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# ‘Hush-hush’: Hearing the Silent and Silenced Screams of Bathsheba and Tamar in 2 Samuel 11 and 13

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**Abstract**

*In the narrative accounts in 2 Samuel 11-13 (better known under the titles ‘David Commits Adultery with Bathsheba’ and ‘Amnon and Tamar’) the intersection of the stories lie in their common, but often overlooked or perhaps rather covered-up theme – that of rape. In 2 Samuel 11, King David sees, sends for and rapes Bathsheba while her husband is at war. Likewise, in 2 Samuel 13 David’s son, Amnon, cannot contain his infatuation with his half-sister Tamar and rapes her. Different circumstances, but the same act of violence.*

*These events played out in a patriarchal society where men were the power holders over women. This applied even more to kings and princes who were used to getting their way.*

*It appears that the story of Bathsheba transgresses that of Tamar since Tamar protests vehemently before and after Amnon rapes her, while Bathsheba is never said to have spoken a word of protest. Throughout history, Bathsheba has often been portrayed as an adulterer or, at the very least, as consenting to David having sex with her.*

*This paper explores the two different contexts and argues that Bathsheba screamed just as loudly as Tamar did, however, if she had allowed the sounds to escape her lips, she would have had more to lose. She did not dare speak up. (Sadly, she nevertheless lost what she wished to protect.)*

*Today #MeToo gives a voice to the Tamars who are silenced when trying to speak up and to the Bathshebas who keep silent to stay safe.*

**Keywords:** 2 Samuel 11-13; Bathsheba; Tamar; David; Amnon; Rape; Protest; #MeToo

## Introduction

Throughout the ages, countless women have been the survivors or victims of rape.[1] Statistics show that more often than not, these women remain voiceless.[2] The #MeToo movement, which was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke and quickly gained ground as a movement of empowerment across the globe in its aim to “interrupt sexual violence”,

[1] I want to acknowledge that not all women who have been raped are survivors – an excessive number of victims do not survive this brutal assault on their bodies.

[2] In South Africa alone “it is estimated that 90% of all rapes are not reported to the police”. Jackie Nagtegaal, ‘The Cost of Rape: Seeking Justice in South Africa’ *Daily Maverick* (7 September 2018).

provides a space where survivors of rape can disclose their experiences and experience healing, where they have a voice.[3]

This paper explores two Old Testament narratives where women are raped. There are various reasons for the choice of narratives:

- They are narrated in the consecutive unfolding of a plot, spanning 2 Samuel 11-13.
- The narratives are connected to each other through the relationship of the male characters – father and son.
- Both describe the act of rape, though the contexts and manner in which it happens are different.
- The reactions of the survivors are very different – and herein lies the main focus of the paper: the way in which the one narrative seemingly transgresses the other, how the voice of the one survivor challenges the voicelessness of the other.

Applying the methodology of biblical narrative exegesis and hermeneutics, this paper offers a comparative study between the texts of 2 Samuel 11 and 13. It considers the similarities and the differences in the two narratives. From a contemporary perspective, I then argue that, whilst Bathsheba and Tamar lived a very long time ago, their silent and silenced voices did not fade away forever. The #MeToo Movement opens a way for biblical scholars to reinvigorate the voices of protest of survivors of rape in the stories of the Bible.

## What's in a name?

"Hush-hush ..." There is a very real sense in which this paper transgresses its topic in the choice of the opening words in the title. It lies in the repetative use of the exclamation "hush!" that introduces the theme as a narrative about two women who should not speak out about being raped.

I am not the only one guilty as charged. Throughout the ages of translating these ancient texts, numerous Bible translators have chosen titles that cover up the crimes of rape committed against Bathsheba and Tamar. The majority of English Bible translations have titles that are either misleading ('David Commits Adultery with Bathsheba') or very vague ('David and Bathsheba' and 'Amnon and Tamar').[4] In the case of 2 Samuel 11, I will give the translators the benefit of the doubt – it seems that many scholars do indeed believe that this was a case of adultery.[5] However, in this paper, I add my voice to the group of scholars who interpret the David and Bathsheba incident not as a romantic rendezvous but as a case of power rape.[6] Why the events in 2 Samuel 13 are generally introduced by the heading 'Amnon and Tamar' is not clear since scholars agree that it recounts the story of a clear case of violent rape.

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3 MeToo. https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history. *The Guardian* online news website has a standing #MeToo movement page that is populated with numerous articles every month on what is happening globally on the #MeToo front (https://www.theguardian.com/world/metoo-movement).

4 I consulted 23 Bible translations and the number of these titles far outweigh any others.

5 E.g. Alter (1999), Bailey (1990), McKenzie (2000) and Halpern (2001).

6 Among those who do not shy away from using the word *rape* are Ademiluka (2021), Andruska (2017), Bosman (2021), Goldingray (2000), West (2021) and Zucker & Reiss (2016).

The most significant differences between the two narratives for the purpose of this paper, are the ways in which the two women's reactions, both in actions and words, are portrayed. There are discrepancies that baffle the reader: If both were cases of rape, why did the two women react so differently from each other? Why did Bathsheba seem to consent, since she did everything at the bidding of the king? Why did she not speak up? Why did she not speak out? Where was her "No!"? As for Tamar, who did speak up and out with a very clear "No!" – Why did she grow silent? Why did she allow her voice and herself to wither away in the house of her brother Absalom? Why do we never hear of her again (except in verse 32, where Jonadab refers back to Amnon raping Tamar)?

More important than the differences are the similarities between the two events. The differences are (at least partly) due to the different contexts of the women. The paper will move through the differences to their shared communality, indeed to their shared screams of injustice, whether voiceless, or loud and clear in the beginning but fading into a soundless void at the end. I will first turn to the events that transpire in 2 Samuel 11 and argue the case of rape. This will set the stage for what happened sometime later and is recounted in 2 Samuel 13.

## Bathsheba is raped by David[7]

### *The event*

King David of Jerusalem was a man of action, whether on the field of battle or in the area of taking women for himself. At the beginning of 2 Samuel 11, David, contrary to his nature, refrains from action in the field and stays behind whilst sending his men to war.[8] However, this decision of his sets the ball rolling for his other habitual action – to yet again take a woman,[9] in this case, another man's wife. Note the consecutive verbs of David's actions in 11:1-4a:

> David *sent* Joab with the army to fight in the war.
> He himself *stayed behind* in Jerusalem.
> One evening he *got up* from his bed, *walked around* on the roof of the palace and *saw* a woman bathing.[10]

After the narrator informs us at this point that the woman was very beautiful, he recounts the actions of David further:

> David *sent* someone to ask about the woman.

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7 I specifically choose to foreground the women in my headings of these sections so as to sensitise readers right from the start, to humanise Bathsheba and Tamar as women with identities, even if they were faced with the inequalities and injustices of the patriarchal society in which they lived. Higgins does the same by discussing 2 Samuel 13 as 'The story of Tamar and Amnon' in Ryan S. Higgins, He would not hear her voice: from skilled speech to silence, in 2 Samuel 13:1-22', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36/2 (2020):25-42 (specifically 25 and 27).

8 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 273.

9 See David Zucker & Moshe Reiss, David's wives, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46/2 (2016):70-78.

10 All translations from the biblical texts are the author's own.

After being informed of her identity as "Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite", the pace picks up and lives are ultimately taken (charge of) and changed forever in half a verse:

> he *sent* messengers, he *took* her, she came and he *lay* with her [had sex with her].[11]

At this point, there is a second bit of background information in 11:4b: Bathsheba was in the process of purifying herself from her menstrual uncleanness. Then the story continues: Bathsheba returned to her house, she conceived and she sent word to David: "I am pregnant". This is the first and the last time that we hear the voice of Bathsheba in this narrative.

### *A case for rape*

While numerous scholars maintain that this event speaks of an adulterous affair between David and Bathsheba, others do not go so far but still place (at least partial) blame for what happens at the feet of Bathsheba. They offer various reasons. Some say that Bathsheba should have known better than to bath herself on the rooftop of her house. She wanted to seduce the king.[12] Others reason that when David sent messengers to fetch Bathsheba from her house, she did not have to be persuaded, forced or dragged; she did not protest or scream; she simply came at his bidding. Furthermore, David does not seem to have used any physical force, as in other accounts of rape in the OT. As one action leads to another and leads to the next, it all seems just too easy. Bathsheba's cooperation gives her consent away.[13]

Abasili finds proof of Bathsheba's guilt in the terrible outcome of the event where God punishes David through the death of the child who was born from this sexual act.[14] Hence, David and Bathsheba are seen as partners in crime, and both are punished. This line of reasoning does not make sense at all. Firstly, the text states clearly in 11:27 that what *David* had done was wrong in the eyes of Yahweh, with no mention of Bathsheba at all. Furthermore, the prophet Nathan is appointed to admonish *David* over his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam 12). Yet again, Bathsheba is not implicated in the charge. And lastly, to argue that the death of an infant child presupposes the guilt of the mother at the time of conception, cannot be accepted. There is no evidence for this line of reasoning.

A number of counter-arguments can be made to refute the arguments for Bathsheba's seduction of or willing submission to David. It is possible that Bathsheba did not know that the king did not accompany his men to the battlefront. The people were used to the king going out before his men. The fact that he stayed behind was an exception, not to be expected. Even if the news did travel, in a patriarchal society the women would have been amongst the last to be informed.

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[11] The action verbs on the part of David (as subject) clearly indicate that he took full control of the situation, the initiative was his. Moshe Garsiel, The Story of David and Bathsheba, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55 (1993):255.

[12] E.g. Randall Bailey, *David in love and war* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 89.

[13] E.g. Alexander Abasali, Was it rape? The David and Bathsheba pericope re-examined, *Vetus Testamentum* 61/1 (2011):11; Bailey, *David in love and war,* 88.

[14] Abasali, Was it rape?, 12.

Though the text says nothing about Bathsheba protesting to being summoned by David, it also says nothing of a prior acquaintance or any emotional attachment. We do not read that Bathsheba eagerly rushed to the palace. With the matter-of-fact statement of consecutive actions, without any emotional tone, we get the impression that orders were being performed and Bathsheba simply obeyed the king's command. The reason for her summoning might well have been unknown to her. Her husband was at war, fighting on behalf of King David. Perhaps she feared that something terrible might have happened to Uriah and that the king wanted her to come to the palace to receive the dire news?

When told of Uriah's death at the end of chapter 11 (indirectly but primarily by the hand of David, who could not cover up the rape successfully), we read: "When *the wife of Uriah* heard about the death of *Uriah, her husband*, she mourned over *her lord*." In one short sentence, Batsheba's relationship with Uriah is mentioned three times! This is a significant indicator of the importance of the relationship.[15] It is also the only place in the text where we get an inside view of Bathsheba's emotions – and the only reference to emotions in the chapter at all. She does not merely go through the motions of a mourning ritual for someone for whom she feels nothing. She does not merely mourn her *husband*. He was her *ba'al*, a Biblical Hebrew term that conveys the meaning of "lord".

After David has sex with Bathsheba, the text merely states that she returns to her home. We read nothing of her lingering in the room or palace of the king, nothing of a caring conversation. After David gets what he wanted from her, she is free (probably expected) to return to where she came from. For David it was an encounter with no strings attached – or so he thought. In the days and the weeks after this encounter, we read of no further engagements between David and Bathsheba. The first time he hears from her again is when "the woman" (not even called by her name Bathsheba) informs him of her pregnant state. (The narrator strategically alludes to this dooming outcome when he conveys the time of Bathsheba's menstrual cycle in 11:4b. At the time of David's "taking" of her, she was ready to conceive.)

There is much to be said in defence of Bathsheba, who has often been made out to be the seductress and main accomplice, whom David could not refuse, or a partner in the sin of adultery. I now shortly turn to the character of the king himself. David was a powerful king, used to getting what he wanted. Bathsheba was not the first woman who belonged to another man but was then taken by David.[16]

In 2 Samuel 11:2, we read that the woman who David sees from his rooftop is beautiful. The narrator speaks from the eye of the beholder (David), and it is specifically that which David beheld, that put the rest of his actions, culminating in the rape of Bathsheba (and the death of Uriah), into motion.[17] Even after David inquires and hears that this woman is not available since she is married to Uriah, he does not refrain from

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15 Elna Solvang, *A Woman's place is in the house* (London: Sheffield, 2003), 134.

16 David also took Abigail, the wife of Nabal, to be one of his wives (1 Sam 25:40). He attained this by withholding violence against her husband Nabal. See David Zucker & Moshe Reiss, David's wives, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46/2 (2016):70; David Firth, David and Uriah, *OTE* 20/2 (2008):323.

17 Kozlova does not mince her words when she describes David's actions as "[t]owering over her physically and socially, he fancies her, sends for her, and rapes her". Ekaterina E. Kozlova, 2 Samuel and the architecture of poetic justice, *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 22/4 (2022):3.

sending for her, and when she comes, taking her and having sex with her. At this point in the paper, it does not seem appropriate to use the term *laying with* or *having sex with* her anymore. The case of rape is clear: David sends for Bathsheba, takes her and rapes her. The case is clearly stated, but certainly not closed. What happens afterwards is a series of tragic events.

2 Samuel 11 ends with the phrase: "This thing that David had done, was evil in the eyes of Yahweh." God's verdict is against David, not against Bathsheba. This becomes even clearer in chapter 12, where the prophet Nathan is sent to expose David's abuse of power in the greedy act of rape and, consequently, murder.

### *Bathsheba's silent scream*

> *Hush-hush myself, for he is your king and you a lowly woman.*
> *Hush-hush myself, for he has done it before and gotten away with it before.*
> *Hush-hush myself, for your husband's life is at stake.*

In 2 Samuel 11, we hear Bathsheba's voice only once: "I am pregnant."[18] This short phrase is laden with meaning. As the narrative continues, more meanings are added. It carries the weight of fear, uncertainty, accusation, a plea for help, a verdict, even a death sentence (though not for the perpetrator).

Why did it have to come to this? What if Bathsheba had spoken out earlier? What if she had just said "No!"? I argue that Bathsheba's was a silent scream of protest, a silent No! She could not utter the sounds since her voice was paralysed by fear because of her precarious position vis-à-vis the king. After being summoned and realising that King David's intentions were not honourable Bathsheba would have known that she was not the first woman to become a victim of David's lust[19] – a lust both for power and for sex.[20] Being a man who was used to getting his way, the coast was clear for David to be David yet again. With his men at war he had the power to take the woman he wanted (yes, another one) even though he knew that she was married. Though she was to be violated, she was still a woman in a man's world, at the mercy of her perpetrator, especially since her perpetrator was the "good" King David himself.[21]

Bathsheba's fear of saying "No" may have been intensified further by fear for the safety of her husband, whom she loved. This lord of hers, Uriah, was fighting in a war for the king who had her in his palace. What if she stood up for herself? What if she did not consent? What if she screamed? What might have happened to Uriah?

Nobody knows what Bathsheba thought, why she did not scream. But what we do know is that she lived in a patriarchal society in which the king held the most power. I argue that it is understandable and probable that Bathsheba did not let her No! escape

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18 Robert Alter, *The David story* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 251.

19 David Firth, David and Uriah, *Old Testament Essays* 20/2 (2008):255.

20 Ademiluka interprets the David-Bathsheba narrative, especially the "masculine abuse of power for sexual assault" with the context in Nigeria. See Solomon Ademiluka, Interpreting the David-Bathsheba narrative (2 Sm 11:2-4) as a response by the church in Nigeria to masculine abuse of power for sexual assault, *HTS Theological Studies* 77/4 (2021):1-11.

21 Abasili ironically refers to David as "the 'good' king". Abasali, Was it Rape?, 7.
Also see Zucker on David's abuse of power as the ruler of Israel. Zucker & Reiss, David's wives, 75.

her lips because she knew her place in this society, she especially knew her place in relation to the king with a reputation for taking the women he wanted. Last but not least, she feared for the life of her husband Uriah. In an effort to save his life, she keeps her mouth shut and sacrifices her body. Sadly, she nevertheless loses that which she wished to protect. David gives instructions to his righthand man, Joab, to have Uriah killed in battle. She loses even more. Due to David's sin, the son that she gives birth to dies as well. Bathsheba's is the tragic narration of a woman who gave her all and then lost everything.

## Tamar is raped by Amnon

### *The rape scene*

Like father, like son ... After the rape of Bathsheba, we are confronted by yet another rape. David's son Amnon is so infatuated by the beauty of his half-sister Tamar, that he devises a cunning plan with the advice of his friend and cousin Jonadab, which results in the forceful rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13).[22]

As opposed to his father, Amnon, the firstborn son of David, initially seems to be a man of inaction. Amnon realises that Tamar is out of his reach; the reason given is that she is a virgin (2 Sam 13:2). Strangely, the fact that she is his half-sister, is not given as a reason. Frustrated and sick with love and infatuation, he is "low" morning after morning. Jonadab notices Amnon's depressed state and enquires about it. After being told that the reason for his depressed state is Tamar, cleverly described as "the sister of my brother Absalom" (as if Amnon is trying to create distance between him and Tamar by how he articulates her ties with Absalom rather than himself), Jonadab comes up with a plan of action: "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be sick. When your father comes in to see you, say to him, 'Please let my sister Tamar come in so she can fix some food for me. Let her prepare the food in my sight so I can watch. Then I will eat from her hand'" (2 Sam 13:5).

The next scene (13:6ff) has Amnon lying down on his bed, pretending to be sick, David coming to see him, Amnon's request, and father and king David granting Amnon his wish without further ado. We could say that Jonadab devised the plan, but David set it in motion by sending Tamar to Amnon to prepare food for him.

Now the story picks up pace and gets more action-packed. Even the depressed Amnon is infused with energy to start giving orders and acting when the opportunity arises. Tamar goes to Amnon's house and prepares the food that he requested. But when she takes the pan and places it before Amnon, he refuses to eat. He sends everyone else (the servants) out of the room. Then he orders Tamar to bring the cakes that she had baked to his bedroom so that he can eat from her hand. Tamar does as she is told. Hereafter, the events occur as follows from 13:11-17 (author's literal translation):

> As Tamar brought it to him so that he could eat, he *grabbed* her and said to her: "*Come* [imperative] and *lie* [imperative] with me, my sister!" [forcefully seizing Tamar and commanding her to have sex with him].
> But she said to him: "***No***, my brother! ***Do not*** *humiliate me*, for this is not done in Israel! ***You must not*** do this foolish thing! As for me, where will I go with my

[22] Also see Baruch Halpern, *David's secret demons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 357-358.

> shame? And you, you will be like one of the fools in Israel! Now please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you."

How many No's would it take for Amnon to listen to Tamar?[23] Three tries and an attempt to reason with Amnon was not enough.[24] He overpowers her:

> But **he would not listen to her voice**. He *grabbed* her en he *humiliated* [ענה] her and *lay* with her.

It is ironic that, in Biblical Hebrew, the word ענה is a homonym. Most often it means *to answer*, but in a number of occurrences, it means *to humiliate* with specific reference to the act of rape. With a play on words, we could perhaps translate that "he would not take her 'No' seriously, and he answered by raping her."[25]

> Then Amnon hated her with a very big hate. For the size of the hate with which he hated her, was greater than the love with which he loved her. [It is clear that Amnon's initial "love" for Tamar, was never love at all, but sexual infatuation, lust for her body.[26]] And Amnon said to her: "Get up and go!"[27]

Two imperatives indicating commands. Amnon's treatment of Tamar is beyond dehumanising. Yet she reacts bravely and dares another No!:

> But she said to him: "***No***, for this great evil is worse than the other that you have done with me, by dismissing me." [Meaning: Sending me away like this is even worse than raping me.] But he would not listen to her. He called his male servant and said: "Send this one from upon me to the outside and lock the door behind her!"

At this point, it is crystal clear that Amnon does not regard Tamar in her personhood but speaks of her as "this one". The Biblical Hebrew word זֹאת can also be translated as *this thing* and here this translation does justice to Amnon's dehumanisation of Tamar. Amnon's choice of words "from upon me" is ironic. It creates the impression that he is still playing a game of pretence. First, he pretended to be sick and in need of special care; now he pretends that he has been violated by Tamar and that she must be banished from his presence. Not only that, the servant is commanded to bolt the door behind her. Amnon appears to need protection from Tamar! As Bosman duly argues: "Not only did Amnon

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[23] I got the idea of using the word *No* in this way from the title of Keree Casey's paper, What part of 'no' don't you understand, *Feminist Theology* 18/2 (2010).

[24] See Higgins, He would not hear her voice, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 36/2:30 where he discusses how Tamar used rhetorical skill "to avoid victimization".

[25] See Bosman's discussion in favour of this translation, in Tiana Bosman, Domestic violence in the Old Testament and during the COVID-19 pandemic: A question of identity, *HTS Teologiese Studies* 77/3 (2021):3-4. Also see Ademiluka in support of this argument, in Solomon Ademiluka, A Study of 2 Samuel 13:1-22 as a solution to intimate partner violence in Nigeria, *Journal for Semitics* 28/2 (2019):4.

[26] Also see Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 288; Alter, *The David story*, 265.

[27] Also see Alter, *The David story*, 269.

disgrace Tamar in his violent act of rape – his treatment of her directly after the rape is utterly disgraceful, in Tamar's own experience, worse than the rape itself."[28]

After having read the text, there is no need to argue the case of rape in 2 Samuel 13. It is written all over it.

### *The aftermath*

After the violent rape and subsequent brutal rejection, Tamar, unlike Bathsheba, does not go back to where she came from in silence. She embodies her protest through a mourning ritual – putting ashes on her head and ripping the long robe that she is wearing to pieces. This robe that is "fit for a princess",[29] becomes shreds that expose her pain. She puts her hand on her head and goes on her way, crying for help as she goes.

For an instant, the reader is led to believe that help comes in the form of her other brother, Absalom, for Absalom sees Tamar and asks: "Was Amnon, your brother, with you?" How is it that he guessed right immediately? Perhaps he knew all too well what kind of person Amnon was and what he was capable of.[30] Or perhaps Tamar voiced the violation that clearly in public. But then his shocking response: "Now, my sister, keep quiet, he is your *brother*. Do not set your heart on this thing."

This reaction of Absolom attests to his utter disregard for the fact that Tamar was raped. He prioritises the family relationship between Tamar and Amnon, and in so doing he dismisses the violence perpetrated against her by this very brother. It is as if he is saying: "Stop making such a fuss, Amnon is your brother, after all. What he did to you is not that bad." It is significant that, in Absolom's reaction to Tamar, he does not name the act of rape; he simply refers to it as "this thing". This is already a verbal act of covering up the rape.

Here, the narrative of Tamar, the woman who protested vehemently in the face of her rapist – comes to a tragic end when her future life, if one can indeed call it that, is summarised in 2 Samuel 13:20: "Tamar, desolate, lived in the house of Absalom, her brother."

### *Tamar's silenced scream*

> *Absalom: Hush-hush my sister, for he is your brother.*

In this narrative, Tamar's voice of protest is loud and clear: all-in-all four No's and two attempts to reason with her rapist (one prior to and one after the brutal act). She could not have been more insistent. Yet, Amnon does not listen to her. After her first three

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28 Bosman, Domestic violence in the Old Testament, 4.
For an exposition of the significance of the bolted door, also see Kozlova, 2 Samuel and poetic justice, 6-7.

29 In her provocative paper Van der Walt makes the connection between the dress and the princess. See Charlene van der Walt, Hearing Tamar's voice, *OTE* 25/1 (2012):183. Tamar's dress was the typical garment worn by the king's daughters and is sometimes translated as "a coat of many colours" or "a robe with sleeves". Also see Marvin Sweeney, *1-2 Samuel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 255.
In a public display of grief, Tamar embodies the ancient mourning ritual for the dead (putting ashes on her head, shredding her beautiful robe and putting her hand on her head). This became active symbols of protest in the aftermath of her rape.

30 Sweeney, *1-2 Samuel*, 256.

No's, he answers by raping her; after her fourth No, he answers by referring to her as "this thing" and having her forcefully removed.

Tragically, it is not just the perpetrator who does not listen to Tamar. When hearing the shocking news, her other brother Absalom SILENCES her voice of protest: Since Amnon is her *brother,* she should not dwell on it too much![31] Absalom, who has often been portrayed as Tamar's vindicator or at least the one who took pity on her, is also (or perhaps more so) the first one who silenced her! Yes, he did avenge his sister's rape two years later (2 Sam 13:23-38) when he had Amnon killed; however, I cannot help but question the integrity of his motives. When the opportunity arose for him to rape his father's concubines in a public display of power (on the very same roof from where David observed Bathsheba bathing many years ago!), "Absalom went into [penetrated] the concubines of his father in the sight of all Israel" (2 Sam 16:22).

If seemingly concerned, why does he hush her voice of protest? Why does he allow her to wither away in his house? Why does he rape his father's concubines? Could there be truth in the idea that maybe, just maybe, Tamar's rape presented him with an opportunity, the perfect excuse to get rid of his brother as the main rival in a battle for the throne?

Besides Amnon and Absalom, the names of David and the community can be added to those who did not heed Tamar's voice.[32] To these, I would like to add the narrator who is also culpable of silencing Tamar by ceasing to write about her after the rape event. The reason may be that 2 Samuel 13 is a subsection that forms part of a broader narrative – the narrative of succession. The focus is on the men who rivalled for the position on the throne.[33] The narrator only told Tamar's story insofar as what happened to her had a role to play in the rivalry between Amnon and Absalom. Besides the effect of her rape on the battle between the brothers, she was of no further use to the narrator.

Casey rightfully observes: "Raped by one brother, silenced by another, and unprotected by her father who will not call his son to account for his violent actions, Tamar is left voiceless and silenced—history condemning her to become another forgotten victim of violence justified by its historical context."[34]

## Women getting their voices (back)

Bathsheba, initially the silent one, is depicted as a woman of strong character in her later years.[35] Her voice and her reasoning pave the way for her son Solomon to become the third king of Israel. The voice of Tamar, the one who was very outspoken and clear in her No!, grew silent, desolate in the house of Absalom and we never hear her voice again.

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31 John Goldingray, *Men behaving badly* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000), 268.

32 Van der Walt, Hearing Tamar's voice, 183. Van der Walt further substantiates her argument that this text is also "hushed" by modern day clergy – It is not often read in liturgies, nor is it utilised for preaching.

33 Arnold A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC 11; Waco TX: Word Books Publishers, 1989), 177; Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 286.

34 Keree L. Casey, What part of 'No' don't you understand?, *Feminist Theology* 18/2 (2010):166. Also see the discussion by Eze and Ugwu (2024:4) of the psychological effects of the rape on Tamar as revealed by their exegetical study of the text: Virginus U. Eze & Collins I. Ugwu, 2 Samuel 13:1-22 and the psychological effects of rape in Enugu State, Nigeria, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45/1 (2024):1-6.

35 Zucker & Reiss, David's wives, 76.

However, the story of Tamar has become the object of study for many feminist theologians and through their studies, she is regaining her voice.[36]

These narratives are by no means unique to Bathsheba and Tamar. It has been a recurring pattern throughout the ages. Innumerable women's bodies have been and still are the site of abuse by men in positions of power. I would like to imagine that many of these women voiced the injustices done to them – whether we as readers and hearers today have access to their voices or not. Gerald West does exactly this in a compelling paper in which Ahithophel, David's advisor and also Bathsheba's grandfather, is interrogated by Bathsheba, Tamar and David's concubines (the women who were raped by Absalom in the sight of all Israel) in letters that have not been included in the Bible. In these letters, they call Ahithophel to account and want to know how he could allow the rapes to happen.[37]

Since the founding of the #MeToo movement in 2006 started giving survivors of rape a platform from which to speak up, society at large has become much more aware of the atrocities done to (the bodies of) women. The movement has gained ground globally. Women who may have been in hiding (if only by not speaking out or by physically hiding in fear of being violated again) surfaced and started telling their stories. This was probably happening all along – women telling their stories in spaces where they feel safe like inner circles, letters, books, underground networks. Perhaps Bathsheba, Tamar and David's concubines formed part of such a network?[38]

In my home country, Khwezi (Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo) became one of South Africa's strongest voices in the #MeToo movement. This is the woman who spoke out against Jacob Zuma in 2006 and recounted how he, a father figure throughout her life, raped her when she was 31.[39] Zuma was inaugurated as president of the country three years after the rape trial, in 2009. He may have become president, but he never outlived the public shame of what he did to Khwezi. Her courage in speaking out caused her and her mother to flee for their lives and live in exile in the Netherlands for five years, but the fact is that Khwezi was heard and, even though she died in 2016, her voice, like that of Tamar, still echoes through the world.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have done an in-depth reading of two consecutive Old Testament narratives where women are raped. The perpetrators are a father, the "good" king David, and his son, Amnon. The female survivors of the rapes react very differently – the voice of Tamar challenges the voicelessness of Bathsheba. In my application of biblical

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36 E.g. Van der Walt, Hearing Tamar's voice; Denise Ackerman, *Tamar's cry: Re-reading an ancient text in the midst of an HIV/AIDS pandemic* (South Africa: EFSA, 2001); Ademiluka, A Study of 2 Samuel 13, *Journal of Semitics* 28/2 (2019):1, 10-14. While Gerald West argues that 2 Samuel 13 is not a text normally be read on a Sunday, yet it is a very important text for both "women and men in the context of gender violence". See Gerald West, Exegesis seeking appropriation; appropriation seeking exegesis: Re-reading 2 Samuel 13:1-22 in search of redemptive masculinities, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34/2 (2013):6.

37 Gerald West, Interrogating Ahithophel: Intersecting gender and class in Biblical tText and South African context, in *Terror in the Bible: Rhetoric, gender and violence*, eds. Monica Melanchthon and Robyn Whitaker. International Voices in Biblical Studies Series (Atlanta GL: SBL Press, 2021).

38 Gerald West, personal communication, June 2019.

39 Khwezi's story can be read in: Redi Thlabi, *Khwezi: The remarkable story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2017).

hermeneutics and through a comparative study, possible reasons were sought for the women's distinct reactions.

Having read the stories of two women of ages past and touched on the accounts of David's concubines after them, we are encouraged to keep the protest alive by giving other women who cannot speak out for themselves (anymore) their voices (back). We are called upon to honour these victims and survivors of sexual abuse by remembering them and speaking out on their behalf. Biblical scholars can do this by following the example of West and others (particularly feminist biblical scholars) who hear the female voices of protest in the biblical narratives, even if they are not seen in the pages. Those who are survivors today are encouraged to glean strength from the Tamars and the Khwezis and to help the movement of women who are no longer prepared to be silent or forever silenced, to gain further ground.

Strength is found in the retelling of stories. This paper aimed to do exactly that by retelling the stories of Bathsheba and Tamar – two women whose characters and actions have too often been portrayed incorrectly by the translators, interpreters and preachers of the texts.

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