

Read the Rape of Tamar, and pay attention to the verbs

The story's action words tell us a lot about power and who has it.

by [Anna Carter Florence](#) in the [August 1, 2018](#) issue



Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, called Guercino, detail from *Amnon and Tamar*, oil on canvas, 1649–1650.

Pretend. Would not listen. Send in. Send out. Take hold. Force. Bolt the door. Tear. Cry aloud. Keep quiet. Speak neither good nor bad. Remain. Hate. These are the verbs in the story of the rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–22). It's a story that can be traumatic to read. Since statistics tell us that one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused by the age of 18 in the United States, a good portion of readers will be connecting with some hard verbs very quickly. It takes courage to walk into this story and ask which verbs are ours. It takes boldness to ask where the story could have gone differently if only someone had chosen a different verb. But asking such questions is our calling.

The story of the rape of Tamar begins with a short sentence: *Some time passed*. It's a signal that we're entering a story mid-progress. In this case, what we've missed is the story of David and Bathsheba in the previous two chapters. David has returned from war, victorious, and is now directing his troops from the palace. One afternoon David lies down for a nap, wakes up, looks out the window, sees a beautiful woman bathing, and thinks—I want that. He has several wives and many concubines at this point. But he's zeroed in, and he wants what he wants—even though the woman has a husband and isn't available.

David sees, wants, and takes. Why? Because he can. Because he's the king and has the power to do it.

This is what the prophets warned about when Israel started wheedling them for a king. Kings, they cautioned, are dangerous. Even a king as golden and righteous as David is dangerous. Kings succumb to the temptation of their own power, and eventually they overstep. They take what doesn't belong to them. And sure enough, that's what David does. There's a scandal—Bathsheba becomes pregnant—and the cover-up includes killing her husband. Even though the prophet Nathan calls David out on it, the king still gets what he wants in the end: Bathsheba, who never speaks a single word in the entire story.

Who is watching the king during this entire escapade? His offspring. Children are always watching their parents, and as my sons often remind me, “Mom, we notice everything.” They learn from our actions. David's sons are watching: Amnon, the firstborn, and Absalom, the third son by another mother. His daughter is watching, too: Tamar, Absalom's sister. They all know what happened: Dad wanted and took, because he could—and he got away with it. And we might as well cue the ominous music, because there's a predatory precedent on the loose now, and the ones who are the most susceptible and vulnerable to it are David's family.

We can see it prowling as soon as the story continues. Here we begin to catch sight of the verbs that nobody had control over and the verbs that were absolutely within their control—the ones that could have gone differently.

The crown prince gets the first fastball, which he handles in a worrisome way. *David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her.* “Fell in love” is the verb he couldn't control, and the phrase itself underscores that. To say that we “fall” in love makes it sound like the

verb was an accident, something we never meant to happen (you were just minding your own business, it was there, you tripped, and boom, you fell in it: love). And that's oddly accurate. No one plans this verb. You don't wake up one morning and announce, "Today, I will fall in love." You just go down, without warning. *Amnon fell in love*, and we can understand that this is the way of human beings: a verb beyond our control. But the problem here is that he fell for his half sister, Tamar, who's off-limits. He fell in love with the wrong person. And what happened next was within his control.

But before we rush in to castigate Amnon, let's pause to consider that script—falling in love with the wrong person—and, if we can stand it, to remember when it was ours. We've all fallen in love with the wrong person, and if we haven't, we will. This is the way of human beings. And it doesn't matter how old we are or how available we are; it just happens. Ask an adolescent. Middle school is all about falling for the wrong person, because everyone's out of your league. And all this drama may be great for the music industry—there would hardly be a song on the radio without it—but it's not so great for the one who falls.

It's Amnon's turn now to fall for the wrong person. And we might feel for him until we read the next string of verbs, which tell us how he handled it. *Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, because she was a virgin, and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her.*

Amnon fell in love, but he didn't fall sick; he "made himself ill," which lets us know he's back in charge of his verbs. And what he chooses to do is to cultivate this illness, nourish it, feed it, like an impossible obsession. Why "impossible," by the way? Not because she's his sister. *Because she's a virgin.* There will be unmistakable physical evidence. David didn't have to consider the virginity issue with Bathsheba; she was married. But with Tamar, Amnon has to consider it; he can't *do anything to her*. Not "with," by the way; "to," as if she were an object he could pick up and put down at will. As if love, in the world according to Amnon, has no use for mutuality. It's just something he gets to do—to anyone he wants.

Amnon may not have had control over *falling in love*, but he did have control over *making himself ill* because of what he couldn't *do to her*—which is stomach-churning phrasing at best, but also the chilling sound of a predator, sniffing the air.

The adjective that describes Amnon here is *haggard*, which is no surprise for a person who's making himself ill. When you sit around stressed and obsessed all day, losing sleep and weight, you're going to look haggard—and people will notice. They'll see the change in you and worry. Jonadab, Amnon's friend and cousin, did exactly that: *"Son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?"* Jonadab's concern would be a fine thing, except *Jonadab was a very crafty man*. That adjective leads us straight to Genesis 3 and the serpent, who was more crafty than any of the other animals. And now we know all we need to know about Jonadab. The man is a snake.

Here's the next place in this story where things could have gone differently. Jonadab asks, and Amnon tells, and while *tell* is a good verb to choose when you fall in love with the wrong person, you have to be careful whom you tell. Tell the right person and the urge to confide, to share, to bring into the light may lead to honest healing. Tell the wrong person and a world of hurt follows. Amnon tells the wrong person. He tells the crafty friend, which means whatever Jonadab has to say about this situation is going to be as slippery and shrewd as he is. The ship could have turned around right here if Amnon had told the wise friend (who would have said something along the lines of "Oh, my goodness—I'm so sorry—and look, we're going to get through this together, because you know this can't happen, right? It cannot happen!"). But Amnon told Jonadab. And before we jump onto that condemn-the-crown-prince bandwagon again, let's take another pause to consider the script. How many of us have ever gotten bad advice from a friend? And how many of us have ever deliberately gone to the friend who we *knew* would give us bad advice, because it's what we wanted to hear?

Jonadab's advice is worse than we feared. *"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.'"* It is a carefully crafted string of verbs, calculated to get Amnon what he wants: the girl in his room.

Amnon does as Jonadab schemes, and, sure enough, here comes King David to check on his firstborn. A crown prince can't sneeze without the press going nuts, as our British friends will confirm. Pretending to be ill, Amnon repeats Jonadab's words almost verbatim: *"Please let my sister Tamar come and make a couple of cakes in my sight, so that I may eat from her hand."*

This is the next place where things could have gone differently. David doesn't pick up on his son's slightly off-kilter request. Or he doesn't want to pick up on it. And parts of that script, we can understand. To acknowledge that there might be something wrong here—a half brother wanting a private bedroom audience with his half sister—is venturing into unthinkable territory, and, by definition, we don't gravitate toward the unthinkable, especially with our own children. It's why incest can be such a shock to parents, even when all the signs are there. Unthinkable. Unspeakable. And yet.

In the story of Tamar's rape we can see our own choices and imagine different endings.

That precedent that David unleashed is roaming the palace grounds, and there are definite warning signs. Amnon is haggard: that raises concerns. He wants Tamar alone in his room: that raises eyebrows. It might even cross the line and go way out of bounds, even for a crown prince. Should David have noticed and been alarmed? Yes. No. Yes. All we have to go on are his verbs: *David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him."* Two imperatives, delivered by messenger, and shortened to a few clipped commands. What would David really have to do to think the unthinkable about his firstborn? He'd have to look at himself in an agonizingly clear mirror. And that would reveal all his terrible verbs from the previous chapters with Bathsheba, the ones Amnon has been studying and fantasizing about—and now is asking his father to collude in. *Take. Pretend. Send. Come on, Dad; you know what I want.*

This is one of those huge moments in a parent's life, and David blows it. He won't step up. He won't take control of his son's out-of-control verbs. It could have gone differently. But then David would have had to do something even harder than confessing to the prophet Nathan. He would have had to turn his gaze on his own actions and admit how they've shaped his own children. And that takes the courage of a mighty king.

When nighttime predators are on the hunt within the walls of the palace, everyone, from the king to the servants, will eventually come within range. And even the minor characters will have decisions to make about the verbs they use—decisions that could alter the course of events or keep them steamrolling along.

After David orders Tamar to Amnon's quarters, she goes, without comment. *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. Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat.* Note how many verbs it takes to make a couple of cakes; we assume she was there for a while. Note, too, that she has to perform each one of those verbs "in his sight": we assume *kneading* must have been particularly trying. He sits back and watches her, feasts his eyes, which is exactly what he wanted and what his friend and his father helped him orchestrate; it is the prelude, a form of visual pornography. She says not a word; she just finishes the task and sets the pan before him. But he refuses to eat. He has other verbs in mind.

To pull them off, he first has to clear the room—and this is the next place where things could have gone differently. *Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him.* The spotlight suddenly shifts to the bystanders, who, as it turns out, were also in the room, with front-row seats. Servants, most likely, his and hers. And even though something's going on here that everyone can smell and see, and perhaps has even seen coming, they all get up and leave her alone with him. What would have happened if they hadn't?

There's a serious power dynamic here: the prince has it, and the servants don't. Amnon gives the orders, and they must obey; when he *sends out*, they *go out*. If they don't, they lose their jobs—or their heads. It makes the situation complicated, because they're at risk: no matter what they do, lives and livelihoods are at stake.

And who doesn't know what that's like? To look the other way because someone told you it was your job? To leave the room because someone instructed you, "You're not liable and you're not responsible for what happens here; just do your job over there." Feelings are supposed to be irrelevant, which is why we say inane things like "Sorry, ma'am, it's nothing personal—I'm just doing my job." But it's always personal when someone's at risk. It's personal for Tamar. So we have to ask ourselves: Are the verbs that could happen to her less important than the verbs that could happen to me? And why has my job suddenly turned into fig leaves that can't cover any of us?

The bystanders' script is one we must seriously consider. We may not be servants of an ancient Near Eastern king in the Bronze Age whose lives will be hanging by a thread if we so much as cough in the crown prince's presence, but we know what it's

like to be part of the crowd that's watching, witnessing, and choosing not to get involved as a tense scene unfolds. Choosing to hang back when the drama erupts. Choosing to remain silent when the violence is done. Choosing to protect our own verbs rather than those of a person we aren't, technically, responsible for—and ignoring her bruises and her black eye, too. It's none of our business. It's not our job.

If one bystander had taken control of a verb here—chosen *stay* or *shout* or *go for help*—things might have gone differently for an entire kingdom, for a family, and for the woman they cast overboard.

Tamar has some verbs of her own. She delivers what is probably the most rhetorically perfect argument in scripture: the case against rape, start to finish, in seven irrefutable points.

1. No. I'm saying no.
2. You're my brother.
3. We don't do this in Israel. It's not who we are.
4. This act has an adjective: *vile*.
5. What would happen to me? I would have nowhere to go.
6. What would happen to you? You would be one of the scoundrels in Israel.
7. If it has to happen, if it's really about to happen, at least talk to Dad first—because we both know he won't withhold me from you.

It's an astounding speech, especially when contrasted with Bathsheba's silence in the previous two chapters. But it doesn't hold against Amnon's verbs, which are *would not listen* and *being stronger*. He was stronger, and so he forced her—because he could. He wanted and took—because he could. David's precedent has struck another member of the family.

Tamar's final set of verbs is a breathtaking act of resistance in the wake of the crime. In a rage of loathing, Amnon calls his servant (who is, painfully, within earshot) and orders him to *put this woman out* and *bolt* the door after her—as if the very sight of her, now, were abhorrent. Tamar responds by tearing her robe, putting ashes on her head, and taking to the corridors, *crying aloud* as she goes. It's a mourning script, but it's also a prophetic one; the prophets of Israel “cried aloud” in times of injustice. And she makes sure that everyone in the palace sees and hears, even though Amnon wouldn't. *She makes a scene*, one that any activist would admire. “Look at my wretchedness!” she might as well be crying. “Listen to me

scream! I'll make sure your eyes are opened to what we've become in this palace—and the verbs we've set loose to devour us!"

There are more heart-wrenching stops to make in this text, places where it could have gone differently, but I'll mention just three more from the family circle. Tamar's brother, Absalom, advises her to *be quiet for now*—a script which bears an uncanny resemblance to the one women are still ordered to take and still speaking up to expose. Tamar's father, King David, hears of "these things" and is angry but *would not punish* his beloved firstborn son—a script which continues to play out in the sentencing of men convicted of assault. And then Absalom gets the last stop. He speaks *neither good nor bad* to his brother Amnon. We aren't sure whether he's biding his time to make a play for the throne or truly sickened by his brother's actions. But we do know there's nothing between these brothers now but hate.

And that's where the story ends: a terminus of ruins. We're left wondering what might have gone differently if the father had punished or the younger son had spoken up; perhaps a measure of integrity could have been restored to the kingdom, with justice for Tamar. It would have required deeply painful speech and action, much harder than David's atonement for his sins of two chapters ago, because now we're talking about the atonement of an entire family. But it could have happened. And it didn't. And a few chapters later, these boys of David's are dead, and his beautiful daughter has disappeared.

Scripture is a script that is already published. But our lives—at least in the time that is before us—are not. There are narratives still in process. Asking how a text might go differently is another way of asking how our lives might go differently. When we enter the verbs in the story of Tamar's rape—the verbs that are chosen as well as the ones that could have been but weren't—we see ourselves in them. But we don't suffer them alone. We can claim the strength of standing together. We can claim the courage of planting our feet. And we can claim the freedom of imagining new endings—where things might go differently, so life can flourish. This is an act of imagination, truth telling, and hope.

This article is adapted from Anna Carter Florence's book [Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God's Word in Community](#), just published by Eerdmans. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Listening to Tamar."