

The Breath After the Comma, Psalm 55 and Violence Against Women

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ABSTRACT. Sexual violence against women is often passed over in silence. The biblical story of the rape of Tamar, the king's daughter (2 Sam 13) also tells of the silence which surrounds such violence. Using the interpretative method of intertextuality, this article relates the Psalm 55, a psalm of lament, to the story of the rape of Tamar. On the basis of this intertextual relation it becomes possible to hear Psalm 55 as the voice of Tamar. By reading these texts in solidarity with Tamar, her silenced voice can be heard. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: http://www.haworthpressinc.com>*]

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“Yesterday I said: You need to be hit a few more times, to show you where God is.”¹ This statement by a man who beats his wife shocks me deeply. On one level I am shocked by the apparently self-evident understanding of violence against women as necessary; on another level I am shocked by the way the speaker draws on God for a religious legitimization of violence against women.

How do such statements come about? What role does Old Testament exegesis play in the legitimization of violence against women? How can the writings of the Hebrew Bible be read in a way that prevents the perpetrators of violence from claiming that God is on their side? What are the responsibilities of exegesis when considering

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injury to the raped woman's integrity. Rape is described as "he did not love her with his whole heart." This can at best be termed a euphemistic description of behavior which can destroy a woman at her deepest level.

Sexual violence against women seems to find linguistic space only in the pause for breath after a comma. There seems 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, to use words to cover up what has taken place.

Silence and silencing are characteristic of approaches to sexual violence against women. Women's stories are silenced, or, if these stories are told at all, women's voices are excluded. Women's voices are locked into texts from which no sound escapes. Women's laments beat against the walls of the texts and are beaten back; they are overwhelmed by the voices of those who order silence.

One might object here 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. It is as though her words have disappeared into emptiness. In response to the question, how should she bear her shame, Amnon throws her out onto the street. Although they are spoken, Tamar's words are absent. It is as though she had never said anything.

Is it nevertheless possible to give Tamar a voice which will free her from silence? The writer Ingeborg Bachmann suggests one possibility when, in her novel *The Case of Franza* she portrays the protagonist's response to the marks left when symbols representing a queen were scraped off a temple wall: "You see, he had forgotten that even when he destroyed her symbols, she remained. She can be read, because there is nothing there where she should be. He had not been able to destroy her."³

According to Ingeborg Bachmann, the scratches left in the stone make possible an indestructible memory. In a similar way, the pause after the comma, into which violence disappears, can be reinterpreted to offer an option for the victims of sexual violence, if it is understood as a moment in which fear causes breath to be caught. This is a different pause, which makes it impossible to carry on speaking as though the violence had not happened. This pause for breath might give rise to a different way of

biblical texts which speak of violence against women? Is it possible to read these texts in solidarity with women who have experienced, and who continue to experience, violence? Can these texts be read in a way which gives a voice to the victims of violence and which does not simply perpetuate the silence which these women have suffered, or which has been forced upon them?

In this article I wish to attempt such a reading in solidarity by interpreting a Hebrew psalm of lament as the voice of Tamar, the raped daughter of the king (2 Sam 13.1-20). This relating of psalm and story uses the method of intertextuality. I shall begin by considering the story of the rape of Tamar. In a second step I shall offer a brief discussion of the method of intertextuality. Finally I relate a psalm of lament to Tamar's story.

A PAUSE FOR BREATH AFTER THE COMMA

Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart. Absalom reacts to the rape of his sister Tamar with this command to silence. Another brother, 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. The story of this rape can be found in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Samuel 13.1-20. 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 crying.²

The question of whether and how the story of the rape of Tamar should or can be retold in a Children's Bible deserves more attention. But, leaving that aside, this version—or maybe better perversion—of the story reveals a particular way of dealing with violence against women.

In this retelling of Tamar's story, the rape vanishes into the space between two clauses. It is not mentioned. It is not spoken about; there is only a comma, a pause for breath, as if nothing had happened.

However, when we read this text in the knowledge that a rape did in fact take place, it reveals an attitude to rape which simply ignores the

reading, which could offer linguistic space to the victims of sexual violence and which could give them back their voices.

Everyone should be robbed of breath by the memory of the fear which is implicit to such experiences of violence. But despite this fear—or precisely because of this fear—we can attempt to understand this pause for breath as a change of breath, and in doing so, we can read Tamar's story in solidarity with her. I shall do this by connecting Tamar's story to other texts which, like these scratches in the stone, are present only in their absence.

AN INTERTEXTUAL CHANGE OF BREATH

In the Hebrew texts of the psalms various pointers can be found which indicate a way towards a feminist rereading of the psalms. One way leads via the titles of the psalms. These are later additions to the psalms.³ They name men (David, sons of Korah, Asaph, Solomon, Etan, Moses) as literary and fictive authors of the psalms. In this way the psalms have been concretised as the voices of these men and connected to their biographies as told in the Hebrew Bible. Thus the title of Psalm 51 allows it to be woven into the story of David and Bathsheba and to represent David's voice (compare 2 Sam 12).

The relating of the poetic text of the psalm and the narrative biographical (con-)text by means of the titles can offer a way of reading the psalms from a feminist perspective. The net of inner-biblical relationships spun by the titles of the psalms can be changed and widened. By using the method of intertextuality,⁴ the net of inner-biblical relationships can be shifted to focus upon the voices of women in the texts of the psalms. In this way the psalms can be related to stories about women who have experienced sexual violence.

Connection here is not meant in the simple sense of empathy or identification, but in the literary sense of intertextuality as it has been developed in post-structural literary theory. Only the lowest common denominator of these theories can be described here.⁵ The starting point is a particular understanding of what a text is and of how meaning is established. Intertextuality refers to the relationships between texts. All literary texts are woven together from other texts.

This definition of text mitigates against an over-emphasis of the boundaries of a text. Such an over-emphasis places the boundaries of the text so much in the foreground that texts appear to be islands,

isolated from each other in the endless expanse of the sea, like prison islands upon which meaning is fixed once and for all and which are dominated by one perspective, one way of reading. But texts are not islands, and readers are not shipwrecked sailors, who, having lost their memories, have nothing to do except to count and to categorize palm trees.

For texts work in dialogue, they call other texts to memory, remind the reader of what has been read before, of earlier experiences. No text exists in isolation, but every text finds its own place in an already existing world of texts. This place is not static. Instead, the text has its own motion and cannot be confined to one statement of meaning. Texts are ambiguous, multi-voiced, never definite.

Every time a text is read, new ways of reading evoked by the relationships between texts come into existence. Some of these intertextual relationships are present in the text as unambiguous markers, but in most cases it is the reader who creates the relationships, in part on the basis of simple chance—what has been read before—and in part through conscious choice or because of traces which lead the reader to the edge of the text and beyond it into the world of texts, to wander and to remember.⁶ In my opinion, the intertextual model lends itself to combination with a feminist epistemology, for it enables texts: to be brought into conversation with one another in a feminist sense and allows women-specific traces to be chosen as relational points.⁷

I wish to offer a concrete example of the way of reading which can emerge when texts are related to one another against the background of feminist interest. I shall do this by reading the story of the rape of Tamar in connection with other texts in which the voices and cries of those who suffer violence and who are exposed to fear can be heard, that is the psalms of lament. These psalms put into words feelings of despair, fear and powerlessness. Here the laments and accusations of despair, fear and powerlessness can be heard. The psalms of lament can take absent voices which have been condemned to silence and make them present and audible. 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.

PSALM 55 AS TAMAR'S VOICE

Reality as it is experienced is described by the psalms in a metaphorical way as a reality, which can be experienced. The psalms offer

the reader a possibility of identification through which it is possible to express a reality, which the reader has experienced. They open up an imaginative space in which experiences can be located. Within this imaginative space they put into words the experience of violence. In Psalm 55 this imaginative space, created by language, is structured by the construction of different spaces in order to locate a particular experience of violence. In this way it is possible to speak of a topography of violence. This topography of (the experience of) violence is particularly clearly placed in the image of city (vv. 10b-12) and the closeness between victim and perpetrator (v. 14). This topography of violence and closeness can be related intertextually to the story of Tamar's rape, so that Psalm 55 can be heard as Tamar's voice.⁸

A TOPOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE

Psalm 55 is a psalm of lament in which the fear and the violence which have been experienced by a woman who is now at prayer are compared to a city. The city's walls have been violently occupied, and the violence has penetrated the city's center, the market place. In verses 10-12 we read:

- 10b. I see violence and strife in the city.
11. They surround it day and night on its walls,
and trials and tribulations dwell at its heart.
12. Ruin dwells at its heart,
oppression and deceit do not retreat from its market.

The city is depicted as a place of violence, although no concrete act of violence is named. Instead the city is populated with terms which show a generally dreadful state of affairs. These terms appear like people: violence and strife surround the city walls; oppression and deceit do not retreat from its market place. Violence has entered the last corner of the city and has occupied it. Taken together, the verbs which express this domination, "surround" and "not retreat," make up a circle and a point, movement and persistence. Violence is present not only in the spatial expanse but also in the movement within this space. It dominates time as well ("day and night": v. 11). There is no time other than the time of fear. Time and space are surrounded by violence.

The city is not only a place of violence; it is the object of violence. It is the object of the verb "to surround," which in a military context implies a siege. But the attack has already reached the center of the city. The ring of besiegers outside the city has closed in upon the center of the city; the city walls have themselves become the walls of the siege. The walls, which were meant to keep out the attackers, are in their hands. Only the attackers have freedom to move. The safe space of the city no longer offers a place of refuge; indeed it no longer really exists, for violence dwells at its heart.

The psalm relates the image of the besieged and defeated city to the literary "I" of the psalm. In those passages in the psalm in which the "I" speaks of itself (vv. 3-6), it speaks of itself as the object of violence. The "I" is an object which is exposed to the actions of others. On a syntactical level the city and the "I" are woven together. Associations of key words produce the relationship between the "I" and the city. Thus "trials" (verses 4 and 11) is the context of both, and the threat to "the heart" of each is emphasized (verses 5 and 11f).

Both the city and the literary "I" are exposed to violence; in the face of this violence, both are simply objects. If the verbs used by the "I" in verses 4b-6 to express its experience are applied to the picture of the city, the total domination of the space becomes even clearer. While the threatening movements in the image of the city are horizontal, the trials/disaster which beset the "I" move in vertical lines ("bring down upon," "fall upon," "overwhelm"). The resulting image is that of a closed space from which it is impossible to escape. The topography of violence dominates this space.

INTERTEXTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

To which texts can Psalm 55 be related? Are there traces in the text of the psalm which connect the image of the defeated and destroyed city to the story of Tamar's rape?

Such traces can be found. There are a number which complement one another and which, woven together, make it possible to hear in Psalm 55 the voice of a woman who has been subjected to violence.⁹

A first trace: the violence to which the "I" has been subjected is described in terms of the image of an occupied city. This is not an historically identifiable occupation of an historically identifiable city; rather, the image of the city is part of a topography of violence which

is expressed metaphorically by means of the spatial structure of the psalm. In Hebrew, “city” is a feminine noun and cities are often personified as women. The daughter Sion and the virgin Jerusalem are well-known examples of the relating of woman and city. This first indicator suggests that the points of contact between the city and the “I” in Psalm 55 may pick up the portrayal of other cities as women, so that it is possible to see the subject in Psalm 55 as a woman.

A second trace is the verb *sbb*, which means “to surround, to encircle.” In the psalms of lament the action of this word expresses the threatening nature of violence (Ps 17,11). But the relating of the city and market place by means of the verb “to surround,” as in Psalm 55, indicates an intertextual marker. This marker points to a particular story from the First Testament, found in Judges 19. The violence related in this story begins in a situation characterized by the verb ‘surround’; a situation which culminates a rape. In Judges 19 a woman is raped the whole night through by men who have surrounded the house. She dies in the early morning.

If we relate Psalm 55 and Judges 19 to one another intertextually and read them together, a parallel between the besieged city and the abused body of the woman results. The violence to which the city is exposed in Psalm 55 corresponds to the violence which in Judges 19 destroys the body of the woman. The track of the verb *sbb* “to surround” can be followed still further. In its military meaning of “surrounded by the enemy,” the verb occurs frequently in military contexts of the besieging and defeat of a city. Judges 19 read together with *sbb* “to surround” as a term of siege and defeat of a city make it possible to understand the verses from Psalm 55 as a literary representation of rape. The woman at prayer implies that, like the defeated city, her own space, her own body have been robbed of their wholeness. The vulnerability of the city corresponds to the vulnerability of the woman’s body. Like a city, the body of a woman can be captured, defeated, plundered and destroyed. The defeat of the city corresponds to the rape of the woman.

In the Hebrew Bible adjectives meaning “deserted,” “destroyed,” “abandoned,” “laid waste” are used to describe the inevitable consequences of the defeat of a city. In particular, the word *šmm* “destroyed, laid waste” is often used to describe a strategy of war which leaves the opponents with only burned earth.¹⁰ This verb connects the consequences of the defeat of a city with the consequences of the rape

of a woman. In the biblical story of the rape of Tamar her state after the rape is described using precisely this word.

In 2 Samuel 13.20 we read, “So Tamar remained-desolate-in her brother Absalom’s house.” Between the Hebrew words “Tamar” and “house” another word is inserted, and this word introduces a tension. Between Tamar’s living and the place of her living stands the word *wšomemah*, which is often translated “desolate,” or “lonely,” but which is derived from the verb *šmm* “destroy, lay waste.” Given the use of this verb to describe land which has been laid waste or cities which have been destroyed, *wšomemah* should here be translated as “destroyed,” “cut off from life.” When lands and cities are described with the verb *šmm*, the implication is that they are uninhabitable; they are seen in terms of “desert.” There is an ineradicable tension between “laid waste, uninhabitable” and “Tamar lived.” The consequence of the destruction of integrity and identity through rape is that Tamar no longer has any space of her own in which she can live, whether physically or psychologically. Absalom’s house becomes a place into which she disappears, behind the walls of which she can be forgotten. “And Tamar lived homeless in her brother’s house” would be one possible translation.

This statement of the consequences of rape has many connotations such as loneliness, lack of place, speechless fear and the image of the city which has been laid waste. The image of this city and Tamar’s raped body are intertwined. Both are places and objects of violence. Psalm 55 can be connected to the story of Tamar through this topography of violence. An intertextual relationship between the story and the psalm of lament results, which can also be found in other points of connection.

A TOPOGRAPHY OF CLOSENESS

The rape of Tamar takes place in a place which is geographically and emotionally well known to her. It is Amnon, her brother, who rapes her. The topography of closeness is also visible in Psalm 55. In verse 14 the perpetrator is addressed directly with the words, “But you: one of my own, my companion, my friend.” Here the perpetrator is named as one who stood in a relationship of trust to the woman at prayer. Through his action he has abused and destroyed the friendship, which should have excluded violence.¹¹

In the telling of the rape of Tamar, the perversion of closeness remains even after the rape. The house of her other brother, where Tamar finds refuge, is bound up with the command to keep silence. Because no sound can be heard outside its walls, this house becomes a place in which the perpetrator and the others who are in the know are protected. The walls of the house keep silence about what has happened. The rape is excluded from language in that Tamar's speech is restricted to the limits of the house. Cut off from all communication, Tamar lives in Absalom's house as if buried alive with no prospects.

PSALM 55 IN THE PAUSE AFTER THE COMMA

If we read Psalm 55 as the prayer of a woman who has experienced sexual violence, and if we understand the topography of violence as a literary representation of rape, then we can hear Tamar's voice. And so intertextuality brings not only texts but literary forms into conversation with one another. In this case, the literary representation of rape is related to the literary genus of the psalms of lament.

But what does it mean to read rape in the context of lament? One essential function of lament is the finding of a language for the expression of fear and pain. By doing so, suffering begins to free itself from its subjective isolation and seclusion. Laments make it possible for victims and survivors to name the fear and violence and to break through the wall of silence which victors have erected around their victims. The texts of lament are always on the side of the victims, and these include the victims of sexual violence. They lay open that violence, name it and make it heard. They expose the perpetrators of acts of violence and reveal the structures of violence.

Lament offers a place where fear can find expression. The fearful and the victims can be certain that texts of lament stand in solidarity with one another and that no other voice will suppress or talk down 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. And so we can say that by relating rape and lament, God too is found in the daily and nightly experiences of violence against women.

A movement can be seen in Psalm 55. The psalm begins with a despairing cry and ends with a statement of trust in verse 24. This trust in God is what makes it possible to name the action, to accuse the

perpetrator, and to hope for an end to the violence. This trust claims God for itself and challenges God to act. Blumental calls this linguistic movement, which may appeal to God against God, a "faithful defiance,"¹² a trusting challenge, which is founded in the lament.

Psalms of lament are texts of resistance against silence, fear and violence. As a literary form for the communication of lament and accusation they give a voice to those whom violence has brought to the limits of their language. 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 which has been imposed upon them.

Our way of dealing with sexual violence against women shows whose side we believe God to be on. Is God on the side of socially dominant groups, privileging their sexist ideologies and the texts in which they express them? Or does God stand in solidarity with texts which give each other a voice, which come from the margins to break through the silence about violence against women and to cry out in protest? To read and to speak Psalm 55 as a lament about rape is to make it impossible simply to talk as though the rape had never happened. The psalm of lament fills the pause for breath after the comma because its words resist silence.

The wordless pause for breath after the comma can be understood as a change of breath. Combined with the tool of intertextuality this change can take the words of silenced victims, make them present in our consciousness, and make them heard.

In this way, Psalm 55 can be read and heard as Tamar's voice. To make this clear, I shall give the psalm a new title and cite it in its entirety.¹³

Tamar's song of lament.

To be spoken against silence.

2. O God, hear my prayer, and do not hide from my plea.

3. Attend to me and answer me.

4. I am restless in my despair, and am confused
by the cries of the enemy
by the onslaught of the wicked.

They bring down trials upon me

and with anger they persecute me.

5. My heart quakes within me,

and the terrors of death fall upon me.

6. Fear and trembling come upon me,
and terror overwhelms me.
7. So I said,
Had I the wings of a dove,
I wanted to fly away and have rest.
8. See, I wanted to flee far off,
and settle in the wilderness,
to hurry to my refuge,
away from the blast of the wind, from the storm.
10. Confuse, my Lord, split their tongues.
Yes, I see violence and strife in the city.
11. They surround it day and night on its walls,
and trials and tribulations dwell at its heart.
12. Ruin dwells at its heart,
oppression and deceit do not retreat from its market.
13. 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.
14. But you: one of my own, my companion, my friend,
15. with whom I enjoyed sweet fellowship,
walked in the crowd in the house of our God.
16. Let death fall upon them,
let them go down alive to Sheol,
for evil is in the heart of where they live.
17. For I, I call to God, and GOD will rescue me.
18. At evening, at morning, at midday I lament and moan,
and he will hear my voice.
19. He will rescue my life for salvation
from the quarrel against me,
for they are too many about me.
20. God will hear and will humble them,
he, who has been enthroned from the beginning of time,
for they do not keep their word,
and neither do they fear God.
21. He lays hands upon those who are at peace with him,
he breaks his trust;
22. His mouth flatters more smoothly than butter,
but strife is in his heart;

his words flow more gently than oil
but they are daggers (drawn swords).

23. Cast your desire upon GOD,
and he, he will sustain you,
he will not allow the righteous to stumble forever.

24. But you, God,
you will bring them down into the deepest pit,
the men of blood and deceit
will not achieve even half of their days.
But I, I trust in you.

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NOTES

1. Godenzi 1991, 51.
2. Unfortunately I did not note the author of this Children's Bible, perhaps because I was so shocked at this trivializing of rape. Nevertheless, I cite it here as a clear example of the mechanism of dealing with violence against women.
3. Bachmann 1982, 437.
4. See Bail 1998a, 83-113.
5. For a detailed discussion see Bail 1998a, 98-113; Bail, 1998b, 242-263.
6. The direction taken by reading and remembering depends upon the language and cultural system in which the reader is rooted, upon the discourse in which the reader participates, the social position from which the reader reads, the dominant conventions about reading to which the reader is subject, and the gender of the reader.
7. See Ecker 1994, 77-98.
8. Psalm 6 could also be interpreted intertextually as the voice of Tamar. Psalm 6 focuses on the relationship between God and violence and the theme of revenge and forgiveness. The solidarity of God counteracts the fear and the violence. The change in God's attitude shown in Psalm 6 can stand against the absence of God in the story of the rape of Tamar; the words of the lament and their call for justice against Absalom's order of silence (2 Sam 13.20). Compare Bail 1998a, 114-159; Bail 1999.
9. Much of what can only be hinted at here is described in greater detail in my book: Bail 1998a, 160-219.
10. See Bail 1998a, 196-201.
11. This analogy is typical also in the modern perspective. The topography of closeness can be found by most rapes. About half of all rapes are perpetrated by men who already know the woman. Two thirds of all rapes take place, not outside, but in the home. This shows, as Feldmann has pointed out, that the greatest danger to the

- victim is from a known perpetrator in a familiar environment. See Feldmann 1992, 17, and compare Bail 1998a, 171-175.
12. Blumenthal 1993, 256.
 13. Translation from the Hebrew by Ulrike Bail; English in consultation with Charlotte Methuen.

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