Be quiet for now, my sister

-----On the deliberate silence in the Story of Tamar’s rape

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The passage 2 Samuel 13 follows the death of Saul, the dynastical promise from Nathan, and David’s marriage with Bathsheba, and is followed by the rebellion of Absalom, the next in line to the throne. The passage is a story about the beginning of the great disturbance that is to come to David’s house. As Nathan speaks for God in chapter 12, “thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house” (2 Samuel 12:11\(^1\)), the story certainly serves as an introduction to the fulfillment of Nathan’s prophesy of David’s familial conflict. However, a closer reading of the passage reveals something different. What is interesting about this Amnon-Absalom-Tamar story is that, being a book supposed to be written by a prophets, and indeed written by many priestly redactors, the passage seems to have nothing to do with religion. What religiosity entails is a value judgment; however, this whole passage is devoid of any authoritative moral judgment, even when Amnon finished raping Tamar, the critique of Amnon’s deed only comes from his sister: “No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me” (13:16). We see the same moral silence, when Absalom tells his Tamar to be silent (13:20), when David refuses to punish Amnon (13:21), and when Absalom murders Amnon (13:29). In a weird way, the all-knowing Yahweh, represented by his prophets and priests on earth, who punishes evilness and is slow to anger, seems to

\(^1\) I will always refer to 2 Samuel if not stated otherwise.
have disappeared completely as the story unfolds. In another word, the narrator is trying to make the audiences understand: the nature of the story is a political one, and the reader will notice surprising connections to other texts of the Hebrew text.

The passage begins with the sexual attachment of Amnon to his half-sister Tamar. If the name of Amnon (and his later sexual abuses) does not remind one of the word onanism, Tamar certainly reminds the reader of something. It is exactly the same name Judah’s daughter-in-law had in Genesis 38. The parallel becomes clearer as the audiences, both us the modern readers and the contemporary ordinary Israelites, certainly know that the tribe of Judah is where the house of David comes from. Later, in the book of Ruth, the writer reminds the readers of the genealogy of David (Ruth 4:18-22), we find out that David is the tenth grandson of Perez, who is the son of Tamar, who became pregnant due to Judah’s sexual misconduct.

There is something peculiar about the Judah story: it is awkwardly placed in the middle of the Joseph narrative, has nothing to do the Joseph story, and is about a yet trivial character whom we do not know much about. Then why is this story there? This urges the readers to speculate whether it is a later insertion by some priestly hand that certainly had some agenda in mind. Like the Amnon story, the Judah story almost invokes no name of God; this helps to separate it from its immediate context in the book of Genesis, as the chapter 39 begins with the statement that “the LORD was with Joseph.” While we readers know that the Absalom story culminates in the conflict between the brothers and ends with the accession of Solomon and the demise of all others, the Judah story begins with the death of Er and the death of his brother
Onan, whose name and whose sexual misconduct certainly remind us of Amnon. Onan has the duty to and is actually ordered by Judah to fulfill his duty of levirate marriage, and God punishes him to death for his failure to do so (Gen 38:9). Amnon also fails to fulfill a similar familial duty when he rapes his sister, and refuses to marry her when he deflowered her, when the ancient Israel law says that a man can only redeem his guilt if he marries the woman whom he rapes.²

Again, this poses a serious question to the readers: what exactly is the relationship between the two texts? Why do similarities exist? And why, if the biblical writers were so interested in making moral judgment, is the Amnon story, one of the most explicit story in the Bible about violation and abuse, utterly blank of any criticism? The answer I offer is twofold. First, the narrator wanted the audiences to figure out the answer himself. This narrator pretended to be a neutral recorder of the early Israelite court history, but certainly had some opinion about the David court that he either had to, or chose to, refrain from stating explicitly. Second, the Judah narrative serves as the missing judgment, and criticism, to the Amnon story, and it contains the answers that we have been looking for about Amnon, Absalom, Tamar, and eventually, about David. In fact, the connection between Genesis 38 and 2 Samuel 13 has been widely noticed among the scholarship. Ho states, “[I]f the Judah story and the David story were originally two independent traditions, there are just too many coincidences to be explanted (away).³”

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Strangely, Tamar (the second) does not become pregnant after the affair and remains childless. No archeological evidence suggests that the ancient Israelite people had any form of contraceptive devices. Then it became an interesting question to ask: why was Tamar not pregnant? The answer is not given in the Amnon story, but one can wonder, the only contraceptive method people had in that time was coitus interruptus, and we know from the Judah story that what Onan does to avoid making Tamar pregnant is to “[spill] his semen on the ground” (Gen 38:9), which just means coitus interruptus. Given all the connection we found between Onan and Amnon, and between Tamar and Tamar, we are left with the answer: Amnon used the same method to avoid making Tamar pregnant. We know how God thinks of Onan, as the text explicitly states, “what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death.” Here the author offers his moral judgment on Onan.

From this point the two stories begin to diverge. The Amnon story goes on to talk about the rebellion of Absalom, while the Judah story turns its attention towards Judah. The text is certainly critical of David and the discussion on Judah serves as an allusion to him. At the beginning of the story we are told that Judah saw a Canaanite woman whose name was not given, but she was referred to as the daughter of Shua, which in Hebrew reads “Bat Shu’a” (Gen 38:2), a name that seems to allude to Bathsheba. Since the husband of Bathsheba is a Hittite resident alien, it is reasonable to assume that Bathsheba is not Jewish, and we know from the Solomon story that messing up with foreign women was not well-esteemed among the biblical writers.

story of Judah and Tamar very probably has no prior tradition-historical existence before being written; it was derived from the David story.”
Similarly, we find that this “Bat Shua” is not only not Jewish, but also one among the worst enemies of the ancient Israelites: the Canaanites. It is very curious that the text seems to portray the marriage between Judah and this “Bat Shua” as a very short and fast event. In line 2 we are told that Judah “saw” a Canaanite woman, and in the next line we know that he married her and “went into” her. This is too fast. The action of seeing emphasizes on the sexuality but not, for example, emotionality in this relationship. This is just like another version of David’s affair with Bathsheba and his swift marriage with her. At the same time, the narrator refrained from making any moral evaluation, as if it had been too sensitive a topic to him. When both Er and Onan have died, Judah goes on a trip and goes into another prostitute, who turns out to be Tamar in disguise. During this sexual affair, David gives Tamar his “signet and the cord and the staff” (Gen 38:25), which can be symbols of royalty, possibly alluding to David. The narrator then explicitly reveals Judah’s hypocrisy when he hears about this prostitution story and orders the prostitute burnt, as if he is a righteous person himself. It is intended to be a dramatic irony when the prostitute turns out to be Tamar, who tells Judah, “It was the owner of these who made me pregnant” and gives Judah the signet and cord and staff (Gen 38:25). This is the crucial line which makes the connection between Judah and David certain. Jefferey C. Geoghegan notices a further connection between the two in the sense that both narratives happen in the time of sheepshearing, and “whenever sheepshearing is mentioned it marks an important epoch.”

5 Geoghegan, Jeffrey C. pp.55.
ancient Israelite festival, appears only four times in the Bible, and every time it is linked to the Davidic dynasty, including the Judah and Absalom narrative; both happen at the time of sheepshearing. In this sense, the story of Judah not only alludes to David, but Judah himself, as a literary character, can be seen as a doppelganger of David.

However, not every scholar is supportive of this view. A very strong counter argument comes from Paul Noble, who points out that this methodology is “fundamentally flawed.” Pointing out Ho and Rendsburg’s pitfall, he argues that this method of “accumulating an extensive catalogue of resemblances proves very little unless the methodological principle…has itself been securely established.” He then goes on to mention that these resemblances, drawn from names, and similar experiences, lead to very absurd conclusions such as Absalom could be identified with Yahweh:

Or consider this parallel: Onan’s sexual mistreatment of Tamar provokes Yahweh to kill him || Amnon’s sexual mistreatment of Tamar provokes Absalom to kill him. This is textually as well-founded as any of the other proposed resemblances, and appears to confirm two of Rensburg’s character matches (Onan = Amnon; Tamar = Tamar) yet the third implied correspondence, Yahweh = Absalom, would surely have been unacceptable to most readers in ancient Israel.

Noble is certainly correct to point out that this kind of superficial resemblance is too weak a method to establish intertextual connections, and he concludes his essay proposing a method he calls “type-narrative” method, which calls for that “discovering a common pattern in two texts is a sufficient criterion for postulating

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6 Geoghegan, pp.59-60.
8 Noble. pp.227
9 Noble. pp.224
intentional allusion—unless the pattern is a very simple one.¹⁰

And I would like to point out here, that the relation between the two texts is not just a superficial “catalogue of resemblance.” In fact, the connection is deeper, is literary, is structural, and can be established using the type-narrative method. Readers familiar with Nathan’s prophesy against the David and the wise woman’s advice to David to bring Absalom back from exile would be surprised by the striking similarity in the way the protesting statements are rendered. Upon David’s marriage with Bathsheba, Nathan comes to David with his parable of the rich man taking away a lamb from the poor. David is angered by the deed of the man; he judges that the rich man deserves death punishment, which meets with Nathan’s furious crying, “you are the man!”(12:7). We should also notice that in the Judah story, the answer that Judah gives is also a typically Davidian one: “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah” (Gen 38:26). This response is so rational, so diplomatic and so gentle that it almost reminds us of David whenever someone warns him of his wrongdoing.¹¹ These indictments against Judah and David not only have superficial similarity, they share the same literary structure and use the same literary method, i.e. dramatic irony. Each story begins with a counterpart (Tamar, Nathan, the wise woman) coming to the protagonist (Judah, David) with a case (prostitution, rich man robbing the poor, saving the line of succession); and the irony culminates in the protagonist pronouncing his judgment of the case and sentencing the guilty. In the first two cases we see the protagonist sentencing the guilty to death, and in the last we

¹⁰ Noble. pp.251
¹¹ For example, in his first encountering with Abigail, his future wife.
see David judging that the woman’s son should be protected. The dramatic irony is then immediately resolved when the counterpart makes it explicit that the case is against the protagonist himself. The three stories also end in the same way, with the protagonist diplomatically acknowledging his fault and compromises.

Then allusion does not end there. In the last paragraph of the Judah story we find that Tamar gives birth to two sons, one being named Perez, meaning breach, and the other Zerah, meaning brightness. The Perez will turn out to be David’s ancestor, while Zerah appears to be nobody, rather contradictive to our expectation we get from their names. We know that the Genesis writer deliberately uses a lot of Hebrew puns and literary techniques to make fun of some of the biblical characters. Especially, they like giving mocking names to the ones they frown upon, like the way Esau was named: he was named red because he wanted to eat the red stuff of Jacob and because he is seen as the ancestor of the Edomites (Gen 25:30). In this sense, to name David’s eleventh grandfather “Perez”, or breaching (of rule), is more likely a criticism of David’s breaching of many laws. The scholars generally agree that the historical background of David is dated to about 10th century BC, and, say, each generation takes twenty years, then the time of Perez would be at least 200 years before that of David. It seems that the writers could by no means have recorded David’s genealogy so accurately. Therefore it is reasonable to regard these names more as literary devices rather than historical facts. In naming David’s ancestor “Perez,” therefore, must reflect the agenda the writer had in mind. I argue that this agenda that he had in mind was to condemn David, who had become almost a model king in the narration of the
books of kings.

However, despite the various absolution of David from various possible guilt he has, the text’s over-emphasis on his guiltlessness seems to tell us in a stealthy way that he actually has something to do with the various dirty events, such as the death of Saul, given the two contradictory recounting of his death scene in the last chapter of 1 Samuel and the first chapter of 2 Samuel. Again, in 2 Samuel 13, we find David’s alibi when he hears the reports about the death of his sons. He seems to be surprised and very sad when he “rose, tore their garments, and lay on the ground” (13:31). These acts are typical actions of mourning, and David does this when all of his servants are present. His action only ends when he is told by Jonadab that the only person dead was Amnon, because Absalom had been hating him since the day of Amnon’s raping of Tamar (13:32). This mention of Jonadab brings him into a strange position, as we know that his father is a brother of David. Readers might remember that this is the same person who came up with the plan for Amnon to rape Tamar, kindling hatred between two oldest sons of David, leading to the death of both. Jonadab is behind the rape of Tamar, and seems to have known about Absalom’s murder plan from very early on, and appears to be an important figure in David’s court. He is certainly associated with the death of Amnon and Absalom. David’s role in the event is yet not clear, but he seems to have an interest in seeing his older sons dead. Whom David has in mind is certainly Bathsheba and her son Solomon. Notice that Solomon was also the only son of David who is given two names. When David names him Solomon, he also sends for Nathan, who names Solomon Jedidiah,
meaning God’s beloved (12: 25). It suffices to suggest that Solomon is more likely the favorite son of David. To secure Solomon’s succession, two threat need to be cleared and they are Absalom and Amnon, and through Jonadab, who had no chance of inheriting the throne, the hand of David is cleaned\textsuperscript{12}. While the Bible does not supports this interpretation explicitly, I would like to suggest this is what the writer, critical of David, was trying to hint at, since he lived under the reign of Davidic dynasty and had to “be quiet for now.”

Finally, I would like to suggest that, the writers of Genesis 38 and 2 Samuel 38 are closely related; and in making Judah acknowledge his own fault by making him say “She is more in the right than I” (Gen 38: 26). The writers give their moral judgment of David. Having read through 1 Samuel, what the readers have in mind upon hearing this phrase “She is more in the right than I” should not be David, but Saul, for his identical acknowledgement to David: “you are more righteous than I” (1 Samuel 24:17). This cross-reference seems to identify David with Saul, if we are able to make the connection between David and Judah. In this sense, the writes of Genesis 38 and 2 Samuel 13 seem to be making the point that David is just like Saul, in the ways that he disobeys the Lord in his actions and in that his hypocrisy to disguise his immorality. This would not be an expressible objection to the monarchy during the writer’s time since the book of Samuel was mainly written by the southern Judahide writers whose patron was mainly the Davidic dynasty. In this sense, the silence of the

\textsuperscript{12}McCarter actually suggests otherwise, arguing that Absalom might actually be the one who is behind the whole scheme. See McCarter, P K. \textit{Samuel: I [and] II}. Garden City: Doubleday, 1980. But this does not undermine argument, since McCarter points out that David seems to be aware of Absalom’s plan for his reluctance to attend the festival. See pp. 334.
deity in 2 Samuel 13 is a deliberate one, and reflects the uncomfortableness of the narrator to make a judgment about that he knows or speculates what David had done.

Bibliography


