

2 Samuel 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 13. Now Absalom, David's son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar, and after a time Amnon, David's son, loved her. And Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimea, David's brother, and Jonadab was a very crafty man. And he said to him, O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me? Amnon said to him, I love Tamar, my brother Absalom's sister. Jonadab said to him, Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill, and when your father comes to see you, say to him, Let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat it from her hand. So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill.

And when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand. Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, Go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him. So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. And she took dough and kneaded it and made cakes in his sight and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and emptied it out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, Send out everyone from me. So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, Bring the food into the chamber, that I may eat it from your hand. And Tamar took the cakes she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, Come lie with me, my sister. She answered him, No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel. Do not do this outrageous thing. As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the outrageous fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you. But he would not listen to her. And being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her.

And Amnon said to her, Get up, go. But she said to him, No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me. But he would not listen to her. He called the young man who served him and said, Put this woman out of my presence and bolt the door after her.

Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed. So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. And Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the long robe that she wore. And she laid her hand on her head and went away, crying as she went.

And her brother Absalom said to her, Has Amnon your brother been with you? Now hold your peace, my sister. He is your brother. Do not take this to heart. So Tamar lived a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house. When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry.

[3 : 1 4] But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad, for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had violated his sister Tamar. After two full years, Absalom had sheep shearers at Baal Hazor, which is near Ephraim.

And Absalom invited all the king's sons. And Absalom came to the king and said, Behold, your servant has sheep shearers. Please let the king and his servants go with your servant. But the king said to Absalom, No, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome to you.

He pressed him, but he would not go, but gave him his blessing. Then Absalom said, If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us. And the king said to him, Why should he go with you?

But Absalom pressed him until he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him. Then Absalom commanded his servants, Mark when Amnon's heart is merry with wine. And when I say to you, Strike Amnon, then kill him. Do not fear, have I not commanded you? Be courageous and be valiant. So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king's sons arose, and each mounted his mule and fled. While they were on the way, news came to David, Absalom has struck down all the king's sons, and not one of them is left.

Then the king arose and tore his garments and lay on the earth. And all his servants who were standing by tore their garments. But Jonadab the son of Shimea, David's brother, said, Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king's sons, for Amnon alone is dead. For by the command of Absalom this has been determined from the day he violated his sister Tamar. Now therefore, let not my lord the king so take it to heart as to suppose that all the king's sons are dead, for Amnon alone is dead. But Absalom fled, and the young man who kept the watch lifted up his eyes and looked. And behold, many people were coming from the road behind him by the side of the mountain.

[5 : 10] And Jonadab said to the king, Behold, the king's sons have come, as your servant said, so it has come about. And as soon as he had finished speaking, behold, the king's sons came and lifted up their voice and wept. And the king also and all his servants wept very bitterly. But Absalom fled and went to Talmai, the son of Ammihad, king of Geshur. And David mourned for his son day after day. So Absalom fled and went to Geshur, and was there three years. And the spirit of the king longed to go out to Absalom, because he was comforted about Amnon, since he was dead. As we move into 2 Samuel chapter 13, we must recognise that in many respects we are still reading the story of David and Bathsheba.

David was forgiven his sin and restored at the end of chapter 12. But this does not mean that the ongoing effects of his sin were simply neutralised. Chapter 13 is all about the consequences of David's sin continuing to play out in the world. These consequences are not merely those of an imposed punishment by the Lord, but they are the consequences of the natural fruit of his sin itself. Just as in the story of Saul in 1 Samuel, we had a portrait of the corruption of a man's character over time.

So in 2 Samuel, we have a portrait of the horrific dynamics of sin, even for a forgiven person. It also shows that though we would like for the consequences of our sins to be carefully targeted and contained, if we have to face them at all, the consequences can actually fall most heavily upon innocent parties. Our unaddressed sins can cause immense harm to others. When reading this chapter, we also should be mindful of the ways in which biblical narrative often conveys meaning through artful literary means, connecting events together in ways that invite comparison and contrast, which help us to perceive developments. Associations can be communicated through subtle details that all but the most careful readers may pass over without noticing. The final chapter of Shimon Bar-Ephrat's Narrative Art in the Bible has a masterful treatment of the literary features of this story, which informs a lot of my observations. The first verse sets the scene. It places the character of Tamar between two sons of David, Amnon and Absalom. As Bar-Ephrat observes, it hints at what is to come.

It begins with Absalom, even though Absalom plays little direct role in the narrative that immediately follows. However, it helps the alert reader to recognise that this is a crucial part of the larger Absalom narrative that will follow. By placing Tamar between the two sons of David, it structurally prepares us for a rivalry between the two of them. By characterising Tamar as the sister of Absalom, rather than as the daughter of David or simply as the sister of Amnon, without reference to Absalom, it also prepares us for the way that it will be Absalom who acts for Tamar, rather than David. At the outset, we are told of Amnon's intense love for his sister, a love so intense that he becomes sick through it. The fact that she is a virgin seems to play some part in his desire for her. However, he can't do anything to her. What does he want to do to her? We might be wondering what precise intentions he has, but they aren't made clear at this point and are left ambiguous. Had things remained as they are set up at the beginning of the chapter, nothing might have happened. But we are now introduced to the character of Jonadab.

Jonadab is described as crafty. He doesn't necessarily intend all that Amnon does. His plan is designed to get Tamar close to Amnon. It is not clear that he intends what happens next.

[8 : 44] The attention that is given to characterising him, however, suggests that he is an important character. His role in the narrative may be rather more significant than we originally suppose. His suggestion to Amnon is that he should lie in his bed and pretend to be ill, and when David comes to see him, he should ask David to send his sister Tamar to him, to give him bread to eat, prepare the food in his sight, that he may see it and eat it from her hand. The design of this request is that under the guise of preparing food for the sick Amnon, Tamar should actually come close to him.

Amnon takes Jonadab's advice and puts the plan in motion. He asks David to send Tamar to him, but his request is shortened from Jonadab's. Jonadab's suggested request is more artfully constructed, more fitted for disguising the true intent yet achieving the purpose.

When David gives the instruction to Tamar, it is shortened yet again. From Jonadab's suggestion, let my sister Tamar come and give me bread to eat and prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat it from her hand, we get, go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him. Nothing is mentioned in David's instruction to Tamar about any personal interaction with Amnon. All she has to do is prepare the food at his house. She's going to his house, not necessarily to his bedside. There is no reference to preparing the food in his sight or feeding it to him from her hand. Tamar follows David's instruction and there is a chain of instructions and responses. Jonadab instructs Amnon, lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill. So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill. Amnon then instructs David and David sends for Tamar. David instructs Tamar, go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare food for him. So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house. Amnon speaks to those around him, send out everyone from me. So everyone goes out from him. And then Amnon instructs Tamar, bring the food into the chamber that I may eat it from your hand. And Tamar takes the cakes that she has brought and brings them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. But then the pattern of instruction and obedient response is broken, as rather than eating from Tamar's hand, as per the instruction, Amnon asks her to lie with him.

As if to heighten the suspense beforehand, we are given a very detailed account of how Tamar prepared the cakes. She took dough. She kneaded it. She made cakes in his sight and baked the cakes. She took the pan and emptied it out before him. Much attention is given to the preparation of cakes that are never eaten.

Tamar refuses and resists Amnon's request to lie with her. She makes clear to him that it would be a violation. It's not a thing to be done in Israel. Do not do this outrageous thing. The language of her protestation here might remind us of the story of Genesis chapter 34 and the rape of Dinah. The response of the sons of Jacob was very similar to the way that Tamar responds here. The sons of Jacob had come in from the field as soon as they heard of it, and the men were indignant and very angry, because he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing must not be done. The association between this story of Tamar and Amnon and the story of Dinah back in chapter 34 of Genesis should be borne in mind. Beyond pointing out the wickedness of the act, Tamar draws attention to the consequences that it would have for her. She would be shamed by it, and he would have committed a sin of such great proportions that his character was defined by it.

[12:07] Rather than take her in such a manner, she suggests that he go and speak to the king. He will not withhold her from him. Whether this was a ploy, or whether she was serious, is not entirely clear. However, Amnon does not listen to her, and he forces himself upon her, overcoming her with his greater strength. However, once he is lain with her, he despises her, even more than he once loved her. If her virginity played some role in his original attraction, now her loss of virginity causes him to despise her. He sends her away from him in the harshest of manners. She protests at this point, she is doubly shamed by his actions. Again, we might recall the story of Shechem and Dinah. In that story, Shechem humiliates Dinah by seizing her and lying with her. However, then he seeks, on account of his love for her, to formalise their union.

Amnon, by contrast, takes Tamar, violates her, and then takes no responsibility for her. Her response to her rape is described in the most pitiful of fashions. Thrust outside the door by Amnon's servant, she pours ashes on her head and tears her long robe, according to some translations, a coat of many colours. This detail should not go unnoticed.

The comparison with the story of Joseph should jump out at us. Absalom finds her, discovers the truth, and then takes her into his house, where she lives as a desolate woman. David, however, hears but does nothing about it. Absalom wants vengeance for what Amnon has done to Tamar, his sister, and so he bides his time. And after two years, by which time Amnon might have lowered his guard, he prepares his vengeance. His vengeance occurs at the time of sheep-shearing. The time of sheep-shearing is an important one within the story of Jacob and also of Judah and David. It's the time when Jacob leaves Laban. It's the time when Judah sleeps with Tamar. It's the time of the conflict between Nabal and David. And now it will be the time of Absalom's revenge. Absalom invites David to come to his feast. This more general invitation will be a good cover for the invitation that's given to Amnon. David declines the invitation for himself and his servants, but gives Absalom his blessing. When Absalom asks for Amnon to go too, David is surprised. But seemingly under the guise of an invitation given to all of the king's sons, he is, when pressed, willing to let him go. We should observe the way that Absalom makes David complicit in the death of his son Amnon. Amnon had made David complicit in the rape of Tamar, and now Absalom, seeing David's complicity and his lack of action in the case of

Tamar, wants to get his own back upon his father too, and so makes him complicit in the death of his son. The servants kill Amnon according to Absalom's instructions, and then the news goes back to the palace that all of the king's sons have been killed. We might here recall the story of Genesis chapter 34 once more, where the king's house and the city of Shechem were wiped out by Simeon and Levi in an act of bloody vengeance undertaken because the father had failed to act. However, Jonadab, who knows what Amnon did to his sister, and was alert to Absalom's motives, assures David and the others that the king's sons are not dead, just Amnon alone. Absalom then flees to Talmi, his maternal grandfather, in the region of the Transjordan, in Geshur. David bitterly mourns the loss of his son. It isn't entirely clear which son he is mourning for, Amnon the worthless rapist, or Absalom, for whom he seems to have a deep affection. By the end of the chapter he is comforted concerning Amnon, since he's dead, but his heart longs to go out to Absalom. Reading the story of David in 1st and 2nd Samuel, we should see many parallels between David and the character of Jacob in Genesis. Such parallels can be seen in the story of Nabal, or the parallels between the story of Jacob's blessing by Isaac, and a number of the encounters between David and Saul. Saul plays the part of Laban in relationship to David. He switches the two daughters and sets himself in a rivalry with his son-in-law. There is deception involving a teraphim, and there are many other events in which we can see some sort of parallel. And yet, in the latter half of Jacob's life in the story of Genesis, the violence and the rivalries among his sons, and the tragedy of a seeming death casts a shadow over everything else. In this chapter, a cluster of familiar details from the story of Jacob's surface. There is a character called Tamar who is sexually wronged. There's a rape in the house of Jacob. There's a vicious premeditated act of vengeance by brothers that seems to wipe out an entire royal house. There's a robe of many colours that bears testimony to the evil committed against its owner by a brother. There's a comeuppance at the time of sheep-sharing. There's a reference to an abominable act and a disgraceful thing in Israel. There's a father who, though angry, fails to act on behalf of his raped daughter. The reader of all of this should have a chilling sense of recognition. David, who had played out so many of the positive themes of

Jacob's life, is now playing out some of the most negative ones. David was forgiven for his sin in chapter 12. But if you sow evil seeds, you will reap a terrible harvest. In the lives of his sons, David's own sin mutates into even uglier forms and destroys his household. Seeing his sons, David should be able to recognise himself in their actions. There is a comeuppance for him here as well. The unnamed son of Bathsheba dies in his stead. In seeming contrast to David's sin with Bathsheba, Amnon's rape of Tamar is an act of violent coercion. However, as Peter Lighthouse observes, crudely verse 14 records that Amnon laid her, rather than the more common idiom, lay with her, which makes it clear that this was not consensual. A parallel with David is being drawn. Though David did not force Bathsheba, Amnon's use of his superior strength provides an unexpurgated view of what David actually did. Just like Amnon, David had used his superior strength to take a woman. In the more shameless actions of his sons,

[18:07] Yahweh was bringing to light the truth of David's sin. In the story of Amnon, we can see another parallel. Jonadab acts as Joab did with David, with the craftiness of a serpent. He makes David unwittingly complicit in the rape of Tamar, much as David himself had formed a web of complicity around his sin. Jonadab is a nephew of David, just as Joab was. Amnon's feigning illness and remaining in bed, David himself being sent as a messenger to Tamar, Tamar's mourning, and the movement between houses that is constant in this chapter, all harken back to David's own sin. David himself had played the part of the ill king in chapter 11 at the beginning, neglecting his duty to defend his country when it was under threat. He had sent messengers to get Bathsheba and had made her a mourner by killing her husband. David is here being made to feel some of the anger and disgust that God felt at his sin.

We are also seeing a further effect of his sin. As father, he set the pattern for his sons and his sin concerning Bathsheba and his killing of Uriah are played back to him in a recognisable form in the actions of his sons. What we do can set a pattern for other people who can go on to do things that are even worse. A question to consider. The story of David and Bathsheba has often been appealed to as a precedent for restoring fallen leaders after serious sin. How can a more careful reading of the story of David and Bathsheba help us to use the example much more circumspectly? What does it teach us about the effect that serious sin can have upon people's ministries, lives, families, households, and wider spheres of influence?