

Tamar of Judah

Genesis 38 portrays Judah's authority concerning marriage. He chooses his own wife (v. 2) and also chooses Tamar as the wife of Er, his eldest son (v. 6). As a daughter-in-law, Tamar belongs to the Judah family (Westermann 1986:54). Unfortunately, her husband dies before she has become pregnant. He does not consummate his marriage with her pregnancy and, in Jewish tradition, he

1.The Bible translation used hereafter is from TANAKH (The New Jewish Publication Society translation 1985), unless otherwise stated. Abbreviations of the biblical books according to the Contemporary English Version (1995).

2.For the text of Mishnah, see Danby (1933).

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

does it on purpose because he wants his wife to remain beautiful (Sarna 1989:266). By doing so, he just exploits her sexuality and this is a violation of her motherhood. Having a son is related to a wife's dignity. Being a childless widow in Israelite patriarchy is a state of not being blessed (Baab 1962), a humiliation in public (Lk 1:25, NJB). This is Tamar's first bitter experience as a member of the Judah family.

The Israelite law provides a remedy for the problem of a childless widow living with her brother-in-law. A man may not marry his brother's widow (Lv 18:16), which is an unlawful union called abomination (Lv 18:26–30 *to'ēbā*), except within the framework of levirate marriage or *yibbum* (Dt 25:5–10; Lat. *levir* 'brother-in-law'). The man shall share his male seed for his deceased brother by impregnating his sister-in-law. A male descendant is to carry the name of the deceased. If a man refuses to fulfil his levirate duty, he must present his refusal in front of the elders as witnesses and submit to the ceremony of *ḥalitsah* (Dt 25:7–9), then the widow may remarry someone else (Sinclair 1997). Then he shall be publicly humiliated, and his family henceforth shall be known in Israel as 'the family of the unsandaled one' (Dt 25:10), a nickname for a selfish Israelite as well as a demeaning one for his family (Tigay 1996:234).

After Er's death, the levirate duty falls on Onan alone because Shelah has not come of age (v. 8; cf. *Yeb* 4:5–6). The Mishnah stipulates that if a man refuses to consummate a levirate marriage, the property of the deceased brother would go to the father; if that marriage takes place, the man would acquire the title to his brother's property (*Yeb* 4:7). Onan would inherit half of his father's property if Er has no heir; his inheritance would be less than that if his brother has an heir. Thus, some Bible interpreters point to the economic reason as the cause why Onan does not share his seed with Er (Hartley 1992:340; Sarna 1989:267). He is 'selfish' in not sharing an heir with his brother (Brenner 2008:216). Every time Onan sleeps with Tamar, he spills his semen on the ground (v. 9) and, thereby, only exploits her sexuality (Fischer 2012:28). Just being the sex object of Onan is certainly against her desires as a wife, an offense in her personal realm that is difficult to prove. This is her second experience of domestic violence. As Onan 'has infringed his brother's sexual prerogative' (Lv 20:21, NJB), an incestuous relationship, 'a capital offense' (Sarna 1989:267), the LORD takes his life too. The narrator explains the death of Er and Onan in the same way: they have done things very offensive to the LORD, then he takes their lives (vv. 7, 10, NAB). It implies that Tamar is innocent (Wise 2008:228) and not the cause of their deaths (Brenner 2008:216).

As Er's father, Judah is morally responsible to give Shelah to Tamar. As Shelah is already born when Er gets married (v. 6 *wayyiqāh*; NKJV 'Then Judah took ...'), the Mishnah stipulates that he is also a potential levir with a delayed levirate marriage until he is an adult (*Yeb* 2:1–2; 4:6). However, Judah suspects that the deaths of his two sons have something to do with Tamar and he does not want Shelah to suffer the same fate (v. 11). So without being frank to her, Judah has decided

not to give her to his remaining son (v. 26). On the grounds that Shelah is too young to marry, Judah orders her to return temporarily to her biological father while waiting for Shelah to grow up. Thus, Tamar is legally bound to Shelah; she should remain a widow and know no other man until her levirate marriage. Fully trusting Judah's arrangement, she returns to her biological father and puts on her widow's garb for years. After waiting for a long time, she finally realises that Judah does not intend to keep his promise. Shelah has now grown up, yet she has not been given to him as wife (v. 14). For the third time, she is betrayed by her husband's family, now by her father. She is helplessly a victim of betrayal and humiliation from the men in her family who have authority over her body. Her right to progeny and motherhood is violated by men whom she trusts. Having a son for Er is her noble goal to carry on the name of her husband so that his name would not be erased among the Israelites (cf. Dt 25:6).

After his wife's death, Judah takes a business trip to Timnah. Having received information about this trip, Tamar takes off her widow's garb, puts on a veil, and by being dressed as a prostitute,³ she sits by the road that Judah is about to pass (vv. 14–15). She does not want to be recognised and wants Judah to think her as a prostitute (Bar-Efrat 1989:51). The faithful and passive wife is now in action. When Judah sees the 'prostitute', he turns aside to her without realising that it is Tamar (v. 16). Before they have intercourse, she asks about the price of her service. He promises her a young goat that is not available at the time, meaning that what he is doing is 'on impulse' (Sarna 1989:268). With Tamar's previous experience of being betrayed by her father (vv. 11, 14), she now asks for his personal objects as collateral (v. 18 'your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry'). The intercourse takes place in the context of prostitution, although it does not apply to Tamar who is not a prostitute (the narrator in vv. 14–23 deliberately does not make Tamar's name explicit). Having completed her mission, Tamar takes off her veil, puts on her widow's garb again and returns to her biological father (v. 19). Judah fulfils his promise and sends a young goat to get back his personal valuables but only to find that the prostitute is gone and even, according to the testimony of the residents, there has never been any prostitute (vv. 20–21). He assumes that his debt is cancelled.

Three months later, Judah is told that Tamar has become pregnant through having prostituted herself (v. 24). He becomes very angry and sentences her to death for her unfaithfulness to Shelah. He orders her to be burned alive. This is the climax of the domestic violence experienced by Tamar. On the way to his father, she sends word to him, 'I am with child by the man to whom these belong ... Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these' (v. 25). He immediately recognises those personal belongings as his and

3. It remains unclear whether *zonā* (v. 15) and *q'dēšā* (vv. 21–22) 'are considered identical or merely similar' (Kornfeld 2003:542), but it is noteworthy that the LXX assigns the same word *pornē* to both Hebrew terms (cf. RSV, NJB, NKJV). As there is no evidence that cultic prostitution ever existed in the ancient Near East, instead of translating *q'dēšā* (v. 21–22) as a temple prostitute, Athalya Brenner (2008:218) translates that Hebrew term as a courtesan, an attempt 'to add dignity to a simple sexual transaction by giving it a cultic meaning'. Perhaps, *q'dēšā* is a Canaanite notion or that term is deliberately used 'to avoid embarrassment' (Sarna 1989:269).

admits, 'She was right and I was wrong [*šādqā mimmenni*], since I did not give her to my son Shelah' (v. 26, NJB). Instead of understanding this judicial statement that his guilt is greater than hers (Kline 2016:122; NIV, RSV, NASB 'she is more righteous than I'), it is a confession that 'she rather than he is in the right' (Ringgren & Johnson 2003:259; cf. 1 Sm 24:18 *šaddiq 'attā mimmenni* 'you are right, not I'). Not only does Judah admit that he has misjudged Tamar and is now rehabilitating her reputation, but he also admits that he is the guilty one (Hamilton 1995:450; Wenham 1994:369; Westermann 1986:55). This is Judah's public confession (Fischer 2012:28–29; Zornberg 1995:327).

The narrator's comment that Judah 'had no further intercourse with her' (v. 26, NJB) indicates that their intercourse is 'problematic' (Doane 2020:246). If it happens again, his sexual relationship with her would be categorised as incest (Lv 18:15), a capital offense (Lv 20:12).

According to the Mishnah, levirate marriage between a father-in-law and his daughter-in-law is forbidden (*Yeb* 1:1). With Judah deliberately avoiding an incestuous relationship (Hamilton 1995:451; Hartley 1992:296), the narrative reaches its climax (Westermann 1986:55). Thus, his public confession proves effective in breaking off the potentially incestuous relationship if the act were to be repeated, as well as in preventing repeated violence against Tamar, for she is now a legitimate mother to the house of Judah. This story of Tamar has a happy ending. A childless widow now gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah. Whether Judah is Tamar's father-in-law or her husband is not the question. Despite her experiences of sexual abuse by Er and Onan, finally the threat of being burned alive by Judah, the non-Israelite Tamar is remembered as part of Israel's ancestry.

Tamar of David

The driving force of the preceding narrative is the childless son of Judah but in the following narrative, problems arise among the children of David (2 Sm 13:1–22). Amnon is the crown prince, David's firstborn by his wife Ahinoam (2 Sm 3:2; 1 Chr 3:1). Absalom and Tamar are born to Maacah, daughter of King Talmi of Geshur (2 Sm 3:3). The beautiful Tamar is truly a royal descendant from both her father's and her mother's side.

Amnon is 'infatuated with' Tamar (2 Sm 13:1), a fatal attraction that endangers her (Müllner 2012:155). He becomes 'sick' as she is a virgin and it seems impossible for him to do anything to her (v. 2). As a princess, her daily life resembles being held in seclusion until she meets her future husband. Knowing Amnon's frustration, Jonadab, his friend, a son of David's brother Shimah, advises him to pretend to be sick and to have no appetite in order to make his father visit him (vv. 3–5). Amnon asks his father's permission to let Tamar visit him and prepare something to eat in his sight. At her father's request, she visits her sick brother and makes a couple of cakes in his sight. She takes the pan and sets the cakes out before him, but he will not eat unless she herself

serves him. After he tells everyone in the room to leave, she serves her brother, but he grabs her and asks her to sleep with him. She refuses and warns him, 'No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!' (v. 12, NRSV). If he rapes her, he commits *n^ebālā* ('anything so vile'; ed. Clines 2001:595 'outrage'), and is categorised as 'one of the scoundrels' (v. 13 *nābāl*). Here is a Hebrew pun: *nābāl* is the one who commits *n^ebālā*, 'someone who has seriously damaged the community of Israel through a sexual transgression' (Marböck 1998:163).

Tamar proposes an honourable way for Amnon to get her father's approval to marry her (v. 13). Indeed, the use of sibling vocabulary in this narrative is striking and suggests that the best way to read it is in the context of a sibling relationship. In relation to Absalom, Tamar is his sister (vv. 1, 20, 22 '*āhot*') and Absalom is her brother (v. 20 '*āh*'). In relation to Amnon, Tamar is his sister (vv. 2, 5, 6, 11) and Amnon is her brother (vv. 7, 8, 10, 12, 20). Bible interpreters differ on the seriousness of Tamar's proposal: such marriage is not incestuous (Hertzberg 1964:323–324) and that proposal is just a time-buying tactic (McCarter 1984:324). However, the problem at stake does not seem to be a legal or forbidden relationship but *n^ebālā* (v. 12), 'not only just the transgression of fundamental social or religious principles but in the consequent violation ... of the Israelite community' (Marböck 1998:167). Under such an imminent threat of rape, Tamar would naturally do her best to use every possible means to buy time. And Amnon's crime in the first place is not incest but rape, 'which is reprehensible at all times, but particularly so when it involves a brother and a sister' (Bar-Efrat 1989:240). Overcome by lust, he overpowers her and refuses to listen to her proposal.

Unfortunately, Tamar lives in a rape culture in which rape is a way of expressing male dominance (cf. 2 Sm 12:11; 16:22). Having made her the object of his desire, now Amnon makes her the object of his hatred, which is greater than his desire (v. 15). He expels her, but she warns him that her expulsion is 'worse than the first injury' (NAB) he has done to her; again 'he would not listen to her' (v. 16). So far, Amnon always calls Tamar his sister (vv. 5, 6, 11), only to cover up his lust, but once his lust has been satisfied, he calls her 'that woman' (v. 17). She puts dust on her head and rends her long robe, the kind of garment worn by the king's unmarried daughters. She also puts her hands on her head and walks away, 'screaming loudly' (*zā'āq*) as she goes (v. 19). This *zā'āq* is not only a public expression of her pain and despair, but also an appeal for aid and a complaint against an injustice (Bar-Efrat 1989:271), a call 'with utmost urgency for the intervention' of the authority (Hasel 1980:117). However, Absalom's response is to tell her to keep silent and not think about the outrage she is experiencing (v. 20). This is her second experience of violence (Müllner 2012:150), having to keep silent and remain 'a desolate woman' (NIV, N/RSV) for the rest of her life in Absalom's house. Because she is no longer mentioned in the Bible, it is not impossible that she will take her own life out of desperation, but it will not be the LORD, who takes her life as in

the case of Er and Onan (Gn 38:7, 10). Absalom names his only daughter Tamar (2 Sm 14:27),⁴ probably in memory of his ill-fated sister (McCarter 1984:350).

Upon hearing all this, David is 'greatly upset' (v. 21). Pietersen (2021:6) interprets David's strong emotion as shame for the loss of Tamar's virginity. However, the central issue here is not so much the loss of virginity as the use of force. The element of force is indicated by the Hebrew root *'nh* (v. 12, N/RSV, N/KJV, NJB, NIV; v. 14, JPSV, NKJV, N/RSV). Indeed, the use of force is not the only element of rape according to the current definition of international law as emphasised by Dubravka Šimonović (Preturlan 2021), the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women:

The use of violence or force shows lack of consent, but it is not a constitutive element of the crime of rape. Lack of consent by the victim should be at the center of all definitions of rape.

This definition fits perfectly with the narrative text that the case of Tamar in the first place is rape. Even the recurrent use of sibling vocabulary in this narrative 'does not necessarily point to incest but rather to the lack of fraternal feelings, on the part of Amnon' (Anderson 1989:175). He is a *nābāl* (scoundrel) because he lacks fraternal feelings in the worst sense; raping his sister is *n^obālā* (outrage).

David is greatly upset but keeps silent, without 'a word to Amnon, good or bad' (v. 21). We do not know whether he condemns Amnon's outrage. It becomes clear later that his sadness for Amnon's death outweighs his upset. He rents his garment, lies down on the ground, weeps bitterly and mourns a long time (2 Sm 13:31, 36, 37), but there is no mention of his tears for Tamar (cf. 2 Sm 12:21–22 tears for his unnamed baby). It takes three years for him to accept Amnon's death and the presence of Absalom in the palace (2 Sm 13:38–39). The explanation of his 'inaction' (Bar-Efrat 1989:277) regarding Amnon is provided by several ancient texts, such as the Septuagint, the Old Latin translations, Josephus (*Ant* 7:173)⁵ and the Hebrew text of the Qumran (McCarter 1984:319–320). Several modern Bible versions adopt the Septuagint reading that describes his special affection for Amnon as his first son (v. 21; NRSV, NJB, NAB). Again, this is a wrong manifestation of affection in David's family.⁶ David's affection for Amnon makes him a weak king, unable to act justly (v. 21). An Israelite king is expected to be the administrator of justice. The narrative mentions David's fatherhood once (v. 5 by Jonadab) but his kingship thrice (vv. 6, 21 by the narrator; v. 13 by Tamar). Amnon receives impunity because the king does nothing, 'The father identifies with the son ... male has joined male to deny justice for the female' (Trible 1984:53–54). David's inaction contrasts with Absalom's hatred for Amnon (*Ant* 7:173 'Absalom watched for a fit opportunity of revenging'). Absalom hates Amnon

4. This text does not contradict another text that mentions Absalom's three sons (2 Sm 18:18), if it is assumed they died in infancy (Auld 2011:544; McCarter 1984:407).

5. For the text of Josephus, see Whiston (1995).

6. The other *agapaō* has Amnon as the subject (vv. 1, 4), but this affection for Tamar turns to hatred (v. 15).

not because of the latter's hatred for Tamar (v. 15), but because he has 'violated his sister' (v. 22) without being punished. He later dies at the hands of Absalom (2 Sm 13:32).

A tale of domestic violence

It is noteworthy that three biblical women are introduced in the same way *ušmā tāmār* 'and her name is Tamar' (Gn 38:6; 2 Sm 13:1; 14:27), a name that would evoke bitter memories of domestic violence.

The first Tamar is betrayed and sexually exploited by her brother-in-law who is supposed to give her an offspring (Gn 38:9). Her way of getting offspring is unconventional but not incestuous (Fischer 2012:29). Her creativity and courage are commendable because she tries hard to carry on her husband's name, but she is almost burned alive by her father-in-law (v. 24), although the latter confesses in public his misjudgement and unfair treatment of her (v. 26). That public confession rehabilitates her and opens up a future for her. Her born twins are counted as Judah's sons and parts of the Israelite ancestors (cf. Gn 46:12; Nm 26:20; 1 Chr 2:4–6; Mt 1:3). The women of Bethlehem praise her as the ideal prefigurement of Ruth (Rt 4:12). In the New Testament, Matthew refers to her as an ancestress of Jesus (Mt 1:3).

The fate of the second Tamar is different being not remembered as part of Israel's history. Throughout the narrative, she becomes an object of men: Amnon's object of rape, Absalom's object of protection and the object of an unfortunate event in David's eyes. She lives in a culture of silence that perpetuates domestic violence and impunity for its perpetrator. Just in her screaming publicly (2 Sm 13:19) does she become an independent subject. In a society that tends to cover up domestic violence and silence the voices of pain, voicing bitter experiences is necessary.

The reading of both narratives together reveals domestic violence at the structural level and its resistance at the practical level. At the structural level, both Tamars live in a traditionally patriarchal culture with gender inequality and male domination over female. Because the female position is structurally weaker, they are vulnerable to domestic violence by their family men who are supposed to protect and support them. That violence tends to be covered up so as not to embarrass the family. Here is the importance of paternal assertiveness to condemn and discontinue domestic violence by openly admitting guilt (Judah's example) or not allowing impunity (David's bad example). However, paternal assertiveness is not enough at the practical level. Female victims need to take the initiative to speak up, to fight for their violated rights (first Tamar), at least to voice publicly their bitter experiences (second Tamar). The family and the community must be able to provide space for the painful expression of women victims of violence. Although modern laws have guaranteed women's right to voice their pain because of domestic violence, their silence continues because of hidden pressures from patriarchal structures that are insensitive to women's abuse and suffering.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Prof. Joas Adiprasetya for the support in conducting this research.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

Y.K. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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