

Adrien Bledstein, Independent Scholar, Chicago

The Bible is full of traumatic events. Insights on how some people cope and thrive may provide clues to the identity of an ancient writer. In legend Joseph is abused by his brothers, becomes prime minister of Egypt, then reconciles with his family. In 2 Samuel 13, seven centuries after Joseph, Tamar, wearing a coat of many colors, is abused by her half brother Amnon. We hear her protest before, how she thinks and feels about what her half-brother intends to do, and what she feels after the rape. Thrown out, Tamar does not shamefully slink into the shadows along the streets of Jerusalem as one might expect in a patriarchal shame culture. Instead, she tears her garment, strews ashes on her head, and laments, loudly bewailing her humiliation. When she arrives at her brother Absalom's, he hushes her. We do not hear her voice again within the narrative.

Who wrote this intimate family story, parallel to Joseph? Who wrote the great narratives in Genesis through the life and death of King David, framing a meaningful history of Judah/Israel? In *How to Read the Bible: a Guide to Scripture Then and Now*, James Kugel remarks on the “personal nature” of the David biography. “Scholars have always wondered why all this was written and by whom” (p. 491). Under “Solomon’s Wisdom” Kugel devotes nearly two pages to recounting the rape of Tamar, then wonders parenthetically “(indeed if that was what happened and not an excuse invented after Amnon’s murder)” (p. 497).¹

From a psychological rather than political point of view, we may see clues to the woman I suggest might feel compelled to tell and write about her own abuse within the superb narratives by the so-called Yahwist, Elohist, and Court Narrator preserved in Scriptures.² This narrator cuts

to the quick of an event, presenting what happens, focusing on a character's problems, point of view, choices, and consequences, providing just enough information to share the experience without moralizing.³

In 1999 CE, Louise DeSalvo published *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*.⁴ A literature and writing instructor she draws on psychological studies which substantiate her experience that describing a trauma in writing and how one feels about it is healing.⁵ She illustrates with numerous well known writers who through writing put in context devastating experiences and how some are better able to move on past the trauma.

With recognition that trauma can become a source of strength through telling the story in context, my paper suggests that with an omniscient perspective and a sense of irony and humor erupting from human grief, Tamar transforms her lamentation to storytelling.

Beginning in Eden, she presents humans as vulnerable and satirizes those who behave as if they are immortals, like the "*benei-elohim*" in Gen 6 who take any woman they choose as do deities in other people's myths. She focuses on trials of mortals, revealing fundamental values and strategies for surviving in a difficult world. To be heard, a woman at that time would focus on men, and present strong women as well as disadvantaged women. Perceiving Tamar as the "master" storyteller opens a reader to hear stories differently than if one assumes narratives were written by men (or Harold Bloom's sophisticated lady). Understood in context of this woman's perception of the past, "texts of terror" (Trible) may become sources of healing.⁶

Trauma

So who is Tamar? Tamar is a "daughter of the king" (2 Sam 13:18). At the king's request, she is performing a healing ritual (2 Sam 13:5, 7, 10) in a sacred garment. Innocent of

wrongdoing, why does she suffer?

Tamar appears in the Bible after David becomes king of both Judah and Israel. He establishes Jerusalem as the political and religious center of the country which unites the tribes descended from Jacob/Israel with Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Through the prophet Nathan, King David learns that YHWH does not want him to build a temple, a “house,” in Jerusalem. Instead, the Divine will build a “house” for David, that is a dynasty that will last forever.

Sometime after this assurance, David desires Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite (one of David’s “mighty men,” 2 Sam 23:37), and takes her, like the *benei-elohim* of Gen 6, Pharaoh, or king who takes any woman he chooses.⁷ The unfolding events spell out how it is that Solomon, a son of the adulterous pair, and not an older son of another wife, becomes the next king of Judah/Israel. Succession History, Court History, and Court Narrative are other terms scholars use to designate the gripping narrative in 2 Samuel 11 through 1 Kings 2.

Hearing Tamar’s story, which she casts in the context of David’s successor, provides insights into her presentation of the tales of the royal ancestors, her family and her people. Please refer to the handout.

2 Samuel 13:1-22⁸

^{13:1}And it was after this, and Absalom, son of David, had a beautiful sister, and her name was Tamar. And Amnon, son of David, loved her. ²And Amnon was so distressed as to make himself sick over Tamar, his sister, because she was a virgin, and it was inconceivable in Amnon’s eyes to do anything to her.

³Amnon had a friend, and his name was Jonadab, son of Shimeah, David’s brother, and

Jonadab was a very *crafty* man. ⁴And he said to him, “Why are you so low, son of the king, morning after morning? Won’t you tell me?”

And Amnon said to him, “I love Tamar, my brother Absalom’s sister.”

⁵And Jonadab said to him, “Lie down on your bed and act sick, and your father will come to see you, and say to him, “*Please let my sister Tamar come, and she will break my fast with bread; for she will perform before my eyes habbiryâ in order that I may see, and I’ll eat from her hand.*”

We pause here to consider what is happening. Note how Jonadab who isn’t consumed with passion, like a fraternity brother, suggests Amnon can get a closer view of Tamar by tricking his father into sending her to Amnon’s house to perform a well-known healing ritual, *habbiryâ*.⁹ The plan works. Listen carefully to what Amnon says to David, and the king to Tamar.

⁶So Amnon lay down and acted sick, and the king came to see him, and Amnon said to the king, “*Please let my sister Tamar come and shape a couple of heart-loaves in my sight, so that I may break fast from her hand.*”¹⁰

⁷David sent to Tamar at the house, saying, “*Please go to your brother Amnon’s house and perform for him habbiryâ.*”

Without Amnon’s specifying the name of the ritual, David understands and uses the proper name in requesting Tamar perform a ritual at Amnon’s home.

⁸So Tamar went to her brother Amnon’s house. He was lying down. She took the dough and kneaded it and *shaped hearts* before his eyes and cooked the *heart-loaves*, ^{9a}she took *the server and poured out* in front of him. *But* he refused to eat.

Visualize Tamar, wearing the “coat of many colors” of a royal priestess, preparing the ritual “heart”shaped loaves. Heart-loaves connote a Mesopotamian ritual called “rising of the heart” performed by a woman for an impotent man. Tamar pours a libation.

^{9b}Amnon said, “Have everyone go out from me.” And everyone went out from him. ¹⁰And Amnon said to Tamar, “Bring *habbiryâ* to the room, so I may *break fast* from your hand,” and Tamar took the *heart-loaves* that she had made and brought them to the room, to Amnon, her brother, ¹¹and she brought them over to him to eat. And he took hold of her and said to her, “Come, lie with me, my sister!”

Sounding like imperial Joseph before he reveals his identity to his brothers, Amnon orders everyone out. Tamar does not leave because the ritual involves feeding the ill person the “heart-loaves.” A similar ritual performed by a Hittite woman is performed in the home of an ill person who is expected to dream. The woman practitioner than interprets the dream, which will suggest whether or not the patient will recover.¹¹ So Tamar enters his room. Amnon “takes hold of her.” Then, “Come lie with me” parallels what we hear from Potiphar’s wife when she tries to seduce Joseph. Now we hear Tamar’s voice.

2 Samuel 13:¹²And she said to him, “Don’t, my brother! Don’t *force* me (אַל־תַּעֲנִי). Because such a thing isn’t done in Israel. Don’t do this *vile* thing (אַל־תַּעֲשֶׂה אֶת־הַנְּבִלָה הַזֹּאת). ¹³And I, where would I *carry my shame*? And *you*, you’ll be like one of the *scoundrels* (הַנְּבִלִים) in Israel. And now, speak to the king, because he won’t *withhold* me from you.” ¹⁴And he *would not* to listen to her voice. *Stronger than she he forced her and lay her.*

Visualize Tamar resisting Amnon’s grasp. She is well aware of what his act will

mean for her. He does not release her so she speaks of consequences for him. Unable to free herself, she offers an alternative for him to have his way. Amnon's act resembles the ruthlessness of men who surround Lot's house demanding the visitors that they might "know" them (Gen 19:5) and the Gibeonites who gang rape the Levite's wife (Judges 19:22-26). Amnon willfully does not respect her plea. He forces himself on her. The Hebrew word for "humiliated" in other contexts of Scriptures means afflict, rape, violate, make feel dependent, mortify. The root ענה is YHWH's description of what will happen to Israel in Egypt (Gen. 15:13).

¹⁵ *And Amnon hated her a very great hatred. That hatred was a greater hatred of her—more than the love with which he loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Get up. Go."*

¹⁶ *And she said to him, "No! Concerning this evil, to send me away, is greater than the other that you did to me."*

And he was not willing to listen to her. ¹⁷And he called his *young servant* and said, "Send *this* away from me, outside! And *bolt* the door behind her!"

The abuser is revolted by his victim. Again she resists. She knows laws and customs. Ironically, the comparison of Amnon's hatred to his love of Tamar, and his act of sending her away as greater than his raping her are reversals of a comparison Boaz makes in his admiration of Ruth for choosing him over a younger or richer man to father a child for her deceased husband, herself, and Naomi (Ruth 3:10). The book of Ruth is a gem in Scriptures, and I suggest a part of the healing of Tamar.¹²

¹⁸*Though she had on a coat of many colors, because virgin daughters of the king would wear such sacred-ropes, his servant brought her outside and bolted the door behind her.* ¹⁹And

Tamar put ashes on her head and ripped *the coat of many colors* that she had on and put her hand to her head and went on and on screaming.

She is wearing a protective, royal-priestly garment like other Mesopotamian “daughters of the king” who act as intermediaries between members of the royal house and the elohim. These royal priestesses were often literate.¹³ After David’s crimes of adultery and murder, Tamar is the ewe lamb who was “like a daughter” to the poor man in Nathan’s story (2 Sam 12:1-4). In effect Tamar is one of four sacrifices, payments for her father’s crimes.¹⁴ She does not slink away in shame. With rage and grief she rips the distinguishing garment and wails her anguish as she moves through the streets of Jerusalem.

^{20a}And Absalom, her brother, said to her, “Has *Aminon*, your brother, been with you? *For* now, my sister, keep quiet. He’s your brother. Don’t set your heart on this thing.”

How does Absalom know Amnon was the attacker? Was Amnon’s ruthless treatment of women well known?

^{20b}And Tamar stayed at her brother Absalom’s house and was devastated.

Let us reflect on the Hebrew word שָׁמָה (שָׁמָה) here translated “devastated.” Later prophets frequently use the image of a desolate woman to describe Judah & Israel, Babylon, Egypt, and Edom. In early narratives, Egyptians speaking to Joseph use the term to express their situation during the famine (Gen 47:19). In 1 Sam 5:6 strong translations are used to describe the affliction of the Philistines as they return the Ark to the Israelites: TNK “havoc,” JPS, KJV “destroy,” NRS “terrify,” NAS “ravage,” NIV “devastation.” David employs the root שָׁמָה three times in his prayers of anguish (Ps 40:16; Ps 69:26; Ps

143:4). The term is variously translated KJV “desolate,” JPS, NRS “appalled,” TNK “numbed with horror.” Familiar with her father’s prayers, legends and history of her people, a third person omniscient narrator indicates in a word how Tamar feels when isolated in her brother Absalom’s house.

²¹And King David heard all these things and was very *depressed*. ²²And Absalom did not speak with Amnon, either good or bad, because Absalom hated Amnon over the fact that he had degraded Tamar, his sister.

Her protector, Absalom, silences her to protect family honor. David, like Jacob after the rape of Dinah, is silent. I suggest David is depressed, anger turned inward, as he does nothing.¹⁵ Like Dinah’s brothers, Absalom takes revenge.

In 2 Samuel 13, we hear Tamar voice her concerns, her knowledge of law and customs, and her wit under stress, both before and after the rape.

“Why did this happen to me?” is often heard from a victim of violence. I suggest that after a time, perhaps after her brother Absalom’s death, she feels compelled to sort out what happened, to understand her father’s inaction, and to investigate how the rape came about. Tamar explores her understanding of earth and heaven, her place among her people and within her family, and her family’s place in relation to YHWH from the beginning in Eden. On one level, the Joseph story is her story: his privilege as darling of his father; his high standards which made him impatient with his brothers so that he complains to their father; his confidence in his talents; and his youthful oblivious, arrogant joy in sharing his dreams—all might characterize Tamar as a royal-priestess sent by the king to perform a ritual before she was humiliated, metaphorically cast

into a pit by her brother.

DeSalvo quotes Alice Walker, who in italics characterized “Writing as *a very sturdy ladder out of the pit*. I like that metaphor very much. For it says that though there’s a pit, there’s a way out that’s safe and strong and dependable. That all you have to do when you’re in the pit is to remember that writing’s there. And use it as a way to reach freedom and safety” (p.8).

Furthermore, DeSalvo suggests “*the act of writing about something painful can help right a wrong that has been done to you*. It can be a form of restitution” (p. 10). She also points out that in studies of a particular kind of writing—describing what happened and how one feels about it—women tend to benefit more than men (p. 26).

The coat of many colors distinguishes Joseph and Tamar as their fathers’ favorite, most promising child, spiritually and intellectually gifted, and breathtaking to behold. Jacob’s heartbreak over the “death” of Joseph may reflect Tamar’s wish of how her father feels regarding her humiliation. Tamar also writes of David’s years of despondency then grief unleashed on hearing that Absalom is dead.

Joseph survives his siblings’ attack, the pit, slavery, and imprisonment. He rises to higher and higher levels of achievement in every adverse circumstance, a tale that inspires adults and children to this very day. I suggest Tamar’s journey continues to have parallels to Joseph. Her irrepressible gifts are expressed in telling and writing history and legends drawn from writings, oral performances, her father’s prayers, family and court gossip among women and men, her own investigation and evaluation of sources. Her indomitable, energetic, independent devotion to YHWH is conveyed through her writing and is what grips us to this very day. She “carries” her grief well by transforming her humiliation into a license for telling history—her story—as she

understands it.¹⁶

If we can set aside the preconception that only men wrote Scriptures, then we can empathize with each character, man or woman, so learn to be cautious regarding what is hateful—the scoundrels like Amnon and Potiphar’s wife—and feel compassion for those who suffer and strive to survive in a difficult world where people who behave like gods take what they please and damn everyone else.

One of Tamar’s great achievements is the biography of her father, from a shepherd lad who soothes King Saul’s anguish with music, to a smart-mouthed young warrior who slays Goliath, to a captain of an army, to an outlaw and mercenary for a Philistine king, to king of Judah, and then monarch of all Israel. Tamar’s consummate writing skill comes through in the Court History of David, his adultery and murder, the fallout from his crimes, the description of how her rape came about, the ordeal, and how she felt at the time. The context within the history of the people beginning in Eden provides the meaning she constructs.

Portrayed as morally paralyzed by his own sins and grief, David does not punish Amnon, does not even exile him for his atrocity nor for his own safety. In effect, from the point of view of the child, David abandons his daughter. None-the-less, he is her father. The quality of their special connection, her resilient affection comes through in all that Tamar writes about YHWH, her father, and her ancestors.

Tamar casts protagonists whose stature is measured not by might, nor by gender, but by spiritual vigor.

For example, consider the mysterious episode in Exodus 4:24-26. After YHWH commands Moses to tell Pharaoh YHWH would kill his firstborn, suddenly “at a camp on the

way, YHWH encountered him and sought to kill him.” Seeing the Divine menace, “Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin and touched His feet with it.” Clearly the firstborn of Moses was not circumcised according to the Hebrew custom on the eighth day. Zipporah understood that is why YHWH was about to kill a loved one as they set out on this mission. In a crisis, this priest’s daughter Zipporah knows exactly what to do and say. “Surely You are a *hoten* of blood to me.” In Hebrew she appears to address Moses as *hatan* “bridegroom of blood.” However, in Arabic *hoten* is the bride’s father who circumcises the man before marriage.¹⁷ In this perilous moment, Zipporah addresses YHWH as her Father who requires the blood of circumcision. “And He withdrew from him.” Zipporah’s act and words are effective. Then she says, “You are a *hoten* of blood in regard to the circumcisions.” מַלְאָכָה appears only once in the Bible and is feminine plural which indicates to me that she has, metaphorically, removed the covering of her heart, thus opening her heart to YHWH—converted— and she will circumcise her second son.¹⁸ Now that Zipporah has passed YHWH’s test of her, Moses is permitted to continue his journey.

We may imagine that the violence done to Tamar is the “circumcision” of her heart which provokes her to write the story of Israel, evoking healing and restitution for wrongs done.

Judith Plaskow regrets that in Scripture: "Women are named through a filter of male experience."¹⁹ I invite you to remove the male filter so you may hear narratives in the voice of Tamar.

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Endnotes

1. James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: a Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (Free Press: New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, 2007).
2. Tamar's grandfather on her mother's side is Talmai, king of Geshur (2 Sam 13:37). Her heritage from both sides includes Judah and Geshur, just east of the Galilee and north of the Joseph tribes. I suggest that over a lifetime of writing she could well revise so-called J narratives with the so-called E narratives following Solomon's death and the division of Judah and Israel.
3. "In literature and storytelling, a point of view is the related experience of the narrator — not that of the author. Authors rarely, in fiction and non-fiction, insert or inject their own voice, as this challenges the suspension of disbelief. Texts encourage the reader to identify with the narrator, not with the author. . . . Most novels are narrated in 'third person omniscient', or in 'third person limited'. A third person omniscient narrator can shift focus from character to character with knowledge of everyone's thoughts and of events of which no single character would be aware." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point_of_view_\(literature\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point_of_view_(literature)). Some scholars see the narratives of David as leading to the "first real history writing in the ancient Near East." Kugel, p. 492.
4. Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).
5. DeSalvo, p. 19 ff. A recent New York Times article illustrates the point. Jeffrey Gettleman, "Rape Victims' Words Help Jolt Congo Into Change," 10/17/08 http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/18/world/africa/18congo.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin
6. David Rosenberg and Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990). Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984); "Dear Harold Bloom" *Lilith*, Summer 1991, 16:3, 28. See "Tamar: Royal Rape of Wisdom," p. 37 ff, for a beautiful literary appreciation of the 2 Samuel 13.
7. Abraham and Isaac both fear for their lives because their wives are beautiful. An Egyptian parallel suggests they had reason to consider the threat to their lives. Adrien Bledstein, unpublished paper, "Parallel Triangles: Bata and Uriah, Beautiful Wife and Ruler," Society for Biblical Literature, Atlanta, November 2003.
8. The rendering of the text is my variation of Richard E. Friedman's 1998 "literal" translation in his book, *The Hidden Book in the Bible* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) which through word analysis confirms my perception that one gifted narrator writes the great tales. Where my version differs is indicated by italics and draws on my research into the ancient Near

Eastern cultural context, bringing to light significant elements known to the contemporary audience but lost to subsequent readers. Friedman distinguishes J and E as different narrators from south and north in *Who Wrote the Bible* (New York: Summit Books, 1987).

9. Adrien Bledstein, "Was *Habbiryâ* a Healing Ritual Performed by a Woman in King David's House?" *Biblical Research*, 1992, 37:5-31; "Dr. Tamar" a letter in *Bible Review* October 1995, 10-11.

10. לבבות "heart cakes" is used only in 2 Sam 13:6, 8, and 10.

11. Bledstein, *Habbiryâ*; "Dr. Tamar" a letter in *Bible Review*.

12. Bledstein, "Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth Were Written by a Woman . . ." *Ruth, A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 3:116-133

13. Adrien Bledstein, "Tamar and the 'Coat of Many Colors'" *Samuel and Kings, A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 2/7:65-83

14. When David hears the story of the rich man who stole and served the poor man's one ewe lamb, he is furious, blurts out his feeling "the man should die," then announces the punishment according to law, pay fourfold. Through Nathan, YHWH says David will not die for his crimes. But David does suffer fourfold: death of the infant, rape of Tamar, death of Amnon, and death of Absalom. Paper: Adrien Bledstein, "David's Rupture with God, Depression, and Recovery," Society for Biblical Literature, Washington DC, November 19, 2006.

15. Paper: Bledstein, "David's Rupture with God . . ."

16. Textual ambiguities and unconventional behavior of characters take on new meanings in relation to Tamar addressing audiences in David's then Solomon's courts, with her revisions attributed to the so-called "Elohist" during the reign of Solomon and following his death.

17. In Hebrew narratives, Zipporah as a Midianite is a descendant of Keturah and Abraham, and her father Jethro is called a priest of Midian. In Ex. 4:25 & 6, the word translated husband or bridegroom from Hebrew *hatan* suggests Zipporah is addressing Moses, indeed the NRSV inserts the name of Moses as the male whose feet or genitals she touches. While *hatan* in Hebrew means bridegroom, i.e. husband, Brown, Driver and Briggs, (p. 368) also lists *hoten*, as circumciser, suggesting it probably arose from "circumcise" as in Arabic. *Hoten* appears in Ex 3:1 and Ex 4:18, with regard to Jethro who is *hotno*, his father-in-law, referring to Moses. Furthermore, BDB suggests that *hoten* is a "wife's father (Ar. ... a circumciser, hence father-in-law, with ref. to circumcision performed on young men just before marriage)." It was not and is not uncommon to address God as "Father."

18. See Dt 10:16 for the metaphoric use of circumcision which applies to women as well as men.

19. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 6.