

**TELL IT LIKE IT IS!  
THE CASE TO INCLUDE THE STORY OF THE  
RAPE OF TAMAR IN CHILDREN'S BIBLES  
AS AN AWARENESS TOOL<sup>1</sup>**

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**G.L. JAMES<sup>2</sup>**

**ABSTRACT**

This article contains the story of a story. This is the story of the ancient narrative of the rape of Tamar, set in the ancient Near East, found in the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel, Chapter 13, and how it became a contemporary instrument as an awareness tool about sexual violence. The “too hot to handle” story of the rape of Tamar is absent in children’s Bibles. This narrative has the potential to engage children on the issues of rape, gender-violence, love and lust. I will strongly advocate for this text to be included in children’s Bibles.

**INTRODUCTION**

The information contained in this article is not a result of my biblical studies expertise since I am neither an Old Testament scholar nor a specialist in Near Eastern studies. This article stems from a passion to empower the children of this country against the dreadful onslaught of sexual violence against them. As a missiologist my special interest in urban mission and theology has led to my search for transformative and empowering interventions that could be used in communities across the country. My involvement in the Tamar Campaign<sup>3</sup> hosted by the Ujamaa Centre of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal has made me aware of the special place the Bible has in the homes of many South Africans. The work of the Ujamaa Centre reveals that the power of the community Bible

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<sup>1</sup> This article stems from a presentation at the colloquium of the South African Society for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (SASNES) held in September 2006.

<sup>2</sup> I am a missiology lecturer at the University of South Africa.

<sup>3</sup> See West & Mubizela (2004:4-12).

study is beyond measure.

This article presents the case to include the story of the rape of Tamar in children's Bibles as an awareness tool about issues concerning gender violence and rape. This text can be a valuable resource for raising the awareness of children regarding a devastating plague that has silently deprived children of innocence for years. It briefly discusses the present content of children's Bibles in order to determine what content is included and why. The South African problem of gender violence and rape is outlined in order to justify the urgent need for all intervention and awareness tools to be utilized. The article will then include an account of how the story of Tamar was effectively used for conscientisation amongst adults in communities across South Africa leading the way for the story to be used amongst children. I will discuss why this text is necessary for children in our world today and how the story was adapted to suit the cognitive levels and sensitivities of different age groups. The actual presentation of the story to children will be described followed by some responses from members of the public.

## **THE CONTENT OF CHILDREN'S BIBLES**

Children's Bibles today generally do not contain the story of the rape of Tamar found in 2 Samuel 13. The tragic story of the rape of the daughter of David is amongst the conveniently disregarded content for children's Bibles. Children's Bibles are instead filled with stories of the heroic actions of improbable candidates for success, the victories and triumphs of the weak and young and escapes from cruel villains. Stories about the suspense of the natural order like the parting of the sea, the sun standing still, the talking donkey and the burning-bush (that didn't burn) remain firm favourites for inclusion in children's Bibles because of their thrill factor.

According to Bottigheimer (1993:74) early versions of children's Bibles did include the story of Tamar. Children were not shielded from the stories of rape, murder and adultery during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These acts were included in order to serve as "cautionary tales depicting the punishment of vice" (Bottigheimer 1993:74). Bottigheimer (1993:68) offers this description of the development children's Bibles:

It generally contained stories from Old Testament histories, the Apocrypha, New Testament gospels and acts. As a group these books included paradigmatic tales of the creation, Fall and deliverance, stories of patriarchal heroes, and New Testament fulfilments of Old Testament pre-figurations (also called "types" or "figures") and prophecies. The profile of stories offered to the reader and the proportion of space allocated to the Old and New Testament changed dramatically from the late sixteenth to the twentieth century: initially the Old Testament outweighed the New, reflecting the composition of the canonical Bible but these proportions slowly changed until the New Testament overtook and began to displace the Old Testament in nineteenth century compilations.

In due course children's Bibles sought to primarily provide children with good moral lessons and positive role models. In an introduction to the *Child's Bible* Lord Bishop Ripon (1906:vii-x) emphasizes his view that the use of the Bible for children is for the purpose of moral formation:

The true use of the Bible is to be found in the moral principles which it supplies. To gain these the Bible needs to be read and studied intelligently. The object of the issue of the Child's Bible is to give help in this direction. The simple and morally suggestive stories of the Bible are set down in the words of the most recent

translation ... the child is introduced as it were into that great house of life's interpretations in which so many have found moral invigoration and inspiration.

Bible story compilations have carefully passed over the "X-rated content" of the Bible with the intention of protecting children from the horrors of rape, gender violence, and murder. The problem with such children's Bibles is that there is a failure to consider that children are becoming increasingly aware of violence, sexual abuse and manipulation in the world that they live in.

Children's Bibles today are big sellers in their own right. According to Garrett (1997:29) booksellers know that it "makes sense to have a well-stocked Bible section". There has been a boom in children's Bible sales and Bible stories which began in 1996 and shows no sign of diminishing.<sup>4</sup> Bookstores in South Africa stock a wide variety of children's Bibles and stories from the Bible. The Bible is still regarded as a source of moral and spiritual formation and it is clear that Christian parents want to pass on the stories of the Bible to their children for this purpose. The stories included in children's Bibles are very similar to present day Disney stories. There is a tendency to oversimplify and purposely hide the "X-rated" content of the Bible. Parents feel uncomfortable discussing stories that contain sexual content with their children. Hence the story of the rape of Tamar is usually considered inappropriate for inclusion in children's Bibles.

In an article titled *Beyond Noah's ark*, Garrett (1997:29)<sup>5</sup> argues that children's exposure to the Bible should not be restricted to stories of "Noah's ark, David and Goliath and Jesus blessing the children". She believes that children should not be shielded from the violent content in the Bible since "the world is a violent place – a place where the forces of death and destruction often

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<sup>4</sup> See also Neff (2001).

have the upper hand”.

## THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The above description of the world can be used to describe the South African context in particular. Much has been documented about the plight of women and children in this country with regards to gender violence and rape. *The Journal of Theology in South Africa* published a special issue, which dealt with the theme “Overcoming violence against women and children” in November 2002. In this issue article after article of shocking stories, statistics and analysis about the disturbing crisis facing South African children are discussed. Lenka Bula (2002:55-68) titled her article “From the womb into a hostile world: Christian ethics and sexual abuse against children in South Africa”. This imagery aptly depicts the situation of children in South Africa today that have become victims to sexual predators even in the safe spaces of their own homes and schools. Concerning the distressing link between the rape of girl children and HIV, Haddad notes that “rape is not confined to women (young and old), but extends to the rape of very young girl children” (2002:97). She adds this shocking information:

The University of Natal reported a steady increase in the number of HIV positive African female children between the ages of five and fourteen in the past few years. The only likely explanation from their point of view was that men with AIDS were raping or having sex with virgin girls ... Thus it would appear that not only is girl child rape used as a preventative measure, but a myth has emerged within communities that sex with a girl child will cure the disease.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.beliefnet.com/story/130/story](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/130/story)

Horrendous stories confirming this view – from rural as well as urban areas – are slowly being documented.

The child rape situation in South Africa is nationwide, disturbing, underreported and overwhelming. According to Meaka Biggs<sup>6</sup> there was a 48 percent increase in child rape over the past two years in South Africa. Of the 54 926 rapes reported between March 2005 and April 2006, 40 percent were children under eighteen. These figures are elusive since many children are threatened and intimidated into silence. We hear horror stories of the rape and murder of minors almost every day. The incidence of child rape continues unabated despite the Minimum Sentence Act<sup>7</sup> No. 105 of 1998 which provides a life sentence for perpetrators of rape of victims under sixteen. Little babies and children who have been raped have had to have reconstructive surgeries, colonoscopies and hysterectomies. Sexual violence has penetrated every place even the sacred space of the home and the church. There is a marked absence of education regarding sexual violence for pre-school children. Children are hearing about rape and sexual violence from each other. They grow up amidst sexual assault, rape and gender violence. They are exposed to sexual violence through every form of media.

The Ujamaa Centre is a community development and research centre that takes the above context seriously. The Centre encourages biblical scholars to become socially engaged and work together with ordinary readers of the Bible “to find empowering and liberating ways of studying” (West et al. 2004:36). The Tamar Campaign is a community Bible study that raises awareness of gender violence and rape amongst adults. The campaign is being conducted across the country and in several parts of the world. The campaign was initially

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<sup>6</sup> See H Bamford, “Child rape stats soar”, *Mail & Guardian* 05/03/07; online newspaper. ([www.forum.mg.co.za/showflat.php?Number=1801886842](http://www.forum.mg.co.za/showflat.php?Number=1801886842))

<sup>7</sup> See J Slothe-Nielson & L Ehlers, *Assessing the impact: mandatory and minimum sentences in South Africa* (<http://www.issafrica.org/pubs/CrimeQ/No.14/Ehlers.pdf>).

structured for adults. This campaign has five major objectives,<sup>8</sup> which are as follows:

1. To create an awareness of gender issues to untrained readers of the Bible, both men and women with particular emphasis on women.
2. To empower women to speak about their abuse and to deal with these issues.
3. To target key leaders in church and community such as pastors, youth leaders, and women's group leaders and NGOs.
4. To conduct Bible studies on texts relating to abuse in the Bible by using the Contextual Bible Study Method.
5. To develop community and church based support groups for abused women.

After attending a Bible study on the Tamar story conducted by Professor Gerald West<sup>9</sup> of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal I was immediately convinced about the need for such a tool in South African churches and communities at large and about the effectiveness<sup>10</sup> of the Tamar campaign. I began conducting the Tamar Bible study with women and youth groups in the north of Durban and discovered that gender violence and rape defied age, race, socio-economic status, educational levels or religious affiliations. The evangelical<sup>11</sup> churches I primarily worked in often believe that they have the monopoly on morality yet I began to discover sordid acts of abuse behind the outward acts of holiness.

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<sup>8</sup> As listed in AusAid report 2005.

<sup>9</sup> West has done extensive work on community Bible studies and reading the Bible in community. My inspiration to re-read the Bible with the marginalised has come directly from the opportunity to work with and observe West. See West (1993).

<sup>10</sup> Njoroge of the WCC highlighted the effectiveness and spread of the Tamar campaign (2006:4-5).

<sup>11</sup> See Smith (1995:339-350). This article discusses the issue of rape and gender violence in evangelical communities. Evangelical churches here include Classical Pentecostals, Charismatics and New Independent churches. See Balcomb's (2001:3-15) *Evangelicals and democracy in South Africa* for a discussion on these typologies.

Certain biblical texts, which contained references to power, triumph, prosperity and blessing, seemed to be the favourite texts amongst the people I worked with. The story of a young girl by the name of Tamar whose own brother violated her trust is a lesser-known biblical text in these circles. After facilitating the Bible study amongst adults I decided to share the story at a pre-school<sup>12</sup> close to my home. The teacher, Lorraine Chinnah, who attended the Bible study for adults, granted me permission to prepare the Tamar story for the pre-school children aged three to five years.

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STORY

The story had to be child-sensitive, and presented in a child-suitable format considering the cognitive levels of children from the ages of three to five. The story had to be stream-lined and simplified in order to avoid confusion. The challenge I faced at this point was expressing the actual rape of Tamar to pre-school children. The question I struggled with was: How does one relate the story of a rape to younger children? I then approached Hannah Vardin who worked at the Office of the Family Advocate and was a former Child Line counsellor for nine years. Vardin suggested that dolls and/or pictures be used to convey how Tamar was hurt and touched in what were supposed to be the private parts of her body.

The next step was to acquire information on writing stories specifically for children. According to Shepard (2000) the theme of children's stories should emerge from the story as opposed to being blurted out. It is advised that the theme should be expressed in dialogue instead of narration. Shepard warns that children's stories should be "explorations of life" and not sermons. With regards to the Tamar story the children are not explicitly told by a narrative that

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<sup>12</sup> The William Carey Pre-School is situated north of Durban.



what was happening to her was wrong; instead the powerful dialogue between Tamar and Amnon is where the theme of the story emerges.

Shepard (2000) advises that the plot of the story should be built around a conflict involving the main character. In the case of the Tamar story there is a steady build up of the plot, which leads to a dramatic climax, namely, the actual rape of Tamar. The conflict in the moments before the rape establishes the riveting nature of the story and gives the main character, Tamar, the well deserved title as “the most articulate character in the story” (West et al. 2004:36) and “one of the most articulate women in the Bible” (West 2004:24).

Finally, Shepard (2000) encourages a simple approach to the structuring of children’s stories. He suggests a clear chronological order of events without the use of flashback techniques since the movement between times may confuse little children. Since the Tamar story is loaded with specific details, it was important to choose which details the story needed, to remain coherent yet simple and uncomplicated. There are numerous interpretations<sup>13</sup> of the story which shed different light on the characters. I opted to keep the story as clear and uncomplicated as possible so as to place emphasis on the theme without getting bogged down in the details. The story is long and in depth; it has a slow deliberate sequence of events which had to be abridged in order to avoid confusing the children. I approached Durban-based artist Brad Nairn who was later commissioned to develop contemporary graphics of the characters in order to make them more accessible to children today. I discussed the story with Nairn and shared my basic vision of the storyboard. The pictures of the characters needed to be inclusive in terms of race in order to be relevant to all children. The story was rewritten resembling the original verse division in adult Bibles. I have allocated specific units of text to each graphic frame. The graphic

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<sup>13</sup> See Cooper–White (1995); West et al. (2004); Tribble (1984) and Gravett (2004).

frames can be shown to the children as the story is told. The story together with the graphics is presented below.

### **Introduction of the story**<sup>14</sup>

Long ago in the land of Israel lived a king whose name was David. Now David had many children. This story is about three of his children: Amnon, Tamar and Absalom. *(At this point, if using dolls repeat the names of the characters and get the children to say the names on their own as you point to the dolls.)*

#### **Frame 1**

One day Amnon was behaving as though he was sick and sad because he thought he was in love with his sister Tamar. Amnon had a cousin by the name of Jonadab who was a very cunning, sly person. Jonadab said to Amnon, "You are the king's son, Amnon; tell me, why are you so sad and sick?" Amnon answered, "I am in love with my sister Tamar!" Jonadab said, "Lie down on your bed and pretend that you are sick; when your father comes to see you, tell him to send Tamar to cook some food and feed it to you."



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<sup>14</sup> I am of the opinion that what I have actually done with the story of Tamar for children is write what biblical scholars call a midrash. Midrash comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to go in search of" or "to enquire". The midrash resulted when the rabbis went in search of the meaning of the text for their lives. A neo-midrash is a process where a new reading of the text is created for interested parties. In essence I have re-read the story of Tamar, enquiring into its relevance for children in our present context. See Williams (1993:15-17) for a readable discussion on the midrash.

**Frame 2**

So Amnon asked his father David to send Tamar to cook for him, pretending that he was sick.

(Children, how many of you have pretended to be sick when you did not want to go somewhere or do something?)



**Frame 3**

King David sent Tamar to the house of Amnon to cook for him so that he would feel better.



**Frame 4**

Amnon told Tamar to bring the cakes to the bedroom and Tamar obeyed. When she took the cakes to him he said, "Sleep with me, my sister" (he wanted her to let him touch her private parts.)

**Frame 5**

She said "NO, do not make me do such a wrong thing; this is not done in our country. Do not do this shameful thing! I will be ashamed and you will be a fool. Ask the king for permission".



**Frame 6**

Now Amnon, being stronger than her, did not listen when she said NO; instead, he forced himself on her, touching and hurting her in her private parts. After he did this terrible thing he hated her and sent her away. She begged him not to, but he did not want to listen.

**Frame 7**

He told his servants to throw her out of the house and lock the door. Now Tamar was wearing a beautiful long dress that day. The servants threw her out. Tamar was so sad and hurt about what Amnon did to her body that she cried aloud and tore her beautiful dress.



**Frame 8**

When Absalom, the other brother of Tamar, saw her, he asked her not to cry aloud and kept her in his house. When the king heard what Amnon had done to Tamar he was very angry. Absalom did not speak to Amnon again. He hated Amnon for what he had done to Tamar.

**Conclusion of the Story**

So ends the story of Tamar. She lived sad and hurt in the house of her brother Absalom.

**THE DISCUSSION TIME**

After the story is told the children are allowed to interact with the story through questions and discussions. These interactions are often lively and animated as the children's facial expressions and body language clearly indicate their feelings towards the characters. The children are asked the following questions which are simply worded:

1. What do you think this story is about?
2. Who is the person that you like/is good in the story, and why?
3. Who is the person that you dislike/is bad in the story, and why?
4. What did you think about David, Absalom and Jonadab?
5. What did Tamar say to Amnon when he was attacking her?
6. How did Tamar feel in the story?
7. Do you know any children like Tamar?
8. What can we learn from the story of Tamar?

The questions were formed in order to ascertain the children's understanding of the story. The children generally answer as follows:

1. The story is about Tamar who was hurt and sad.
2. Tamar is good/liked because she was kind and obedient. We feel sorry for her.
3. Amnon is bad/not liked. He made Tamar cry when he touched Tamar where he was not supposed to touch her. He was cruel to his sister.
4. David and Absalom are good. Jonadab was naughty because he told Amnon to lie.
5. Tamar said, "No, do not do this".
6. Tamar was hurt, she felt sad and cried a lot.
7. Yes.
8. Be careful of people who want to be alone with you. Scream and say NO when someone tries to touch you or grab you. Do not be keep quiet, tell someone you trust if such a thing happens to you. Do not listen to friends who tell you to lie. People you know and love can also hurt you, not only strangers.

The child-appropriateness of the Bible story with questions did not diminish its liberating and transformative potential for children aged three to five. The children are not explicitly told whose behaviour in the story is right or wrong, or which characters they should sympathise with or reject. They make these choices on their own. According to the characteristics of popular education "instruction is not the effect of the self-imposition of one person on another, but of the discovery made by a group in its practise of transforming the world" (Preiswerk 1984:120). Through the discovery of this story, children who have been hiding their own abuse realize that they are not alone. The children are free to interpret the story as they choose. The Tamar for Children programme

provides the space where children can, in their own words, express their evaluation of the characters and co-determine possible safety measures.

An interesting observation that I have made is that children are more likely to view the characters as either “bad” or “good”. The danger in this oversimplification of character is that people who can appear to be “good” and kind can be guilty of wrong behaviour like rape and sexual abuse. The issue here is the need for children to identify appropriate and inappropriate behaviour as opposed to labelling a person as good or bad. After the time of questions and answers a discussion takes place illustrating the difference between appropriate or right behaviour and inappropriate or wrong behaviour, as well as good and bad. The children are cautioned that people who appear to be friendly and loving (hugging, kissing and touching) and *good* are not necessarily to be trusted. Another observation is that when the same story is discussed amongst adults there is a tendency for some (particularly men) to question the moral standing of Tamar by suggesting that she had in some way brought her fate upon herself. Yet, in all the children's programmes I have conducted, children have never seen Tamar as liable for her rape. Both boys and girls almost immediately sympathise with Tamar. This could indicate that boys between the ages of 3-5 have not (yet) been socialized to even consider that girl rape victims are liable for their own rapes.

Training has taken place across the country and with leaders across the world<sup>15</sup> in order to equip interested parties to facilitate this Bible story with children. The training is workshop-based and is designed to enable parents, community activists, teachers, church leaders and NGO workers to boldly yet sensitively facilitate community Bible studies for children that deal with rape,

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<sup>15</sup> The Council for World Mission set up workshops in Durban with church and mission leaders from across the world in October 2006; the Tamar for Children workshop was included in this event. Every year church leaders from across the African continent are trained to facilitate the Tamar for Children programme at the William Carey School of World Mission based north of Durban.



gender constructs and gender violence. The facilitators are given the tools of creative engagement with children, story telling and information packages on rape and gender violence issues.

The story structure and method of operation presented in this article is specifically developed for children between the ages of 3 to 5. The Tamar story has also been developed for adolescents, teenagers and young adults. For each of these age groups there are different methods of operation such as group readings and discussions, debates and talk shows, bibliodramas and the use of art and music.

## **RESPONSES FROM THE COMMUNITY**

Maggie was just five years old when she was first raped; she remembers it well since it was in the same year that her father left home and never returned. Now married, Maggie has not escaped sexual abuse, this time at the hand of her husband who has raped her on several occasions. Painfully she lamented that she did not know that this behaviour was unacceptable. She knew that it made her sick, uncomfortable and gave her a feeling of unworthiness and shame, but she did not know that it was socially unacceptable since she had not heard anything about the fight against gender violence and rape in her community. Having been raped as a child she continued to be a victim as a married woman. After hearing the story of Tamar she vowed that she would do everything in her power to prevent the same thing from happening to her daughter by discussing and empowering her little girl. With a look of determination in her eyes she said, "Now I have a tool to use to discuss with my children about rape and abuse".

George, who is the father of a three-year-old girl, telephoned me after his daughter attended a Tamar for Children event in the Pretoria inner-city. He said

that he was amazed that his daughter was able to come home and relate the lessons she learnt. She went home and explained where she does not want to be touched and what she will do if someone tries to touch her inappropriately. George expressed his gratefulness for the way the story was told and its impact on the awareness levels of children.

These two stories are typical of the responses that arise from the children's programme. After listening to the Tamar story, it is not uncommon for parents who were raped when they were still children to reveal their own abuse at the hand of a brother-in-law, uncle, neighbour, parent or step-parent. The stories of the children, which are sobering and heart-rending, have alerted me to the crisis-state of the safety and well-being of South African minors. In the last ten years, it seems to me, South African society has spent much time and money on security paraphernalia such as bigger locks, burglar proofing, gates and alarm systems. This over-emphasis on *security* has caused a subdued, unsustained and imbalanced reaction to the disturbing lack of *safety* for our children.<sup>16</sup> Despite the locks, gates and panic buttons, children are still being raped in this country.

## CONCLUSION

Parents, teachers, and ministers must recognise and understand the signs of our times and include this text in their lesson plans and sermons. The Sunday school or children's churches do not generally discuss the issue of rape and sexual assault. There is a need for vigilant, urgent action. According to De Beer (2006:13) "children should be more central on the agenda of theological education and reflection". De Beer (2006:13) asks the following essential

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<sup>16</sup> I make a distinction between *security* and *safety*. Security here refers to measures and mechanisms used to hinder, prevent or discourage criminal activity. Safety refers to the actual protection and well-being of people.

question:

Why is it that so little is said or done about children by the most prominent theologians of our world? There is a theological silence that needs to be overcome. Pastors need to take the lead in placing children on congregational agendas and in integrating children meaningfully into worship services and other events of the church. They need to affirm childcare workers much more as key members of the ministry team. They need to invest in the development of effective and knowledgeable child care workers.

The story of the violation of Tamar in the land of Israel thousands of years ago still has a potent, compelling message for us today. A responsible children's Bible will include this story together with explanatory notes. Children feel the pain with Tamar when she is abused and realize their agency when she speaks out. They are empowered to detect the signs of manipulation and cruel intent. The story provides children with a point of reference regarding what is acceptable and unacceptable physical behaviour. The children realize that familiar faces do not automatically represent faces of trust and reliance. More importantly, they also become sensitised to discern any potential threat to their safety.

Tragically I am aware that this may not be enough to prevent the "strong" from preying on the weak; however, it certainly is at least proving to serve as a tool of awareness. The children's campaign has proved the strong agency children have in the fight against rape and gender violence. Children educate and alert each other and their parents/family on the lessons they learnt from the story of Tamar. The agency of children can not be underestimated; after all it was the little Welsh girl Mary Jones<sup>17</sup> who was the catalyst for the formation for the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804.

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<sup>17</sup> Read the story of Mary Jones at [www.biblesociety.co.za](http://www.biblesociety.co.za).

I believe that the story of Tamar is no longer avoidable; it has to be brought back into the Bibles of children and Bible story books. Churches, Sunday schools and youth groups must include the story as part of their Bible reading programmes and lesson plans. We are no longer justified in discarding the story of Tamar since this story serves as a caution about the looming danger of child rape and gender violence. In South Africa and other parts of the unsafe world we must tell this story, since it tells it the way it is!

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Ms. G.L James  
Missiology Department  
PO Box 392,  
Unisa, 0003.  
South Africa.  
e-mail: Jamesgl@unisa.ac.za