

Bail, Ulrike, *Biblical-theological Perspectives on Violence between Brothers and Sisters: The Rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13)*, in: Dillen, Annmie (ed.), *When 'love' strikes. Social Sciences, Ethics and Theology on Family Violence*, Leuven-Dudly, MA 2009, 297-315.

Biblical-Theological Perspectives on Violence between Brothers and Sisters: The Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)

ULRIKE BAIL

1. Behind closed doors...: the issue of sibling violence

Sibling violence is an issue that is seldom discussed. Physical and emotional abuse by a member of the family, usually a brother or a sister, is generally not talked about. There is a strong tendency to keep such internal issues behind closed doors. Society and church have been slow to recognise violence between siblings. Sibling violence is the most common, the most accepted and the least understood form of family conflict. It is not harmless and its effects can be very damaging, with long-term negative consequences. And it can happen in any family. Sibling violence may take many forms: from teasing, name calling, belittling, and ridiculing through intimidation, annoying and provoking, hitting, biting and slapping, to life-threatening behaviour, unwanted touching, indecent exposure, intercourse, or rape. As parents or grandparents, uncles or aunts, we may be tempted to ignore sibling violence, viewing it as a normal part of being children: kids will be kids, or boys will be boys. In fact sibling violence is a problem that must be taken seriously.

In this paper I address this serious issue by reading the story of the rape of Tamar in the Hebrew Bible (2 Samuel 13:1-22). This is a story about violence between siblings, a story about the abuse of a sister by her brother. When we read this story, we see many of the problems that sibling violence produces, but at the same time we also discover ways of handling this violence. The story discusses not only the problem of sibling abuse but also the problem of silence about violence. And it raises the

question of how we might break the silence and speak about sibling violence¹.

2. "Be quiet for now, my sister!": the story of Tamar

"Be quiet now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." Absalom reacts to the rape of his sister Tamar by commanding her to silence. Another of Tamar's brothers, Amnon, had lured her into his room by pretending that he was ill. There he raped her. Afterwards he threw her out onto the street. From then on she lived in the house of her brother Absalom, silent and forgotten.

Some time ago I came across this story in a children's Bible, retold in the following words:

Amnon was very bad and wicked, but he loved Tamar. Tamar was Absalom's sister and was very beautiful. But Amnon did not love Tamar with his whole heart, and one day he began to hate her and chased her out of his house and onto the street. For he had now begun to hate her more than he had ever loved her. Then Tamar tore her clothes, put ashes on her head, and went away crying².

¹ On violence against girls and women in the Old Testament, see: I. MÜLLNER, *Klagend laut werden. Frauenstimmen im Alten Testament*, in G. STEIN (ed.), *Schweigen wäre gottsdienstlich. Die heilende Kraft der Klage*, Würzburg, Echter Verlag, 2000, 69-86; EAD., *Sexuelle Gewalt im Alten Testament*, in U. EICHLER & I. MÜLLNER, *Sexuelle Gewalt gegen Mädchen und Frauen als Thema der feministischen Theologie*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999, 40-75; U. BAIL, *Gegen das Schweigen klagen. Eine intertextuelle Studie zu den Klagepsalmen Ps 6 und Ps 55 und der Erzählung von der Vergewaltigung Tamars*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998; C.R. FONTAINE, *The Abusive Bible. On the Use of Feminist Method in Personal Contexts*, in A. BRENNER & C. FONTAINE (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible. Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, Sheffield, Academic Press, 1997, 84-113.

² Unfortunately I did not note the author of this children's Bible, perhaps because I was so shocked at its trivialisation of rape. Nevertheless, I cite it here as a clear example of the mechanism of dealing with violence against women.

The question of whether and how the story of the rape of Tamar should or can be retold in a children's Bible must be asked. We will come back to this problem later, but, setting that question aside for a moment, it must be said that this version – or perhaps better, perversion – of the story reveals a particular way of dealing with sibling violence and with the abuse of a sister.

In this retelling of Tamar's story, the rape vanishes into the space between two clauses. It is simply not mentioned. It is not spoken about; there is only a comma, a pause for breath, as if nothing had happened³. When we read this text knowing that a rape did in fact take place, it reveals an attitude to rape which ignores the injury to the raped woman's or girl's integrity. Rape is here described as "he did not love her with his whole heart", which can at very best be considered a euphemistic description for violent behaviour which can maim or destroy a young woman at her deepest level.

Sexual violence seems to find linguistic space only in the pause for breath after the comma. There appears to be no discourse which can give linguistic space to this violence, but only a discourse which condemns the violence to silence, consigns it to the pause for breath which allows the speaker to continue speaking and to use words to cover up what has taken place. Silence and silencing are characteristic of approaches to domestic violence, and especially to sexual violence against female siblings. The stories of victims are silenced, or, if these stories are told at all, the voices of the girls are excluded. The victims' laments bear against the walls of the texts and are beaten back, overwhelmed by the voices of those who order silence.

One might object that in the biblical version Tamar does speak; she tries to assert herself verbally and after the rape she requires that Amnon should accept his responsibility. But Tamar is not heard. Her words seem to disappear into emptiness. In response to her question of how she should bear her shame, Amnon throws her out onto the street. Tamar's words are spoken, and yet they are absent.

³ Compare U. BAIL, *The Breath After the Comma. Psalm 55 and Violence against Women*, in *Journal of Religion and Abuse* 3 (1999) 5-18.

It is as though she never said anything. The pause after the comma into which violence disappears, may be reinterpreted to offer an option for the victims of violence if it is understood as a moment in which fear causes breath to be caught.

This is a different kind of pause: it makes it impossible to carry on speaking as though the violence had not happened. Such pause for breath might give rise to a different way of reading, which could offer linguistic space to the victims of sexual violence and return to them their voices. Everyone should be robbed of breath by the memory of the fear that is implicit to such experiences of violence. But despite this fear – or, more precisely, *because* of this fear – we can attempt to understand this pause for breath as a change of breath. In doing so, we can read Tamar's story in solidarity with her.

This is the story of Tamar's rape in one English translation (2 Samuel 13:1-22)⁴:

1 Some time passed. David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. 2 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. 3 But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of David's brother Shimeah; and Jonadab was a very crafty man. 4 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." 5 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 something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat it from her hand.'" 6 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, so that I may eat from her hand." 7 Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." 8 So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and

baked the cakes. 9 Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat. Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him. 10 Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother. 11 But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." 12 She answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!" 13 As for me, where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you."

14 But he would not listen to her; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her. 15 Then Amnon was seized with a very great loathing for her; indeed, his loathing was even greater than the lust he had felt for her. Amnon said to her, "Get out!" 16 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. 17 He called the young man who served him and said, "Put this woman out of my presence, and bolt the door after her."

18 Now she was wearing a long robe with sleeves; for this is how the virgin daughters of the king were clothed in earlier times. So his servant put her out, and bolted the door after her.

19 But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went. 20 Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house.

21 When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn. 22 But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar.

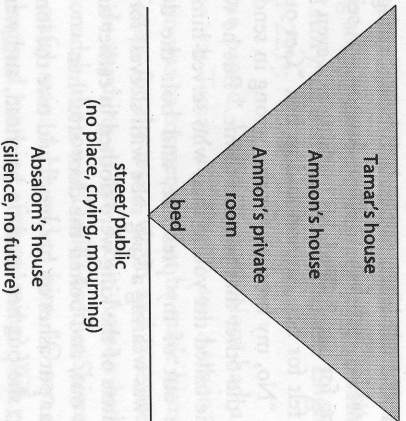
3. The topography of violence in the story of Tamar

How is violence articulated in this story? How does the story deal with the rape? Does it call this violence by its name? I am not

⁴ New Revised Standard Version 1989.

going to offer a verse-by-verse exegesis of this passage, but will focus rather on the question of how the violence is narrated⁵.

Besides the clear naming of the rape, the violence which is done to Tamar by Amnon is primarily expressed in terms of the way in which spaces and movements are described. The story begins in Tamar's own space, in her house, her home. When the king commands her to go to Amnon's house, Tamar has to leave her own house and enter Amnon's. And Amnon's house is then reduced, first to his own room; and then to his bed. This might be represented like this:



After the rape, Tamar is thrown out of Amnon's house onto the streets, and the doors of the house are bolted behind her. The final space of the story is Absalom's house, which is on the very edge. Tamar has been sent from space to space, from room to room, until she arrives at a place in which the walls close around her like a living grave.

⁵ Compare this with I. MÜLLNER, *Gewalt im Hause Davids. Die Erzählung von Tamar und Amnon (2 Sam 13,1-22)* (Herders Biblische Studien, 13), Freiburg, Herder, 1997.

The verbs which describe her movement emphasise this structure. The king's command to Tamar in verse seven, "Go!", which initiates the train of events, is parallel to Amnon's command to Tamar after the rape in verse fifteen. On both occasions Tamar is ordered to leave one place and go to another. Tamar has no power to define her own space. She cannot make decisions about her movements within these spaces, not can she define their boundaries. She must cross the boundary of her own house and go to Amnon's house, which she later has to leave. She obeys the command in verse seven, "Go!", immediately: in verse eight "she went". Amnon's response to her verbal refusal to leave his space in verse sixteen is yet another command: Amnon gives an order to his servant, which the servant carries out: "and he put her out".

Tamar is characterised by her going, and yet she is not really the subject of her going. Her going takes her into the innermost room, to Amnon's back room and the private space in which Amnon forces her to lie down and he rapes her, against her declared will. Tamar is the object of the verb *to lie*. She is forced into the position of Amnon, who lay in bed, pretending to be ill. *Going* always implies a modicum of freedom, however restricted, but here Tamar loses any freedom to move. The spaces in which Tamar exists have become narrower and narrower. Amnon's house is reduced to his private space; all the servants are sent away. She is left alone with Amnon in his room, which in verse fourteen becomes even narrower, reduced to his bed. Her own boundaries are neither respected nor accepted. First she has to leave her own house to go to Amnon's house and his private space; and when she arrives there even the boundaries of her integrity and her body are ignored. Instead, Tamar is functionalised as an object, with all the consequences that that entails. She is treated like a figure in a game of chess which is simply moved from place to place; in this case into the dark inner room of Amnon's private space. Tamar is ordered into a room which is sharply cut off from the outside world and which is generally accessible only to the one who lives there. Amnon knows himself to be safe from the outside world and

probably from public opinion; he has control of this room and this space. For Tamar, this space is dangerous; she has been deprived of her power to make choices about her body and the space it inhabits. Amnon draws her into a space in which he will destroy all that is hers.

Tamar has no power to break Amnon's control over her, her space, her body. After the rape, Amnon orders her to get up and go. She protests, because on leaving this room after the rape she will become a scorned and humiliated person, an outcast with no future. Amnon's response is to pass the order on to his servant. Tamar herself does not move; she is moved: thrown out onto the street. Only then does Tamar move again: she leaves; crying, wailing.

Tamar has no place anymore. Even her way of going has altered: 'she walks her way / she walks and walks', as the Hebrew Bible puts it (verse 19). Her going – walking – is expressed by means of a grammatical structure which indicates emphasis, escalation, an action which lasts a long time. Tamar's going does not give way to rest; she no longer has a destination. Her question in verse thirteen, "As for me, where could I carry my shame?" receives an answer which only extends the question: nowhere. There is no place where identity and integrity are possible for Tamar. Tamar walks and walks – and there is nowhere for her to go; no place for her to take her shame. There is no answer.

Yet the story does name the place where Tamar will stay: "So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom's house" (verse 20). The NRSV's translation "desolate" is used in most English translations. However, the Hebrew word *schamam* is frequently used to refer to a land or a city that has been destroyed and turned into desert, generally as a consequence of the destruction following the defeat of a city or country. The land and the cities reduced to this state are often seen as both uninhabited and uninhabitable, and as equivalent to the desert in which life is not possible. For instance, Jeremiah 51:43 reads: "Her cities have become an object of horror, a land of drought and a desert, a land in which no-one lives, and through which no mortal passes."

The woman in the illustration below also expresses this sense of horror, of desertion and desolation⁶.



This woman turns her back on life, symbolised by the fruitful trees, and sits in an area like a desert, facing death and the destruction of life, symbolised by the tombs on the left of the picture. Grief, trauma and death are associated with the desert.

Similarly, Tamar is described as someone whose existence in life is close to death. Indeed, she has undergone social death; in Absalom's house she lives without a future, cut off from society, an outcast, the living dead. The sense of having no place is strengthened by the narrowing of her available space to the house of her brother Absalom. The house offers not so much a shelter to Tamar, but protection to the perpetrator; for through its walls no sound can be heard. Tamar's silence is enforced; it protects the perpetrators, for outside the house nothing is known of what has happened. The rape is shut out of language, for Tamar's voice is restricted to the house. Absalom's house is wrapped in silence.

4. "Crying aloud...": Tamar's story in the Bible

And yet, the story of the violence is told. The Hebrew Bible does not remain silent about this violent act, and its readers are challenged to grapple with the act and its consequences. There is no

⁶ O. KEEL, *Die Welt der aborientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament. Am Beispiel der Psalmen*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Benziger Verlag/Neukirchner Verlag, 1972, plate 87.

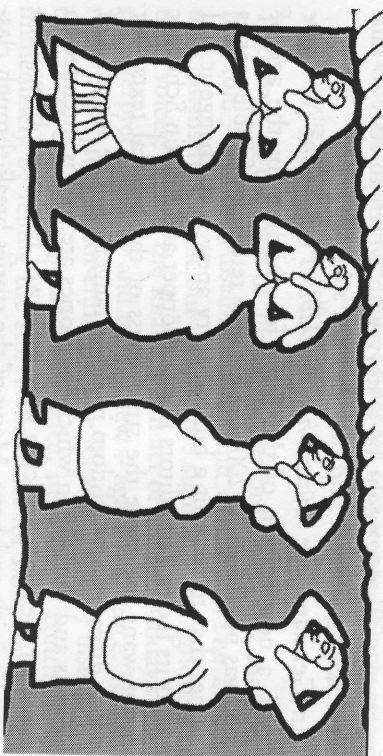
easy way to read such texts about violence, no simple alternative between acceptance and rejection. What does it mean for the readers of this story that the violence is named, and yet at the same time Tamar's voice is not heard?

Although the story wraps Tamar in silence, it also – simultaneously – contradicts that silence. For the very telling of this story contradicts the strategy of silence which the text itself portrays for dealing with sexual violence. The telling of the story stands against the imperative to silence formulated by Tamar's brother Absalom: "Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." (2 Samuel 13:20). In the story itself Absalom has the last word, but the story itself rebels against that final act of violence in the very fact that it relates what happened. Within the story itself, the command to silence is successful; but on the level of communication between story and reader, it is not. Had the command to silence been taken seriously by those who told this story, the story itself would most likely never have been told. The fact that it has been told forces a way of reading, or listening, that opposes the order of silence. Here the process of silence and forgetting are interrupted.

What has happened is also communicated within the narrative. Tamar's feelings after the rape are expressed in this way: "But Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore the long robe that she was wearing; she put her hand on her head, and went away, crying aloud as she went" (verse 19). In reality, this account does not communicate feelings, but recounts actions; at the same time, these actions – "put ashes on her head", "tore her robe", "laying her hand on her head" – all belong to the repertoire of actions which show grief and mourning. Through them, Tamar draws upon a repertoire of familiar actions of mourning to express her response to the traumatic experience.⁷ The gesture of laying the hand on the head is common

⁷ E. KUTSCH, 'Trauerbräuche' und 'Selbstminderungsriten' im Alten Testament, in K. LUTH, E. KUTSCH & W. DANNTINE, *Drei Wiener Antrittsrreden*, Zürich, EVZ-Verlag, 1965, 25-37; S.M. OLYAN, *Biblical Mourning: Ritual and Social Dimensions*, Oxford – New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2004.

term to give expression to grief and mourning in the ancient world of the Middle East, as can be seen on the sarcophagus of King Ahiram, which shows mourning women laying their hands on their heads.⁸



Tamar communicates non-verbally through the language of her body, which becomes a sign, a message about what has happened. Through the socially transmitted movements of mourning, her trauma is written on her body and becomes legible for others. Thrown out of the house by Amnon, Tamar finds herself on the street, in a public place, where she uses her body to tell the news of what has happened to her.

The biblical account names the violence as a crime. It finds a language which does not hide it, but which exposes, judges and condemns it. The story demands that its listeners and readers grapple with what has been told and that they tell the story to others.

But how do we tell Tamar's story? Can we tell it so that it might help us to hinder violence between siblings, to prevent it?

⁸ A. PARRROT, M.H. CHÉHAV & S. MOSCATT, *Die Entdeckung der phönizischen Kunst von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des dritten punischen Krieges*, München, Beck, 1977, plate 77.

5. Retelling the story of Tamar for children

It is very important that we talk with children about violence and that we emphasise that violent behaviour is inappropriate. Children must realise that violence is unacceptable behaviour. Perhaps the story of Tamar might be a story with which to start to talk about sibling violence and how to resist such violence.

In Germany, the *Gütersloher Erzählbibel* (*Children's Narrative Bible*), a new edition of the Bible for children up the age of nine, was published in 2004⁹. This new retelling of Bible stories assumes that to recount a biblical story anew is to change it and to shift its focus. The editors Diana Klöpfer and Kerstin Schiffler do not want to ignore the strangeness of the biblical texts, but seek to discover new wisdom in that strangeness. The selection of the texts and the way in which the stories are told is intended to show that the Bible depicts a wide variety of behaviour by women and men, girls and boys. Many of the stories break through classical gender roles and offer possibilities of identification to both sexes.

The editors of this *Children's Narrative Bible* have made the conscious decision not to include only lovely texts that depict an idyllic world, believing that to ignore the texts dealing with violence would be true neither to the Bible nor to the experiences of contemporary girls and boys. The storytellers write in their epilogue:

Violence is a theme which exists in all corners of our daily lives, also in the daily lives of children. [...] No child grows up in an entirely whole and healthy world – for in this world many things are not healthy. This world is not unspoiled, and it was no different at the time when these texts were written. Biblical texts tell of violence; they work through violence and they criticise violence. If we hide all that from our children, we are being unfair to them in two ways. On the one hand our image of the world of the Bible is warped if it is depicted as an idyllic holy world. On the other hand, children

⁹ D. KLÖPPER & K. SCHIFFLER, *Gütersloher Erzählbibel. Mit Bildern von Juliana Heidenreich*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2004.

who have themselves experienced violence can never recognise their own lives in such an idyllic world. They themselves, their pain, their anxiety and fear, their feeling of having been abandoned remains something they have to deal with by themselves. It seems to them as if nobody cares, and that no one else has ever experienced anything like this before. If we do not tell such stories, we only exacerbate the isolation which is in any case the inevitable lot of girls and boys in such situations¹⁰.

The story of the rape of Tamar by her brother is also included. It is told – against Absalom's command of silence. The biblical texts themselves speak out against the silencing and ignoring of these voices; against the finality of an act of violence, today's readers interpret the story and tell it anew – against violence. For this reason, the story is not entitled "The Rape of Tamar"; instead the title takes up the command to silence, in order to contradict it immediately by telling the story: "Be quiet for now, my sister!": The rape of Tamar.

Juliana Heidenreich, the illustrator of this story Bible, has depicted the biblical narrative in imaginative images which draw the readers into the centre of story. The pictures were devised in conversation with the story-tellers and set an interpretative accent.

The account of 2 Samuel 13 in the *Children's Narrative Bible* reads (in English translation from the German):

"Be quiet, my sister!": the rape of Tamar

"Some time later, David came to his daughter Tamar, Absalom's sister, and said: "Your step-brother Amnon is ill. He wants you to go to his house and cook a meal for him and spend some time with him." Tamar went and did what her father had asked her. What next she nor David could know was that this was just a story that Amnon and his friend Jonadab had made up. Amnon had fallen in love with Tamar. He wanted her so much that it hurt, and he knew

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

that he would almost never have a chance to be with her. But now he lay in bed and waited for Tamar. She came to his house, and cooked him a meal, and brought it to him. Then Amnon sent all the servants out of the room. He grabbed Tamar, and said: "Come on, sleep with me." "No, brother!" cried Tamar. "Don't make me do that. It's not right. What will happen to me, if you do that? Where would I go? Speak to the King: perhaps he will let me marry you." But Amnon didn't stop. He overpowered her, and he raped her.

Afterwards he wasn't in love with Tamar any more. Not at all. Now he hated Tamar. He sent her away. Tamar tried to stop him: "No, brother, don't do that. That is not right either." But Amnon called his servant and ordered him to chase Tamar away. He wanted nothing more to do with her. He even had the door locked behind her. And so Tamar was thrown out onto the street. She tore her clothes, poured ashes over her head, and cried and wailed. It was as though she were dead. Something in her had died.

But she was not even allowed to show her despair. Her brother Absalom came out and took her to his house and said: "Calm down, my sister. Be quiet. He is your brother. Don't worry about it so much." After that no one heard anything about Tamar. She stayed in Absalom's house and never had a chance to live her own life in her own house. It was as though she was really dead. Buried alive.

David heard that Tamar had been raped, and he was very angry, but he didn't do anything. He didn't do anything to his son Amnon and he didn't do anything to help his daughter Tamar. Absalom did something. He had Amnon killed. But did he want to help Tamar when he did that? Afterwards he ran away to another country and didn't come back for three years. David was sad about his son Amnon. Was he sad about his daughter Tamar as well?

The language of the *Children's Narrative Bible* does not try to make this story easier nor pretends that it is nice, but clearly expresses the violence that Tamar is forced to undergo. The consequences of this violence are also clearly named. The meaning of the Hebrew word *schamam* is expressed in the words "something in Tamar had died". The deadly connotation of the desert as a description of the results of violence is translated into modern language and make it possible for children to identify with the story.

In the illustrations¹¹, Tamar is portrayed at the top of the page on the left, with tears in her eyes, seeking to push someone away. The picture is torn in two. Tamar's life is torn away; her life torn apart. The picture is torn across Tamar's mouth, so that her mouth is hidden by the tear and her cries seem to echo unheard. Pictures drawn by abused children often show a face with no mouth. What they have experienced is so unspeakable that they can find no words for it. Often they are told that they must keep their mouths closed and tell no one or else they will be killed. The violence is not spoken about, is silenced; the mouth is closed or rubbed out. The story of the rape of Tamar is still all too relevant.

Behind Tamar, faint staffs of music can be seen, hidden by drops of blood. The lines of the staffs turn into blood, the notes into drops of blood. Tamar has no words; her words disappear into a silence that closes her mouth. Silent tears flow over her face.

But in the *Children's Narrative Bible* the story does not end here. Instead, it gives Tamar words: the words of a Psalm of Lament. This psalm, Psalm 55, is printed on the right hand page, opposite the story of Tamar. This is a psalm that expresses the voices and cries of all who suffer violence or who are afraid.

The psalms of lament put into words feelings of despair, fear and powerlessness. They voice the laments, wails and accusations that arise out of despair, fear and powerlessness. The protesting cries of the psalms of lament can be related to stories of violence against women, and to the story of Tamar, the raped princess. In my book *Gegen das Schweigen klagen* I showed the intertextual connections between the story of the rape of Tamar and Psalm 55 and how Psalm 55 can be read as Tamar's literary voice!¹² The *Children's Narrative Bible* takes up this analysis and applies it by appending extracts of Psalm 55 to the story of the rape of Tamar. The right page of the Bible looks like this:

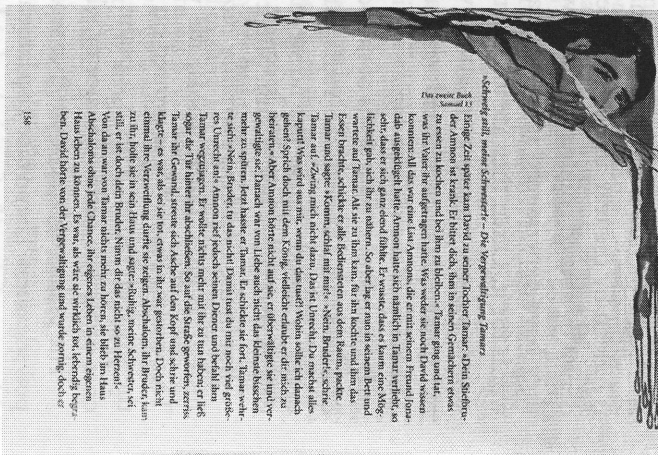
¹¹ For the illustrations, see: D. KLÖPPER/K. SCHIFFNER, *Güterloher Erzählbibel. Die Bilder. Präsentation auf CD-ROM. Beschreibungen, Deutungen, Präxistipps*, Güterloher, Güterloher Verlagshaus, 2005, 103-105.

¹² U. BAIL, *Gegen das Schweigen klagen*.

The verses of Psalm 55, used in the Narrative Bible read in English translation:

*Jeha ire umher in meiner Herzwehnung,
bin verstört,
weil der Feind laut schreit,
der Feind er mich bekämpf.
Mein Herz beif in meiner Mitte.
Todessehrecke'n sind auf mich gefallen.
Hätte ich Flügel gleich der Taube –
fliegen wollte ich und niederlassen,
siehe, weit weit weg wüßte ich flüchten,
in der Wildnis übernachten,
Ja, wenn ein Feind mich schynhülte,
ich wüßte es tragen
Wenn mein Hasset über mich groß gedwöhle,
ich wüßte mich verbergen vor ihm,
Du aber:
ein Pfandch wieinesgleichen,
wahn-über-süßer, mein Bekamter –
Der Tod soll über sie gefalhen –
Lebendig sollen sie zur Umherwelt
Lohn Bosheit ist öf, wo sie hochgeh,
in ihrer Mitte.
Hör zu Gott ruffe ich.
ER wird mich be-treuen*

I am restless in my despair,
and I am confused
by the cries of the enemy
by the onslaught of the wicked.
My heart quakes within me,
and the terrors of death fall upon me.
Had I the wings of a dove,
I would fly away and have rest –
I would flee far away
and settle in the wilderness.
Yes, if an enemy had abused me
I would have borne it.
If a foe had set himself over me,
I would have hidden myself from him.



But you: one of my own
my companion, my friend –
Let death fall upon them,
Let them go down alive to Sheol,
For evil is in the heart of where they live.
For I, I call to God,
And GOD will rescue me.

The rape of Tamar happens in a place that is geographically and emotionally well known to her. It is Amnon, her brother, who rapes her. This topography of familiarity and closeness is also visible in Psalm 55. In verse fourteen the perpetrator is addressed directly with the words, "but you: one of my own, my companion, my friend," and is named as one who stood in a relationship of trust to the woman who is praying. Through his action he has abused and destroyed their friendship, a relationship which should by its nature have been safe from violence.

If we read Psalm 55 as the prayer of Tamar who has experienced sexual violence, a sister who has been raped by her brother, we can hear Tamar's voice: a voice of lament and protest. Psalms of lament offer a place where fear can find expression. The fearful and victims can be certain that texts of lament stand in solidarity with one another and that no other voice will suppress or drown out their voices. God, named in the psalms of lament as the advocate of the oppressed and the silent, makes sure of that; to give up lament would be to identify God with the fear and the violence.¹³

And so we can say that by relating rape and lament, God may be found in the daily and nightly experiences of violence against siblings and its damaging consequences. Our way of dealing with sibling violence shows whose side we believe God to be on. Is God on the side of those with power even within family structures? Or does God stand in solidarity with those who have lost their voices? Is

¹³ See U. BAIL, 'O God Hear my Prayer', *Psalm 55 and Violence against Women*, in A. BRENNER & C. FONTAINE (ed.), *Wisdom and Psalms* (A Feminist Companion to the Bible, Second Series 2), Sheffield, Academic Press, 1998, 242-263; U. BAIL, *The Breath After the Comma*.

God present in texts that give a voice to the silenced, which come from the margins to break through the silence about violence and to cry out in protest? God's presence in the victims of violence is shown by the gold in the lower right hand corner of the picture. This represents what could be a glimmer of hope, an indication that violence does not have the last word and that liberation is possible.

Psalms of lament are texts of resistance against silence, fear and violence. As a literary form for the communicating of lament and accusation they give a voice to those who have been taken beyond the limits of their language by violence. Against the dominant linguistic power of the perpetrators of violence, those who have been attacked exercise their right to speak and to break through the silence imposed upon them.

Psalms can offer a way of talking about those things for which victims have no words. The situation of the psalm is not concrete in the sense that it can be identified by a particular criminological or medical diagnosis; the language of the psalm does not seek to portray reality as in a photograph or with close attention to detail. Instead, the psalm expresses the whole breadth and depth of inner and outer pain and desperation. This is done through particular images that give language to a pain that is experienced in silence. Psalms offer opportunities for identification that enable people to find a language to speak about what they have experienced. They open a pictorial space in which pain can be spoken of and violence can be put into words. Those who spell out these texts will find a linguistic possibility to speak of their pain and their injuries without avoiding or repressing them. At the same time these words, because they are someone else's, leave the speaker with the space to maintain the privacy of their deepest feelings. Feelings can be expressed and at the same time left untouched. The words prayed in the psalms are both borrowed and at the same time one's own¹⁴.

¹⁴ See F. CRÜSEMANN, *Der Gewalt nicht glauben. Hiobbuch und Klagepsalmen – zwei Modelle theologischer Verarbeitung traumatischer Gewalterfahrungen*, in F. CRÜSEMANN et al. (ed.), *Dem Tod nicht glauben. Sozialgeschichte der Bibel*. FS Luise Schorrotff, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlag, 2004, 251–268.

To read and to speak Psalm 55 as a lament about rape is to make it impossible simply to speak as if the rape had never happened. The psalm of lament fills the pause for breath after the comma precisely because its words resist silence. It is important to retell the story of Tamar and to give Tamar a voice. It is important to speak to and with children about sibling violence, to resist both violence and silence, to help children who have experienced violence to not be trapped in the death of silence but to be free to find words to speak about it.