

Rape in the house of David: the biblical story of Tamar as a resource for transformation

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abstract

In this *profile* we discuss the reading practice of the Ujamaa Centre, a project that uses biblical and theological resources for social transformation. Central to our reading practice is collaboration between socially engaged biblical scholars and 'readers' of the Bible in poor, working-class, and marginalised communities. One of the biblical texts we have collaboratively read is the story of Tamar, one of David's daughters, who is brutally raped by her brother, Amnon. This text, as the *profile* demonstrates, has had a profound impact in faith-based communities, providing resources for resisting abuse and for articulating and owning local life-giving theologies.

keywords

rape, abuse, campaign, liberating, biblical

Introduction

Certain biblical texts are seldom read, and never on a Sunday. The story of the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel chapter 13, though a chapter in the story of the celebrated and revered David, is one such text, which even when it is read, is never read publicly. And yet this text, we have found, has the potential to create a safe and sacred place in which women (and sometimes men) can articulate and own their experiences of sexual (and other forms of) abuse. Tamar's story – for she is clearly the most articulate character in the story – though a story of a brutal rape at the hands of her brother, Amnon, in the household of king David, the renowned Judahite and Israelite king, has been used by the Ujamaa Centre in collaborative acts of reading to construct abuse-resisting and life-giving practices and theologies.

The Ujamaa Centre, a community development and research centre within the School of Religion and Theology in the University of KwaZulu-Natal, began to work with this text in 1996 as part of its work with local communities of the poor, working-class, and marginalised. The Ujamaa Centre brings together socially engaged biblical scholars and theologians with ordinary readers of the Bible (whether literate or not), who share their resources in order to find empowering and liberating ways of living. In 1996 we were asked to facilitate a workshop on the theme of 'Women and the Bible in Southern Africa'. One of the sub-themes was 'Women and violence', and so we chose this text as a potential resource. We were overwhelmed by the response, a response that has included a call to make Tamar's story an integral part of the life of the Christian church.

Contextual Bible study

Doing Bible study in a manner that equalises the power relations between academic and ordinary Bible readers is central to the praxis of the Ujamaa Centre. We call this contextual Bible study (West, 1993). Among the tenets of contextual Bible study are a commitment to begin with an understanding of reality as it is experienced and perceived by poor, working-class, and marginalised sectors, a commitment to read the biblical text corporately and critically, and a commitment to plan together for particular acts of social transformation. Within this, we read familiar biblical texts in unfamiliar ways as well as unfamiliar texts, particularly those texts that have been neglected by the Christian tradition. The story of Tamar is one such text.

Typically, a contextual Bible study begins with a generative theme (Freire, 1970) that emerges from the reality of a particular local community. This theme generates both locally familiar texts and interpretive practices as well as texts and interpretive approaches (from the academy) which are not that familiar. By pooling these resources we strive to hear a transformative word from God for our context.

2 Samuel 13:1-14

In workshops on the theme of violence against women, we often work with the neglected text, 2 Samuel 13:1-22. Having made sure that counsellors are available, we work with the following framework:

2 Samuel 13:1-22 is read aloud to the group as a whole. After the text has been read a series of questions follow.

1. Read 2 Samuel 13:1-22 together again in small groups. Share with each other what you think the text is about.

Each small group is then asked to report back to the larger group and responses are summarised on newsprint. After the reportback, the participants return to their small groups to continue.



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Tamar Workshop in Ugu District 21, Kwa Machi

- 2. Who are the main characters in this story and what do we know about them?*
- 3. What is the role of each of the male characters in the rape of Tamar?*
- 4. How does Tamar respond throughout the story?*

When the small groups have finished their discussion, and this takes considerable time, each group is invited to present a summary of their discussion. If there is time, each group is asked to report on each question, but if time is a constraint then each group is asked to report on only one question. The full report, which the scribe of the group puts up on newsprint, is then displayed for everyone to read at some other time. The reportbacks can also be presented more creatively, by way of drama, poetry or song. The groups then reconvene for further discussion.

- 5. Are there women like Tamar in your church and/or community? Tell their story.*
- 6. What is the theology of women who have been raped?*
- 7. What resources are there in your area for survivors of rape?*

Once again, the small groups present their reportback to the plenary group. Creativity is particularly vital here, as often women find it

difficult or are unable to articulate their responses. A drama or a drawing may be the only way in which some groups can report. Finally, each small group comes together to formulate an action plan.

8. What will you now do in response to this Bible study?

The action plan is either reported to the plenary or presented on newsprint for other participants to study after the Bible study.

In our experience, the effects of this Bible study are substantial. Women are amazed that such a text exists, are angry that they have never heard it read or preached, are relieved to discover that they are not alone, are empowered because the silence has been broken and their stories have been told. As one woman said, 'If such a text exists in the Bible, how can we be silent about these things in the church?' How indeed!

The initial, opening question generates a host of responses as participants share their early impressions of this seldom read text. They readily engage with questions 2, 3 and 4, returning to the text again and again to find out as much as they can about each of the characters, missing nothing. They note the way in which Jonadab, a relative of Amnon's, attempts to draw himself nearer to the potential heir to the throne of David by identifying his restrained lust. Reminding Amnon that he is indeed 'son of the king' (13:4) and thereby implying that he should have whatever he wants, Jonadab provides a plan for the rape of Tamar. The slow pace of the story, with the graphic description of the plan and then its execution, are also picked up as they delve into 13:5-11. David, it seems to them, is somewhat irresponsible, unable to detect that Amnon's request is a ruse (13:6), and so he sends Tamar to be raped (13:7). Whatever restraint Amnon may have had now collapses as he premeditates the rape of his sister (13:9-14).

Women participants, in particular, applaud the clear and careful way in which Tamar approaches her task and her defense. She trusts her brother and willingly serves him while he is sick; and even when she finds herself trapped, she argues articulately with him.

First, she says a clear 'no' (13:12), which should be enough. Second, she reminds him that he is her 'brother' (13:12). Third, she makes it clear that she is not a willing participant and so names what he is doing 'forcing' her (13:12). Fourth, she reminds him of their cultural heritage and communal values: 'for such a thing is not done in Israel' (13:12). Fifth, she declares his intentions to be vile and evil (13:12). Sixth, she appeals to what she hopes is some recognition of her situation, reminding him of the consequences of his actions for her (13:13). Seventh, she then turns the question on him, asking what the consequences of such an act on him will be (13:13). Eighth, she offers him a way out, at considerable cost to herself, suggesting that he speak to the king about marrying her (13:13). Alas, even this most articulate of all biblical women is not listened to, 'and being stronger than she, he forced her and raped her' (13:14).

Even after the rape she does not remain silent, arguing with Amnon again, this time urging him not to abandon her to the consequences of rape on her own (13:16). But the male ego again refuses to hear, and she is forcefully (again) removed (13:16-17).

Tamar's public acknowledgment of the rape (13:19) is met with mixed reactions by women participants as they both applaud her decision 'to go public' and worry at the cost of such a public statement in a patriarchal society. They find some comfort in Absalom's offer of sanctuary, but reject his silencing of her (13:20). Finally, they are appalled by David's empty anger, and his impulse to protect his son (13:21). Clearly, each of the male characters, whether it be David, Amnon, Jonadab, the servants or Absalom, plays a role in the rape of Tamar, though their roles are different.

The point of view of the narrator is interesting, with most participants commenting that this 'male character' (presuming the narrator

to be a male) is surprisingly sympathetic to the concerns of women. They are grateful that he names rape for what it is: a violent assault on a woman (13:14). They are amazed by how articulate Tamar is and find many of her arguments convincing. They especially like the fact that she finds aspects of her cultural and religious heritage potentially liberating, even if they are often used to oppress and dominate. Most of all they are astounded that such a text exists in the Bible, for they find it a remarkable resource with which to raise and discuss rape in their own contexts.

Questions 5, 6, and 7 provide plenty of opportunity for precisely such discussions, with many women finding 'sacred space' to share the unshareable. They quickly discover that they are not alone, and soon the 'Davids', 'Ammons', 'Jonadabs', 'servants', and 'Absaloms' in their own experiences are named. Clearly professional counselling is required in many such situations, and it is irresponsible to proceed without it.

Question 8 provides an opportunity 'to do something about it', and groups come up with wonderfully creative action plans, whether to compose a liturgy for their local church or to challenge the local police station to provide resources for the survivors of rape.

From story to campaign

One of the actions that has emanated from our workshops has been the desire to establish a national campaign within faith-based communities that directly addresses violence against women. In response to this call for action, the Ujamaa Centre launched the Tamar Campaign in 2000. Since then the Tamar Campaign has grown, reaching to almost every part of South Africa and beyond.

Increasingly, the Tamar Campaign has incorporated concerns about HIV/AIDS, with many women contacting us 'to do Bible studies about violence against women and HIV and AIDS'. The Tamar Campaign has clearly struck a cord with ordinary African women, providing both a sacred and safe space within which and the resources with which to talk about these related issues. Patriarchy, particularly for rural

women, shuts down or attempts to control the places and spaces in which women meet, preventing women from sharing and exploring with each other their common realities. But, as Beverley Haddad has shown, women are adept at 'making a way where there is no way' (Haddad, 2000:253-254), and contextual Bible study is one of their ways (West, 2003).

This form of Bible study provides a sacred space – because of the Bible's presence, and additional resources – with which to forge potentially transformative theologies and actions. While this space and its resources are not uncontested, our experience is that the Bible studies on Tamar are profoundly empowering, particularly for women, but also for men.

Measuring the impact

Men are becomingly ever more interested in the Tamar Campaign. Recent research on the impact of the Tamar Campaign has clearly demonstrated its impact on both men and women of all ages. In Limpopo, we have been conducting a series of Tamar Bible studies within the Methodist churches and evaluating their impact, as part of a cycle of action and reflection that characterises our work. Martin Maluleke, a member of our research team, worked with a number of focus groups: one of older men, one of older women, one of younger men, one of younger women, and one combined group of younger men and women. He asked them to reflect together 'on the things which they had found significant from the Campaign'. He encouraged them to share on a personal level, adopting a narrative approach. Each group was then asked to select one story that was representative of their group and to share that story with the combined groups. A 'scribe' and not the person involved told the story to the larger plenary gathering.

From the younger women's group, this was the response:

The Tamar Campaign has clearly struck a cord with ordinary African women, providing both a sacred and safe space



Tamar Workshop at Camp Anneley

The Tamar Campaign has given me the strength to face my worst devil, for I was abused by my biological father. I have been quiet about this for 25 years, but now I have decided to have counselling with the minister. After the healing process I want to be trained so that I can lead this kind of Bible study to help other women as sexual abuse and incest are rife in our village.

The particular woman whose story was told here has begun counselling with the local minister, who, unfortunately, only visits her village about once a month.

From the older women's group, this was their story:

I have a friend who used to bother me about her being raped, and every time she began to share her story and cry I would become annoyed and start to say to her to stop annoying me with her problems, for I too have my own problems. After the Campaign, however, I better understand what my friend was going through, and that I had broken the bond between me and my friend. I fear that now it is too late, for my friend is now married and we have not spoken for

seven years, and so I cannot now come into her marriage and remind her of how I rejected and neglected her when she needed me most. I want to make a difference in my village when such a thing comes; I want to have counselling skills so as to be able to address this kind of situation if it ever comes. I cannot change the past, but I can influence the future.

A mixed group of young men and women said:

The Tamar Campaign has been an important opportunity in the church to change the way we see people who are victims. Our normal understanding of them is that they are at fault, but now we see them as our sisters who are longing for help and attention. We want much more of this kind of Campaign, for it gives the young people in the church a chance to be involved.

From the older men came a quite a different response, a story of both confusion and challenge:

We are confused because we know there are verses in the Bible that tell a woman to be quiet in the church. How can these verses and the story of Tamar be

understood? Is the Bible not holy and written by God, and no human being has the power to change it? Our culture tells us that in matters of religion and belief, women and children should not have a say; only men have a say.

The principal researcher, who is also the minister in this community, made it clear that he thought there was genuine confusion here, much of it due, he suggested, to generations of ministers refusing to challenge the views of senior, powerful males in the community.

Finally, Maluieke probed the silence of those who had made no contribution in their respective groups. As he had facilitated the process, he had walked around and noticed a number of participants who had said nothing. After the evaluation, he had cautiously and respectfully probed the silence of one participant. This was her reply:

Umfundisi [minister], what does it help if I say what I feel and what I experience?. You get in your car and go back to your manse [church home], but I stay here behind and starve to death and you are nowhere to be found.

This woman was starkly stating that in contexts such as this, for people like herself, there was still not enough safety to tell their stories. Indeed, telling her story would mean being cast out from her family and the community resources, resulting in starvation.

Conclusion

These bleak words and the more hopeful ones that precede them are an appropriate place to draw this profile to its conclusion. The Tamar Campaign has clearly accomplished much, but much more remains to be done. The struggle does indeed continue, and the Bible remains both a site of struggle itself and a resource in that struggle.

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