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ABSALOM'S DAUGHTER:
AN ESSAY IN VESTIGE HISTORIOGRAPHY

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No one ever lies. People often do what they have to do to make their story sound right.

William Ginsburg*

There is a notice about Absalom that is, set half way between the two principal segments of his story: his murder of Amnon for the rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13-14.24) and his attempt to usurp his father's throne (2 Sam. 14.28-18.18).¹ The Hebrew notice, dispensing heretofore undisclosed information about Absalom, translates as follows (2 Sam. 14.25-27).²

Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised as much for being handsome as was Absalom; from the step of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish on him. When he cut his head hair-at specific intervals he needed to cut it; as it grew too heavy on him, he would cut it-he would weigh that head hair, about two hundred shekels, the king's weight. Three sons were born to Absalom and just one daughter, her name being Tamar; she was a beautiful woman.

* Quoted from the *New York Times*, 'Week in Review', 21 January 2001, p. 1.

1. Aside from consulting the commentaries on 2 Sam. and inspecting entries in dictionaries and encyclopedias *sub* 'David', 'Absalom' and 'Tamar', I have profited from (though I do not always cite) the following essays: V.H. Matthews and D.C. Benjamin, 'Amnon and Tamar', in G.D. Young *et al.* (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on his 80th Birthday* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1997), pp. 339-66; G.P. Ridout, 'The Rape of Tamar', in J.J. Jackson and M. Kessler (eds.), *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (PTMS, I; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974), pp. 75-84; J. Van Seters, 'Love and Death in the Court of David', in J.H. Marks and R.M. Good (eds.), *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (Guilford, CT: Four Quarters, 1987), pp. 121-24.

2. Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

The notice also signals a major change in the portrayal of the prince. The Absalom who meets a distraught Tamar is remarkably prudent (he advises her not to make a fuss), controlled (he shares no ugly words with Amnon), discreet (he keeps his counsel on his plans) and patient (he waits two years before exacting vengeance and three more years at the Geshur court of his grandfather).³ Whether or not a metamorphosis was triggered by his father's moral blindness cannot be said, but the Absalom who resumes his life after the exile is markedly different in sensibility than heretofore.⁴ He is rebellious and openly courts power; he cajoles, soothes, flatters, but also displays the common touch that his father once had but lost after years in palace living.

Yet, while the stories about Absalom themselves only inaugurate the disintegration of David's world that is so major a theme in the succession narratives (beginning with 2 Sam. 9), it is not at all obvious why the narrator has made the notice of 2 Sam. 14.25-27 so pivotal to his tale.⁵ To label these verses 'secondary' or 'a later addition', as is done by many commentators, is a judgment that can hardly be useful.⁶

3. We also wonder how Jonadab, perhaps with the sense that conspirators display about their opponents, knew exactly what Absalom had planned to do (see 2 Sam. 13.32-37).

4. Such a change in posture is implied in the story of Keret in which his son Yassib (Yassub) openly proclaims his right to the throne, accusing his father of neglect of duty; translation by E. Greenstein in S.B. Parker (ed.) *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Writings from the Ancient World, 9; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 40-42; comments by S.B. Parker, *The Pre-Biblical Tradition: Essays on the Ugaritic Poems Keret and Aghat* (RSB, 24; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), pp. 197-203. The portrait of Absalom in 2 Sam. 13 has permitted Y. Amit to interpret the Tamar episode as a coherent and independent unit, meant to draw sympathy for the future usurper, 'The Story of Amnon and Tamar: Reservoir of Sympathy for Absalom', *Hasifrut* 32/9 (1983); pp. 80-87.

5. A major feature of the biographical style of historiography adopted by the Hebrew is to have a hero overcome many obstacles to achieve his goals, only to have them compromised by fratricide and deaths. See my study, 'The Biographic mode in Hebrew literature', in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, iii v. 17 (1982), pp. 1-12. See also G. W. Ahlstrom (JSOTSup, 31; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984), pp. 305-12.

6. There are suggestions, too, that the passage (or parts thereof) was moved from a later placement (most often suggested: just before 15.1); see C. Conroy, *Absalom, Absalom: Narrative and Language in 2 Sam. 13-20* (AnBib, 81; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), pp. 110-11. Reasons that are offered include the

To my good friend Max Miller I offer a study of these verses, making a proposal that, as solid a historian as he is, he is likely to question; but let it at least amuse him.

Absalom, the King

In the notice of 2 Samuel 14, we are told first that Absalom was an attractive presence. The vocabulary is rather fulsome and allocated to two phrases that together establish how physically exceptional Absalom was. The sequence follows a conventional Hebrew literary style in which the incomparability of individuals ('Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised as much for being handsome as was Absalom') is illogically stated before describing their features ('From the step of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish on him'...).⁷ What is interesting to note here is that comparisons built on the formulation '...there was no one like...', when referring to men, generally is applied to kings and leaders.⁸ In the case of Absalom, it is his beauty that is so beyond equal that an unusual phrase is applied to it, *lehallel me'od*. Aside from its uniqueness as a superlative construction that joins an adverb to an infinitive, it may be worth noting that *lehallel*, while commonplace with God as its object, is connected with kings (2 Chron. 23.12-13, acclamation of Joash).⁹

The narrator has waited until this juncture to praise Absalom for his beauty.¹⁰ We should distinguish among praise to individuals for being

attribution of children to Absalom (despite 2 Sam. 18.18) and the reference to the king's weight, deemed by scholars to reflect the Persian period.

7. An excellent example is in 1 Sam. 9.2 (said about Saul), 'There was no one finer among the men of Israel; from his shoulders and up he was taller than any of the people.'

8. Said about Joseph's incomparable wisdom (Gen. 41.39), Moses' intimacy with God (Deut. 34.10), Saul's attractiveness (1 Sam. 9.2), Solomon's wisdom and wealth (1 Kgs 3.12,13; see 1 Chron. 29.2; 2 Chron. 1.12; Neh. 13.26), Ahab's wickedness (1 Kgs 21.25), and the faithfulness of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18.5) and Josiah (2 Kgs 23.25). Somewhat similar is the statement about Daniel and his colleagues (Dan. 1.19-20). The phrasing can also be applied to inanimate objects (plagues, Exod. 9.18, 24, 26; 10.14) and to weapons (1 Sam. 21.10).

9. The formulation is also seldom attached to women: Sarai in Gen. 12.15, the king's favorite (Song 6.9), and a noble woman (Prov. 31.29, 31). Ironic uses are Prov. 27.2; Pss. 10.3 (modesty); 28.4 (evildoer); and Ezek. 26.17 (Tyre).

10. 'Only at the end of this affair does the narrator release the information about

handsome (using variations of the root **yph*), to the attractive features they are specifically said to display, and to their physique (referring to their attractive figure [*to'ar*] or looks [*mar 'eh / r(5'1)*]). To convey a generally handsome look, Hebrew creates a combination of the above vocabulary. Thus, Joseph is said to very very alluring (*yepeh[-]t(5'ar*, Gen. 39.6), and from the Philistine's perspective, David was good-looking (*yepeh mar'eh*, 1 Sam. 17.42). David was also said (1 Sam. 16.12) to have had 'beautiful eyes' (*yepeh `enayim*) and to be 'good-looking' (*lob ro 'i*). Adonijah was very nicely proportioned (*!6b-to 'ar m^e 'od*, 1 Kgs. 1.6), but Saul was simply a fine adolescent (*bahur wdtob*, 1 Sam. 9.2), 'taller than most of his compatriots.¹² In the case of Absalom, however, we are told not just that he was very handsome, but that he had no bodily defect. Yet, we must also observe that the expression *mikkaf regel we 'ad godqod* ('from the step of the foot to the crown of the head'; in one case, Isa. 1.16, simply *ro's*, 'head') occurs exclusively in negative contexts, associated with punishment (Deut. 28.35; Job 2.7).¹³ So a savvy listener to Scripture would have

Absalom's looks, with a perfect timing that the reader grimly smiles at in later recollection: just before the prince crosses the line separating the man of honor from the malcontent and rebel.' M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (ILB; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 358. See also his section, 'Good Looks in Samuel', pp. 354-64.

11. *Bahur* is only the male equivalent of *betides*, an adolescent; see Deut. 32.2 and Isa. 62.5. See Jer. 51.22; Ezek. 9.6; 2 Chron. 36.17; and especially Eccl. 11.9, with regard to the time of life of a *bahur*. Still the accent here is not on his youth (as it was in the case of David) but on his readiness for the task that was to be his.

12. See also 1 Sam. 10.23. Hence God's admonition to Samuel to 'pay no attention to shape or height, for I have rejected him' (1 Sam. 16.7).

13. In fact all but two of a dozen references to the (largely) poetic term *godqod*, 'crown of the head', are similarly associated with negative consequences. We might notice how the expression goes from bottom (feet) to top (crown of head/head) in Deut. 28.5; 2 Sam. 14.25; Job 2.7; and (with *r(5'9)* in Isa. 1.6. (Exceptional is Lev. Z 12 with head *ng* before *eci*.) Such retrograde sequence is familiar from the Song of Songs (7.2-10), on which see my comments in 'A Major Contribution to Song of Songs Scholarship', *JAOS* 107 (1987), pp. 733-39. The sequence seems normal to King Zimri-Lim of Mari when he writes his wife, 'I am now sending you (potential) female weavers, among which there are priestesses. Sort out the priestesses and assign them to weaving establishments. Choose from among the weavers thirty-or as many as are worth selecting-handsome ones, who have no blemishes from toes to head hair, and assign these to Warad-ilishu.

recognized it as potentially a portent of trouble ahead for Absalom, kingly or otherwise.

We are told next about Absalom's luxuriant hair. It is often thought, at least since Josephus's day, that the narrator's focus on this aspect of the prince's anatomy foreshadows his ignominious manner of death." However, as described in 2 Sam. 18.9, Absalom's head (not hair) got caught in the branches of an oak, and he was left suspended in mid-air, when the mule he was riding (as befits his royal status) continued on its way. Far-fetched is the view that the reference to hair was foreshadowed in David's reassurance to the woman of Tekoah that no harm would come to her son's hair, unintentionally applied to Absalom (2 Sam. 14.11).¹⁵ So why hair is mentioned is not readily apparent. Conroy is not unique in thinking of hair as a symbol of pride) But even in an age when bushy or curled hair was favored (Judg. 16.13, 19; Song 5.11),

Have Warad-ilishu teach them Subarean chant; but their quarters are not to be changed. Be careful with their ration so that their looks will not change...' (ARM 10.126 = J.-M. Durand, *Documents épistolaires du palais de Mari*,³ [Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient, 18; Paris: les Editions du Cerf], pp. 349-50 [No. 1166]). Retrograde listings are also known for genealogies. This is the case of Saul's line in 1 Sam. 9.1-2, for which see further J.M. Sasson, 'Generation, Seventh', *IDBSup* (1976), p. 355; cf. the retrograde sequence in the Assyrian King List; see R.R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (YNER, 7; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 86-100. The pattern may be following a bottom-to-top sequence in the scanning of artistic depictions with multiple bands. For Mesopotamia, see I. Winter, 'After the Battle Is Over: The Stele of the Vultures and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East', in H.L. Kessler and M.S. Simpson (eds.), *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Studies in the History of Art, 16; Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1985), pp. 11-32, especially from p. 19; H. Pittman, 'Unwinding the White Obelisk', in H. Waetzoldt and H. Hauptmann (eds.), *Ass.vrien im Wandel der Zeiten XXXIXe Rencontre assyriologique internationale, Heidelberg 6.-10. Juli 1992* (HSAO, 6; Heidelberg: University Press, 1997), pp. 347-54 (ref. courtesy B. Porter). For Egypt, see J. Baines, 'Temple Symbolism', *Royal Anthropological Institute News* 15 (1976), pp. 10-15.

14. *Ant. 1.10.2*, '... he entangled his hair greatly in the large boughs of a knotty tree that spread a great way, and there he hung, after a surprising manner...' I quote Josephus from the translation of W. Whiston, *Josephus: Complete Works* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1960).

15. See most recently, H.S. Pypers, *David as Reader: 2 Samuel 12.1-15 and the Poetics of Fatherhood* (Biblnt, 23; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), pp. 129-30.

16. Conroy, *Absalom, Absalom*, p. 44 n. 4. If there is pride, it was in weighing the hair, not having it.

what is told about Absalom's hair seems more about burden than pride: once each year, Absalom would produce hair that weighs 2.5 kilos (200 shekels at 11.5 each), equalling the wool production of a healthy ram." One clue to the notice's significance may well be the reference to the 'king's stone [= standard]' by which Absalom's hair was weighed. While the phrase seems unexceptional (it is matched in Mesopotamian measures, from the Old Babylonian period on), it remains unique in Scripture, and it may not at all be surprising, if it were coined specifically to connect with Absalom's royal status.

Inspection of the two verses so far discussed have revealed that the physical attributes assigned Absalom are to be read as clues not so much of Absalom's vanity or ostentation, but of his presentation as a royal figure. In this respect, they serve the same role as the passages about Saul (1 Sam. 9.2-3) and David (1 Sam. 16.12-13) that foreshadow their rise to kingship. Even before his open rebellion, the verses imply that there were clues to his accession to power, aside from the pomp accompanying his moves (15.1) and his readiness to dispense justice (15.2-6). In fact, eventually Absalom's usurpation of the throne was so complete that after the failure of the rebellion his father had to campaign once more for it (2 Sam. 19-20).

The Children of Absalom

In 2 Sam. 14.27, the narrator dispenses information that ostensibly differs in goal from what immediately precedes. The focus shifts to Absalom's children. We are told that there were born to him three sons (none named) and a daughter, '...her name being Tamar; she was a beautiful woman.'" The reference to sons has meaning only as an issue

17. Josephus (*Ant.* 7.8.5), found a way to exaggerate on the exaggeration, '...and indeed such was the thickness of the hair of [Absalom's] head, that it was with difficulty that he was polled every eighth day; and his hair weighed two hundred shekels, which are five pounds'. On the amount of wool produced by a ram, see E. Firmage, 'Zoology', *ABD* (1992), VI, p. 1126.

18. About women, the following vocabulary describes their physical attributes: *ydpd* ('pretty') is said of Tamar, sister of Absalom (2 Sam. 13.1), and of the Shunamite (1 Kgs 1.3; but *ydpd* 'ad-me'od ['exceedingly pretty'] in 1 Kgs 1.4), and often of the beloved in the Song of Songs (1.15; 4.1, 7; 6.4, 10). In Prov. 11.22, it is said, 'As a ring of gold on a swine's nose is a beautiful woman who lacks sense.' Vashti and loose women are also said to be pretty (Est. 1.11; Prov. 6.25). *Yepéh-pÿyyd* (based on a reduplication of the root; 'very pretty') is said of Egypt (but a

concerning the continuity of Absalom's kingship, thwarted though his rule might have become. And this is confirmed by the other allusion to Absalom's progeny, albeit negative, coming at the conclusion of his story (2 Sam. 18.18) and so bracketing it:

In his lifetime, Absalom took the pillar that was in the Valley of the King and erected it for himself, for he said, 'I have no son to keep my name alive'. So he dedicated the pillar to himself. It has been called 'Absalom's Memorial' ever since.¹⁹

Whether or not Absalom had sons has exercised scholars: some propose that he never did, others that he once did but was unable to father more after they died, or still others that they were executed during the rebellion. The suggestion is commonly met that one reference to sons (most often that of 2 Sam. 18.18) or the other (2 Sam. 14.27) is a later addition. But it must be noted that in 2 Sam. 18.18 Absalom is excusing his appropriation of a (previously installed) pillar, not because he did not have sons, but because during his lifetime no sons of his had enough prestige to set up a monument that honored their father. We recall that many commemorative stelae (for example Mesha's) are written in first-person mode by third parties.

Absalom's Daughter

The text insists that Absalom had only one daughter (*bat 'ahat*), 'her name being Tamar' (*usemdh tmar*, 2 Sam. 14.27). The formula *usemah* X occurs about ten times in Scripture, introducing women who are either

horsefly is after her; Jer. 46.20). *Ypat(Jmar'eh* characterizes a 'beautiful' woman, and it is applied to Sarai (Gen. 12.11, 14) and to Tamar, Absalom's daughter (2 Sam. 14.27). Pharaoh dreams of beautiful cows (Gen. 41.4). *Tobat march* ('good-looking') were Rebekah (Gen. 26.7), Vashti (Est. 1.11), and a number of women against whom Esther competed (Est. 2.3). *Yepat-War* ('shapely') is how a desirable captured slave is labeled (Dent. 21.11). *Yenat-tn'ar winat mar'ph* ('shapely and beautiful') is said of Rachel (Gen. 29.17), while Esther is said to have been *yepat-to'ar we, td bat mar'eh* ('shapely and good-looking', Est. 2.7). Abigail, wife of David, while not beautiful, was *,tdbat-sekel wipat War* ('intelligent and shapely', 1 Sam. 25.3).

19. In other attestations, *ma~sebet/mas.ebat* is in construct: stone pillar (Gen. 35.14), pillar of Rachel's tomb (Gen. 35.20), pillar of Baal (2 Kgs 3.2; 10.27). The implication is that Absalom appropriated a pillar that was in the Valley of the King, naming it after himself.

featured in subsequent narrative or assigned a number of children." In our case, however, except to be praised for her beauty, Tamar has no story attached to her. This is in contrast to 2 Sam. 13.1, which has a nearly duplicate vocabulary ('To Absalom, son of David, was a pretty sister, her name being Tamar'), but which proceeds with the story of her rape.²¹ The anomaly was noted long ago, and there were efforts to give Tamar, daughter of Absalom, a future. Thus, while the majority of Greek versions agree with the *MT* in vv. 25 and 26 (with diverse spellings of the name Absalom [Abeshalom, Abesalom]), for v. 27b, Vaticanus reads, '...and one daughter, and her name was Themar; she was a very beautiful woman, and she became the wife of Rehoboam, son of Solomon, and she bears to him Abiathar'. For the same section the 'proto-Lucianic' (Cross) or 'Antiochian' (Barthelemy) Greek reads, '...and one daughter, and her name was Maacha. And she was a very beautiful woman, and she became the wife of Rehoboam, son of Solomon, and she bears to him Abia'.²² This last reading of her name as Maacah is itself likely inspired by 1 Kgs 15.2 and 10 in which an Abishalom (Absalom in 2 Chron. 11.20-21) was the father of Maacah,

20. Here is a rundown of the attestations: Gen. 16.1 (Hagar, surrogate for Sarai/Sarah, narrative follows); Gen. 22.24 (Reumah, concubine of Nahor; sons listed); Gen. 25.1 (Keturah, Abraham's wife; sons listed); Gen. 38.6 (Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law; narrative follows); Josh. 2.1 (Rahab; narrative follows); Judg. 16.4 (Delilah; narrative follows); 2 Sam. 3.7 (Rispa, Saul's concubine; narrative fragments in later chapters); 2 Sam. 13.1 (Tamar, Amnon's sister; narrative follows); 2 Sam. 14.27 (Tamar, Absalom's daughter; no narrative); 1 Chron. 2.26 (Atarah, Jerahmeel's concubine; sons listed). Different formulation occurs for Naamah, Tubal-cain's sister ('*ahot tirbal-gayin*') in Gen. 4.22, also with no narrative or listing of sons.

21. The commentaries commonly explain that Absalom named his daughter after his raped sister. Given that 2 Sam. 14.27 is chronologically set within five years of the rape, it would have been premature to describe any daughter of his as a beautiful 'woman', because the term applied to her ('*issd*) is not normally used when describing young children or adolescents (as was, for example, *na'ard* or '*uunu*'),

22. For these versions see S. Pisano, *Additions or Omissions in the Books of Samuel: The Significant Pluses and Minuses in the Massoretic, LXX and Qumran Texts* (OBO, 57; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1984), pp. 55-57. Qumran fragments read this passage essentially the same as in *MT*, see E.C. Ulrich, '4Qsam': A Fragmentary Manuscript of 2 Sam. 14-15 from the Scribe of the *Serek hayyahad (IQS)*, in E. Tov (ed.), *The Hebrew and Greek Texts of Samuel* (Jerusalem: Academon, 1980), pp. 170, 176.

the wife of King Rehoboam and mother of his successor Abija(m). The reference itself has allowed some scholars to suggest that Absalom had two daughters, one named after his sister, the other after his mother. Other scholars have proposed that Maacah was Tamar's daughter.

What is obvious from the above is that the 'tradition' about the name and identity of the daughter of Absalom leaked badly, and I would resist hunting for an 'original' (presumably a truer) version." Luckily, in this essay we are not reconstructing historical truths but are fleshing out literary traditions, in which minor characters are brought in to fulfill other than annalistic purposes. The seemingly gratuitous and undeveloped reference to Tamar in 2 Sam. 14.27 has all the earmarks of being vestigial, that is a remnant from a fuller exposition, much like the mention of Naamah, sister of Tubal-Qayin in Gen. 4.17-22. But unlike Naamah who is mentioned in a starkly unpromising context (midrashic lore has her as Noah's wife), interesting speculation can be proposed for Tamar.²⁴

The Rape of Tamar

Biblical tradition in 2 Samuel and Chronicles gives names for 19 sons that David's many wives bore him. Although notices say that his concubines also bore him sons and daughters (2 Sam. 5.13; 1 Chron. 14.3), the birth of no daughter is specifically mentioned. That Absalom was a uterine brother of Tamar is inferred only from 2 Samuel 13, where the narrator invokes 'brother' and 'sister' almost 20 times, occasionally also very gratuitously, especially when the terms follow a proper name.²⁵ Thus, when Jonadab inquires into Amnon's distress, he is told,

23. Pisano's conclusion (*Additions or Omissions*, p. 56) is typically rational, but also with room for doubt: 'Thamar is thus proto-MT, for if Maacha had been in the text originally [*sic*], it is not likely that it would have been modified to Thamar in the face of so many texts which give the contrary.' See also the brief overview by G.H. Oiler, 'Tamar', *ABD* (1992), VI, p. 315.

24. Vestigial information must not be confused with obtrusive information, such as the unexpected introduction of a character (e.g. the man who tells Joseph where to find his brothers, Gen. 37.15-17), for vestigial characters are not played as *dei ex machina*.

25. This point is nicely worked out in Ridout, 'The Rape of Tamar', pp. 75-78. See also J. P. Fokkeman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analyses. 1. King David (II Sam. 9-20 and I Kings 1-2)* (Assen, NL: Van Gorcum, 1981), pp. 99-114.

'I am in love with Tamar, the *sister* of my *brother* Absalom' (13.4). In this context, we notice that the spelling of Absalom's name here is defective (written without the *nam*). This is conspicuous, for the name Absalom is written *plene* over 70 times but only a score of times is it spelled defectively (without *a nam*), all but one occurring after 2 Sam. 15.37.²⁶ This forlorn example seems to stick out and may betray a later insertion.

Obtrusive too is how Amnon calls his future victim *'aboti*, and Tamar calls her potential tormentor, *'abi* normally terms of endearment in erotic literature, but here obviously alerting us to incest as potential. Finally, embedding four references to 'brother' and 'sister' in Absalom's advice to Tamar (13.20) is much too conspicuous a deployment of crucial vocabulary, 'Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Aminon [*sic*] your brother been with you? Yet now, my sister, keep quiet. He is your brother. Don't be consumed with this matter". So Tamar, forsaken, lived in the house of Absalom, her brother.²¹ While a sensitive reader of texts might justify the 20 references to 'brother' and 'sister' in this episode, the cumulative effect of this surfeit succeeds in exhibiting a royal family about to become dysfunctional. Yet, the story of Amnon's assault on his [half-]sister continues to mystify readers, addressing questions that are answered, in articles and commentaries, but with mixed success:

- What could Jonadab, a courtier in his uncle's (David) circles hope to gain by advising Amnon to seduce his sister (vv. 4-5)?
- What was the nature of the activities that Tamar was asked to perform (v. 7)?²⁸

26. Incidentally, defective spellings of *salom* are but a handful (e.g. at Gen. 37.4; 1 Sam. 16.4; 1 Kgs 2.5, 6; 5.26; Jer. 15.5; Ezek. 13.16 [2x]). Almost 200 examples of *plene salom* are known.

27. Tamar is described as *somema*, the root of which has to do with devastation or the like (often applied to land). Isa. 54.1 offers hopes that *a somema* will produce more sons than a married woman, so referring to a woman who will never acquire *hncchanc* and family. — As a result of Amn's double abuse (rape and V11111G11, contrast with Shechem who rapes but wants to wed Dinah [Gen. 34]), Tamar must live her life beyond the palace, in utter humiliation.

28. The *lebibot* Tamar shaped for Amnon may or not be 'heart-shaped' (Hebrew *lib*, *lebab*), but people listening to the story will no doubt make the connection. They may also realize that the verb Amnon used for baking (*lelabbeb*) evokes a homonym that belongs to the language of love (Song 4.9). At any rate, the acts of kneading, shaping and baking of food by an attractive woman can be highly erotic.

- Did David expect Tamar to enter Amnon's bedchamber (v. 7)?²⁹
- Was rape or incest the *n'bala* against which Tamar warned Amnon (v. 12)?³⁰
- How could Tamar suggest (and expect Amnon to believe) that their father would allow the union of siblings (v. 12)?³¹
- After the rape, why would Tamar beg her brother not to send her away (v. 16)?
- Why did Tamar move to Absalom's home after her rape (v. 20)?
- Why did David allow this outrage to go unpunished (v. 21)?³²
- Why did Absalom wait two years to take his revenge (vv. 23-29)?

The Rape of Absalom's Daughter

The outrage itself is not precisely fixed within David's 40-year rule, occurring after his move to Jerusalem and after his marriage to Bathsheba. Given that Solomon was but a teenager when he succeeded David (see 1 Kgs 3.7; 1 Chron. 22.5; 29.1), we must imagine that everything about Absalom and about his revolt occurred toward the end of David's reign.³³ Since the rape occurred a maximum of seven to

A.J. Bledstein makes the interesting suggestion that Tamar was being asked to perform a healing ceremony that includes the baking of food magically sympathetic: 'Was Habbirya a Healing Ritual Performed by a Woman in King David's House?', *BibRes* 37 (1992), pp. 15-31. Conroy (*Absalom Absalom!*, pp. 29-30 n. 43), cites somewhat similar notions.

29. Normally unmarried princesses remain in the palace (see 13.7) and do not venture unaccompanied beyond it.

30. For *nebala* as a sexual outrage, see also Judg. 19.23, 24; 20.10.

31. Despite all the learned speculation in the commentaries, nothing in Hebrew or Canaanite culture would allow marriage between brothers and sisters. Hebrew law (whatever their age) is firmly opposed to it (Lev. 18.9 [from same mother], I I r from different mnnhPrecl. 70 17_ and Deut. 27.22). In antiquity, such marriages were found only in a few royal houses (Egypt, Elam, some Anatolian tribes), and they would have shocked the mores of people in Canaan and Israel.

32. B. Halpern argues that David thought that Yahweh inspired Amnon's rape of Tamar, and consequently, he could not punish the prince. *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). I find the explanation too accommodating.

33. It is possible that the MT of 2 Sam. 15.7 ('After forty years had gone by,

eight years before the revolt, Amnon and Absalom, who were born in Hebron, would have been adults, and likely to have had children of their own." We presume that their sister Tamar would have been slightly younger in age than both of her brothers. While we know from other tales that biblical women kept their charm deep into old age (Sarai/Sarah for example), it is difficult to imagine Amnon's violent passion for a spinster he has known most of his life. To the contrary, the story reads as if Amnon was struck by the freshness, youth and inviolability of Princess Tamar. It is tempting to imagine, therefore, that the object of Amnon's lust was not a sister of Absalom, but the daughter mentioned in 2 Sam. 14.27.

As far as I know, this suggestion has been made just once previously. In commenting on 2 Sam. 14.27, P.R. Ackroyd says about Tamar, '...she could have been named after his sister (ch. 13), though it is possible that this isolated note contains a hint of an alternative tradition that it was his daughter rather than his sister whom Amnon raped!.' The suggestion is hesitant, fleeting and unsubstantiated; so far it has elicited little response.³⁶ It might be worth developing this notion. I find it economical to do so by rehearsing the activities of those involved in

Absalom told the king, "I wish to go to Hebron and fulfill the vow I made to the Lord" fixes the revolt in David's last year; but other witnesses (Greek, Josephus) read 'four years', presumably after Absalom was brought back to Jerusalem. R. Althann reads 'forty days', a more conventional number. 'The Meaning of רַיִל אֶ'לָּא in 2 Sam. 15.7', *Bib 73* (1992), pp. 248-52. Absalom waited two years after the rape before murdering his brother (2 Sam. 13.25). He lived three years in exile (2 Sam. 13.38) and was two years (2 Sam. 14.28; four years, if one accepts the Greek for 2 Sam. 15.7) brewing a revolt while away from his father's presence. The interval shrinks appreciably if fractions of years are involved. See also R.E. Merrill, 'The "Accession Year" and Davidic Chronology', *JANESCU 19* (1989), pp. 101-12.

34. This inference is supported by the narrator's willingness to assign Absalom three sons and a daughter just as he ended his exile, so within five years of the rape (2 Sam. 14.27).

35. *The Second Book of Samuel* (-RC; riaggc: Ca ubriugc *ṛuivcrsliv* Press, 1977), p. 135. I made the same proposal in 1987, unaware of Ackroyd's proposal. See my 'Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)', *Prooftexts 8* (1988), pp. 333-39 (339 n. 3).

36. A.A. Anderson (*2 Samuel* [WBC, 11; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1989], p. 190) writes, 'It is unlikely that the mere occurrence of the name "Tamar" points to a tradition to which Amnon raped Absalom's daughter [italics there] rather than his sister (cf. Ackroyd, 135)'.

the sordid tale, with the victim being Absalom's daughter rather than his sister.

Amnon had a powerful desire for his niece Tamar that needed immediate satisfaction. He was frustrated that the object of his passion lived in the palace, where her movement was likely restricted. A beautiful young woman, Tamar was a valuable asset to her grandfather the king, and she wore the type of clothing that warned others about her status. As the heir apparent, Amnon could have sued for his niece's hand, and she likely would have been his wife. But he was loath to compromise so early in his career his choice of queen. In the protocol of antiquity, the decision normally cemented political connection with nearby powers. Moreover, Amnon could not have been eager to have his own brother, Absalom, as father of the queen, if only because it would have given undue prestige to an ambitious prince, himself next in line to the throne of Israel.

So Amnon obsessed about his niece; he may even have sensed that his was carnal lust that would die once quenched. (Hebrew uses 'ahab for infatuation, love, passion, even worship [of God].) When Jonadab suggested a ploy by which to bring Tamar into his personal compound, Amnon promptly acted on it. Amnon may not have imagined that his enjoyment of Tamar would turn so quickly into violent hatred; but the psychology is apt, especially in someone who was after momentary gratification and had no intention to be permanently attached to the girl. Before the rape, Amnon was enraged by Tamar's attempt to frustrate his goals and, afterwards, by her pleas for him to keep her. Amnon may have realized that Tamar was not likely to keep the assault quiet; yet-and this is psychologically also very true-he could only think of ridding himself of her. Whether Amnon ever worried about Absalom's reaction cannot be known, but he had such confidence in his father's affection for his firstborn that he decided to take his chances.

Jonadab was a courtier, practicing in the palace his reputation for intelligence and good counsel, for he was an 'exceedingly wise man' (, ~aka,n *Me' Ad*).³⁷ Jonadab had even hope to continue his privileged position, and so he befriended Amnon, the crown prince, and was solicitous about his welfare ('Prince, why are you in such a sorry state morning after morning? Won't you tell me?' v. 4). What exactly Jonadab was advising Amnon to do is open to debate. Taking their cues

37. The term *hdkam* describes a 'wise' person [including Solomon] as well as skilled artisans. It is not used pejoratively, but whether to read it ironically is up to us.

from what ensued in the story, some translations simply deem him a conspirator in the ensuing rape, and so mistranslate *hakam* as 'a crafty man', 'clever', 'subtle' or 'shrewd'. There is even speculation that he was a dupe of Absalom, goading Amnon into a rape that would lead to assassination."

Yet Jonadab never urged Amnon to rape Tamar, daughter of Absalom. He did indeed suggest deception, but to bring the two in contact, recalling that princesses were not likely to circulate freely beyond the women's quarters. It is also probable that he had expressed the same suggestion he offered Amnon directly to the king, for in instructing Tamar on what to do (v. 7), David adopted a partial version of Jonadab's advice (v. 5) rather than Amnon's request (v. 6). From Jonadab's perspective, even if Amnon had forced himself on his niece, it would only have guaranteed Absalom's acceptance of her marriage to her uncle. In ancient Israel, while not endorsed, marriage through violence was tolerated (Exod. 22.16; Deut. 22.28-29).

What must have shocked Jonadab, as it did others, was not so much the rape of Tamar (Jonadab may even have anticipated it, given Amnon's confession of his inflamed libido), but Amnon's refusal to keep her in his own compound once he abused her. Dishonoring Tamar was also dishonoring Absalom her father, so that when Jonadab heard of murders in Baal-Hasor, he knew that Amnon would be the sole victim. And so it seems that no one else but Amnon, not even Jonadab, was responsible for Amnon's humiliation of an entire household.

David was no longer the shrewd person of yore, who accurately read people's intents and charmed them into doing his will. David felt maneuvered into a marriage with Bathsheba, and in the death of their first son he had learned to prize the life of his children above all gifts. He was undoubtedly concerned about Amnon's illness, and when the latter asked that his niece prepare before him the food that would heal him, he readily consented. He might have had some qualms about it all, because when he voiced his version of the request to Tamar, he omitted that she should serve the food to Amnon, as suggested by his son (v. 6) and for that matter, by Jonadab as well (v. 5). We need not guess

38. N. Arrarat, 'The Story of Amnon and Tamar', *BethM95* (1983), pp. 331-57; A.E. Hill, 'A Jonadab Connection in the Absalom Conspiracy?', *JETS* 30 (1987), pp. 387-90. Because Jonadab was close to David, there has even been speculation that the king was an accomplice to the crime against Tamar, see Conroy, *Absalom Absalom!*, pp. 24-25 n. 18.

whether David feared what eventually came to pass. From his perspective, he was sending Tamar to a sickly person who was surrounded by servants and attendants.

For David, as for Jonadab, the assault was bitter news; not just because Tamar was robbed of her virginity, but because she was cast aside by her tormentor. The David of old could have forced Amnon to marry Absalom's daughter, perhaps even have punished Amnon by exiling him from his presence. But he did neither. 'When King David heard about all these events, he was furious', the Hebrew text says (v. 22), and the Greek version adds 'but he did not rebuke his son Amnon, for he loved him since he was his firstborn'. David must have realized that in denying justice to Tamar, he was also aggrieving Absalom, and he must have suspected that the matter would not end there. When against his better judgment he allowed Amnon to attend Absalom's banquet, he made sure to surround him with brothers, just to be safe. Still, David was so conscious of his own inadequate response to the rape and felt so guilty about the consequent dishonor of Absalom's household, that when he heard about Absalom's vengeance, he-and all but Jonadab among his courtiers-were certain that an angry Absalom was retaliating by usurping power (vv. 30-36). In this, David was eventually correct.

Tamar had every reason to dream of a bright future. Daughter of Absalom and praised for beauty, she lived in her grandfather's palace, wearing the robes of a princess, for David himself apparently had no daughters from primary wives (see above). The king commanded her to go to the compound of her uncle Amnon. She was only to prepare for him healing food. (She may, as suggested above, have had special culinary knowledge.) She prepared and set out the food and was ready to leave. But because she was raised to obey men, even after her uncle dismissed his servants, she readily agreed to feed him in his inner chamber.

When her uncle ^ofelzed her, ^ohe kept her senses throughout the ordeal. Before the rape, she warned that the ^osqualid crime would ^ogive her dishonored and him disgraced. Amnon needed only to ask the king for her hand to enjoy her sexually. After the rape, when he was forcing her out, Tamar struggled to keep her dignity. If she might remain in his compound, as a wife or even as a concubine, the crime would not be beyond repair.

Tamar could have quietly gone back to the palace, stifling all

evidence of the outrage against her. But her double humiliation (and possibly other consideration, cf. Deut. 22.13-21) would not permit it. And so, with grief publicly displayed, Tamar made Amnon's crime known to all (v. 19). But she also condemned herself to a secluded life, no longer as a palace princess but as a pariah. In her father's house (v. 20), Tamar became as one of the 'living widows' that survived Absalom's capture of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 20.3).

Absalom had no expectations that he would rule after David. He had three sons and a daughter. As she reached puberty, Tamar was moved to the palace, to enjoy the status of a marriageable princess. Although his permission was not needed when Tamar was ordered to attend to Amnon, Absalom must certainly have known of the commission, for when he witnessed his daughter's anguished behavior, he knew that Amnon was its cause (v. 19). Absalom tried to quiet his daughter, perhaps hoping that the king would right the matter. But David never did, and as Amnon was escaping his responsibility, Absalom could develop murderous hatred toward him.

Conjectures

Once we accept that Amnon raped his niece rather than his sister, the roster of queries raised above will find natural solutions. This version does indeed 'enhance' Amnon's character. A pervert in the old version for raping his sister, in the new version Amnon becomes merely a scoundrel for abandoning the niece he assaulted. David too 'improves' in the new version. From a king who had lost his moral compass by condoning incest, David turns into a milquetoast, incapable of forcing his son Amnon to do right by Tamar. In this rendering, too, Tamar would not be counselling Amnon toward incest, but toward a licit connection between an uncle and his niece. Jonadab, too, would no longer be a partner in a sordid crime, but a counsellor who misjudged the man he sought to influence.

But in this version, *it is Absalom* who gains most in stature. As a *brother* of a raped woman in the old account, Absalom had cause to be indignant. Yet, beyond wrecking the life of Tamar, Amnon's offense was against their father David, and so any retaliation or punishment was the king's to make. (Let us recall the curse Simeon and Levi received from their father for taking matters in their own hand after the rape of Dinah in Gen. 34.) As the *father* of Tamar, however, Absalom was

amply justified in his hatred of Amnon and in his frustration with David. Murdering a brother may be a heinous crime, but psychologically not beyond a father's reaction to the crippling of a beloved daughter's future. Very likely, Absalom was ready to pay for his own crime through permanent exile in Geshur. But once he was permitted to return to Jerusalem, his contempt for the king, his father, only increased, for David compounded the offense of condoning rape by absolving a fratricide. Absalom quickly placed himself on a course to unseat his father. What Absalom could not have known is that his ambition was fueled by a God who was displeased with David's behavior in the Bathsheba affair. Through the prophet Nathan, David had been warned, "Thus said the Lord, "I am about raise evil against you from your own house. Before your own eyes, I will take your wives and give them to your associate (*re'eka*). He will sleep with your wives under this very sun. You have acted secretly, but I shall make this happen before all Israel and under the sun" (2 Sam. 12.11-12).

Despite the narrator's stunning control of verisimilitude, we are obviously dealing with tales whose connection with real events are beyond recovery. Moreover, their editing has gone through so many phases that any original goals the narrative may have had become murky at best. Therefore, despite the competing scholarly ascriptions to the Deuteronomists of quasi-mathematical stages in the development of the David narratives, it is nearly impossible to set the diverse Absalom episodes into a chronological sequence or to establish motivations for their presence. Whether or not we owe the presentation of Absalom as a royal figure (2 Sam. 14.25-26) to the same narrator who was responsible for the rape story (2 Sam. 13), we are still burdened with the need to justify the brusqueness with which his daughter Tamar is mentioned in 2 Sam. 14.27. In ancient as well as in contemporary scholarship, the notice about Absalom's daughter has prompted the speculations I mentioned above.

In treating the mention of Absalom's daughter as vestigial of an alternate version of Tamar's rape I propose that the notice about Absalom's regal posture, as well as about his children (2 Sam. 14.25-27), may in fact have launched the series of Absalom tales.³⁹ With minimal editing, we may insert these verses at the opening of 2 Samuel 13, to read:

39. Many commentators, in fact, move these verses just before 2 Sam. 15.

Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised as much for being handsome as was Absalom; from the step of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish on him. When he cut his head hair-at specific intervals he needed to cut it, as it grew too heavy on him, he would cut it-he would weigh that head hair, about two hundred shekels, the king's weight. Three sons were born to Absalom and just one daughter, her name being Tamar; she was an attractive woman. Amnon son of David became infatuated with her...

Most references to 'sister' and 'brother' in the remaining tale need not be removed, for the terms were conventional among people of close kinship and among those courting each other. The gratuitous references to this vocabulary, such as at vv. 4 and 22, however, will need excision, for under this conjecture, they were added by a narrator intent on sharpening Amnon's repulsiveness, heightening David's oblivion to moral justice, and exposing the rotten core within David's family. Ultimately, however, whether we connect the aggrieved Tamar as a sister or as a daughter of Absalom, we will not evade the powerful lesson the Hebrew writer wanted us to learn from this engrossing tale of lust, moral lapses, vengeance, but also of redemption.