

LS — Week 7 Response

As I reread the story of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 with Ansell's article on the Levite's concubine in mind, I hear numerous echoes. The first echo, though, is even earlier in Tamar's namesake from Genesis 38. This earlier one — the direct ancestor, through David, of the later one (Ruth 4) — is also embroiled in sexual drama, including incest; but she is clever and overcomes her position by outwitting her father-in-law, whereas her descendant is deceived by her relations.

To my mind, the full extent of this operation is the main link with Judges 19–21. In the Judges story, a Levite, a father-in-law, a seemingly hospitable old man, and the town of Gibeah all conspire to rape a woman, and an entire nation is ultimately involved in the matter. To add to the silence that Ansell and his sources (especially Tribble) identify, when the Levite goes to his father-in-law's house to "persuade" the concubine to return, there is no discussion whatsoever with her, only repeated invitations by her father for him to stay and then he left "with his two saddled donkeys and his concubine" (19:10). Two men have renewed their friendship and the girl is carried back to the home she fled from. Later the hospitable old man, protecting his guest, holds no consultation but simply offers up his guest's concubine — seemingly without resistance from the Levite. The mob then acts. Later, when reporting this event to the Israelites, the Levite makes no attempt to blame the old man (20:5). My point is that it took more than the Levite, but rather a whole conspiracy of men to engineer her ruin by mutual understanding.

Now consider Tamar's story. Her brother Amnon falls in love with her, and he subtly implicates another brother in the affair ("the sister of my brother Absalom"). His friend Jonadab, Tamar's cousin, comes up with a plan to ensnare her. They ask David to send his daughter, and David sends her without question — despite the sorrow he has just lived through one chapter earlier as a result of his own sending for a woman to be privately brought to him, and despite the fact that he will shortly refuse an invitation himself and hesitate on an invitation of his son (13:25–27).¹ Tamar obeys and serves her brother from a distance; he sends out the servants, who acquiesce, in order to get her into his private room. He seizes² her, and her best hope is that her father will see no problem with marrying her to her would-be rapist. He then rapes her and sends her away, summoning a servant, who obediently puts her out and bolts the door after her.³ She goes to her brother. David is impotently angry and seeks no justice, while Absalom tells her not to take it to heart (13:20). (He will avenge her, but she doesn't know that.) This amounts to multiple members of her family and all the servants colluding to make it possible for Tamar to be raped.

There are other links, such as Tamar's point that "such a thing should not be done in Israel," echoing the people's response to the Levite's dispersal of the body, and Tamar tearing her robe.⁴ (This may foreshadow the tearing apart of David's own family, beginning with Absalom's murder of his brother and the prescient rumour that he has killed all the king's sons.) But for me

¹ The word for what Amnon requests that Tamar do, "bake cakes", is a homophone with a verb used in Song of Songs to mean "ravish, make one's heart beat fast" (4:9). Arguably, Amnon's request is in thinly veiled language.

² To allude to a previous response, he *khazaqs* her (v. 11) and wins the struggle by out-*khazaqing* her (v. 14).

³ Another echo of the Judges story, at least in Ansell's reading of the importance of her reaching for the threshold.

⁴ The word for her "ornate robe" (NIV) is the same as for Joseph's famous "coat of many colours," which also suffered violence when he was betrayed by his brothers and said to be "torn to pieces" (Genesis 37).

the most powerful warning between the two stories is how we all, like a thousand Judases (to use Tribble's crucifixion imagery), collaborate consciously or unconsciously to betray the vulnerable.

Judging by these narratives, we do so by dismissing a woman's agency and desire (the father-in-law sending his daughter back with the Levite); by outright respecting men over women, even family (the hospitable old man); by protectively anonymizing the guilty (the Levite); by giving up on someone who's been hurt and is now "damaged" (also the Levite); by taking part in mob mentality (the men of Gibeah); by not being suspicious about friends' motives⁵ or even enabling their criminal plans⁶ (Jonadab); by not learning from our mistakes (David); by "just doing what we're told" (Amnon's servants); by minimizing trauma (Absalom's words to Tamar); and many more ways — including accepting social norms that make the victim bear the shame (Tamar's fate). The fault rests partly on everyone who participates in this process. We might grimly say that it takes a village to raise a child, and it takes a village to rape a child.⁷

We have a clear responsibility. Like Jesus at the confrontation in John 8, we must not be among those casting our stone, but must refuse to take part, call out wrong ("Let the one who is without sin..."),⁸ and stand with the vulnerable person until at last everyone drops the real or figurative stone. In fact, we're usually not Jesus in that situation; if we're not the woman, then we're most likely one of the mob. Our job is to hear the challenge and recognize that we are all guilty of sin — the sin of holding the stone in the first place. We have to be the first to drop ours, and ideally do even better than the crowd and not leave but switch sides to Jesus' and the woman's.

Despite the analogy, this problem is not abstract. It's no less real today than it was thousands of years ago. On the public scale, the public rushes to the defence of an abuser and the media creates false balance. Juries are not sequestered. Celebrity gives unequal rights. The ultra-rich are tacitly forgiven for having contact with serial molesters. First ladies are reduced to their clothing. Even in our little corner of the world as teachers, less dramatic events follow the same principle. Responsibility for the care of seven younger siblings falls to the older sister and not the older brother, and her schoolwork suffers while he excels and is commended. A relationship goes sour and the emotional labour of rescuing it falls by default to the girl. The hallway gossip between kids praises "studs" while condemning "sluts" for the exact same behaviour. The friends help the young man get the young woman drunk. The list goes on. If our eyes are shut, we participate. *Qui tacet consentire videtur.*⁹ All the more so for us who teach and model the norm.

⁵ cf. the utterly transparent code Joab and David use to communicate through the messenger in 2 Sam. 11–18–25.

⁶ I was just reading the Wikipedia article on Sacha Baron Cohen's show *Who Is America*, for which he disguised himself and conducted interviews with real people in an attempt to have them incriminate or humiliate themselves. He described a deleted scene where he told a hotel concierge that he had molested an eight-year-old. The concierge responded by giving him advice as to how to cover up the act and how to acquire more juvenile targets. Rather than air this disturbing segment, the crew reported it to the FBI. The FBI declined to investigate.

⁷ And it takes a nation to make it possible for an eighteen-year-old to legally acquire the means to kill 19 children.

⁸ Or, like the earlier Tamar — who ends up in the same situation as the woman in John 8 — not just challenge the mob to reflect on their own sin but outsmart them and gain *proof* of their sin and their obligation in the matter!

⁹ Legal maxim: "Whoever is silent shall be taken as consenting."