



# PAWNS OF DECEPTION

SERIES: *THE DIARY OF AN OLD KING*

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2 Samuel 13:1-22

20th Message

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We come now to the final chapters in our studies in the life of King David of Israel. I have entitled this series *The Diary of an Old King*. In these texts, David's life will be played out before him in the mirror of his spoiled sons. These men take on the sins of their father with flagrant zest and zeal, playing their roles to extremes—all of this to give the king, in his old age, the heart of God.

The first story is the account of the rape of David's beautiful daughter, Tamar, by her half-brother, Amnon. The story has seven movements, each of which is portrayed in pairs of interlocking relationships. These seven pairs of relationships ought to be illustrative of family loyalty, care and protection, but instead, they become clasped hands in a labyrinth of seduction. One broken link in this chain could have prevented the disaster, but, tragically, every link only serves to aid in the seduction and rape of the princess of Israel. This ancient tale of tragic proportions sadly has become all too familiar in our modern world. The one who will feel the weight of this tragedy is David, whose own life is reflected in this story as in a mirror.

The account opens in 2 Samuel, chapter 13:

## I. Obsessed With Desire (13:1-5)

**Now it was after this that Absalom the son of David had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar, and Amnon the son of David loved her. And Amnon was so frustrated because of his sister Tamar that he made himself ill, for she was a virgin, and it seemed hard to (was difficult in the eyes of) Amnon to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother; and Jonadab was a very shrewd man. And he said to him, "O son of the king, why are you so depressed morning after morning? Will you not tell me?" Then Amnon said to him, "I am in love with Tamar, the sister of my brother Absalom." Jonadab then said to him, "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be ill; when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Please let my sister Tamar come and give me some food to eat, and let her prepare the food in my sight, that I may see it and eat from her hand.'" (NASB)**

In verse one we are introduced to the two sons of David. These "chips off the old block" frame the verse; their beautiful sister, Tamar, is caught in the middle. The brothers are princes, the sister, a princess in the royal family. Absalom was the handsome third son of

Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur; Amnon, the eldest son of David by Ahinoam, the Jezreelitess. Every time we hear the names Amnon and Absalom, which mean *faithfulness* and *father of peace*, respectively, we are stung with the painful irony of the rape and murder which follow.

As the scene opens, Amnon, is lovesick for his half-sister, Tamar. The term "frustrated" means to be "bound up beyond measure"; in this case, Amnon is tied up in knots by his all-consuming lust. Surprisingly, the obstacle to his having Tamar is not his father the king, but Tamar's brother, Absalom. Absalom appears to have "the sanctioning power behind the girl, inhibiting him from 'doing something to her,'"<sup>1</sup> Fokkelman suggests that the fact that Absalom is the prominent figure in the text, and that David is always "limping on behind,"<sup>2</sup> indicates that David may have already slipped from his place of prominence, and Absalom, his handsome son, has already emerged as the successor to the throne. So with lust burning within him, so much so that he "made himself ill," and Tamar's virginity preventing him from acting upon it, Amnon sees no way out of his quandary.

But, as if in answer to Amnon's prayers, his "Uncle Joe" enters onto the stage. Verse 3:

**But Amnon had a friend whose name was Jonadab, the son of Shimeah, David's brother;**

Jonadab was David's brother and Amnon's close friend. Seven Hebrew words form the line which introduces Jonadab. Of the seven, five words resonate with covenantal loyalty: "faithfulness," "intimate friend," "God is willing," "son of obedience," and "brother." Yet what follows makes a mockery of all the holy standards of loyal-love that hold the fabric of families together. With cunning wisdom, Jonadab breaks through all the obstacles and sets out to use David to satisfy the lusts of his nephew. He tells Amnon, "Pretend to be sick; lay on your bed. When your father comes to see you, request that Tamar serve you a private meal. When you see her preparing food, the very sight of her will make you well!" What a sordid scene: the uncle feeding the lust of his nephew, through the vehicle of his father, for the rape of his sister.

## II. Seduction and Rape (13:6-17)

**So Amnon lay down and pretended to be ill; when the king came to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Please let my sister Tamar come and make me a**

couple of (heart-) cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand."

Then David sent to the house for Tamar, saying, "Go now to your brother Amnon's house, and prepare food for him." (13:6-7)

Addressing his father the king, Amnon makes a subtle allusion to his sexual passions: "Please let my sister Tamar come and make me a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat from her hand." Both the verb "to make" and the noun "cakes" come from the same Hebrew root as the word "heart." Fokkelman translates this, "Let her knead two heart-cakes."<sup>3</sup> The same words are used in Song of Songs:

**"You have made my heart beat faster, my sister, my bride;  
You have made my heart beat faster with a single glance of your eyes"** (Song 4:9).

The dual image of the "beating heart" reveals Amnon's obsession, and "betrays his secret wish, a meeting with Tamar without any snoopers."<sup>4</sup> But, like an unthinking errand boy, David does not take time to investigate these hidden images. When he passes on the request to Tamar, he removes these sexual overtones and delivers the message in its bare essentials—a sister's duty to her brother.

Verse 8:

**So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, and he was lying down. And she took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. And she took the pan and dished them out before him, but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Have everyone go out from me." So everyone went out from him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the bedroom, that I may eat from your hand." So Tamar took the cakes which she had made and brought them into the bedroom to her brother Amnon. When she brought them to him to eat, he took hold of her and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister." (13:8-11)**

The princess enters her brother's house, playing the role of a faithful cook, unaware of the plot that is now afoot. Immediately we are given a sense of the ugly undertones of Amnon's love-starved imagination. No visual pleasure of his sister's delicate frame is withheld from his voracious eyes. The lust of his eyes feeds his fleshly appetites beyond control; and Amnon orders everyone out of the room so that he can carry out his secret desire. He invites Tamar into the intimate chamber of his bedroom, and greets her with the base request, "Come, lie with me, my sister"—words which should not even be uttered in the same sentence!

A horrified Tamar objects forcefully and soundly. Verse 12:

**But she answered him, "No, my brother, do not violate me, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this disgraceful thing! As for me, where could I**

get rid of my reproach? And as for you, you will be like one of the fools in Israel. Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you." However, he would not listen to her; since he was stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her.

**Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred; for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, "Get up, go away!" But she said to him, "No, because this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you have done to me!" Yet he would not listen to her. Then he called his young man who attended him and said, "Now throw this woman away from me, outside, and lock the door behind her." (13:12-17)**

Tamar, having left the safety and protection of her home, enters the most intimate room of her half-brother's residence, a place which too ought to be a sanctuary of protection. But, painfully, this intimate chamber becomes the sordid scene of a rape. Tamar's plea, and her objections to Amnon, are most honorable and logical. They speak of the dignity with which she holds herself, and the holy standards of God's laws in Israel—"what is not done" and "should not be done."

Tamar counters Amnon's lust with a logic that presses her brother to consider a future that will be inescapably shaped by his present choices. As for herself, to lose her virginity would mark her forever, and sentence her to a life of isolated shame. Who would condescend to pay the price of her dowry? As for Amnon, he would be labeled the worst kind of "fool" in all Israel. The word "fool" (Heb: *nabal*) is reminiscent of the Nabal story. It is a dangerous omen, foreshadowing his violent and certain death. If Amnon wants Tamar, she intimates, he should do so legitimately and ask permission of his father, the king. (Marrying a half-sister was not illegal in Israel.)

But lust favors no patience, no propriety, only savage satisfaction. "Once [Amnon] has seen, he is lost, just like his father in 11:2."<sup>5</sup> So now, this "prince who is constantly served at his every whim" cannot handle any interruption of anticipated desire and blazes away in an act of love which is pure aggression"<sup>6</sup>—rape, which in Israel was punishable by death. I wish it were so everywhere!

Now comes the turning point of the story.

**Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred; for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. (13:15)**

"What was once marked as love was merely a passing desire, now completely spent...Amnon feels no lingering attraction, no desire for continued intimacy, nothing that might remotely be called love."<sup>7</sup> Amnon now hates Tamar with a great hatred, and "the transition from love into hate is so complete that the element of love becomes totally driven out...He who seeks inter-

course pretends to be able to reciprocate tenderness, to make deep contact, and to taste the union of true love.”<sup>8</sup> But any illicit reach outside the sacred bonds of marriage issues forth a devaluing of the person, emptying them of their very worth.

When I was thirteen years old, I had a friend who used to take me fishing and hunting, a wonderful man whom I idolized. One day while we were riding in his truck, suddenly he turned to me and said, “Don’t you ever have sex with a woman before marriage!” It will make you feel about this big,” he said, holding his forefinger and thumb about an inch apart. I was shocked. After all, I was only thirteen. But I knew he was speaking from experience; he knew what he was talking about. He knew even as a non-Christian that sex before marriage is an illicit reach which debases both parties. I have never forgotten his words.

The face of the violated victim now becomes a mirror of Amnon’s own depravity, and a constant reminder of the desecration to which he had subjected Tamar. But the perpetrator cannot face this reflection, so he throws her out with merciless bluntness. “[He] has only one syllable left for her: the deep disdain of [the Hebrew] *zot*—‘get rid of *this* wretch,’” still speaking of the princess whom he violated and whose name he won’t even use. He pushes her out the door, outside, the door is slammed shut behind her. “Now that she has been used she is disposable.”<sup>9</sup>

### III. Public Protest and Private Rage (13:18-22)

#### (a) Tamar’s Public Protest

**Now she had on a long-sleeved garment; for in this manner the virgin daughters of the king dressed themselves in robes. Then his attendant took her out and locked the door behind her. And Tamar put ashes on her head, and tore her long-sleeved garment which was on her; and she put her hand on her head and went away, crying aloud as she went.** (13:18-19)

Perhaps Amnon thinks that Tamar, like Bathsheba, will cooperate and keep the act a secret. But Tamar will not go in silence; she is a better person than Bathsheba. She makes public what Amnon did in private in order to bring some semblance of honor to her violated soul. She tears her beautiful robe, which was a symbol of her royal worth, symbolizing the violent loss of her virginity. “As she was not taken in by his desire, so she is not immobilized by his hate.”<sup>10</sup> Tamar, who was a very visible person in the court, lets everyone know what has occurred. She exposes her shame openly, boldly and forcefully. This is a very important step in the healing process. Society forces victims to keep silent, but silence does even more damage than the act itself.

#### (b) Absalom’s Private Rage

**Then Absalom her brother said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? But now keep silent, my sister, he is your brother; do not take this matter**

**to heart.” So Tamar remained and was desolate in her brother Absalom’s house. Now when King David heard of all these matters, he was very angry. But Absalom did not speak to Amnon either good or bad; for Absalom hated Amnon because he had violated his sister Tamar. (13:20-22)**

Absalom sees through the affair instantly. He tells Tamar, rather bluntly, to keep quiet: “*do not take the matter to heart.*” This is a painful echo of David’s words in 2 Sam 11:25, following the arranged death of Uriah. Fokkelman suggests that Absalom is warning her that taking legal action against Amnon would be difficult, because Amnon “is a prince and is much beloved by his father.”<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Absalom wishes to prevent the royal family from being exposed to a formal lawsuit and the resulting national scandal; and spare Tamar the misery and humiliation which that might involve. Absalom will take her rage on himself. He would care for his violated sister in his own way, and permanently.

When David finally hears of what went on in his own household, he is furious with rage. The king is furious at Amnon, his lustful son; at Jonadab, his shrewd brother; and at himself for his naiveté at not seeing through Amnon’s request. But he does nothing. He is “so compromised by his own past he can do nothing.”<sup>12</sup> “David’s limping on behind betrays that his rage is, in fact, the mask of his own powerlessness.”<sup>13</sup> So when the violated princess looks to her father for help, there will be no investigation, no inquiry, no charges pressed, no legal proceedings, and no justice—just rage with no action.

But if King David is passive in action, his son and possible successor, Absalom, is not. His response to the matter is to publicly excommunicate his brother in a rage of silence, a rage that will brew and fester into a methodical and passionate revenge. Fueled by a burning hatred, Absalom’s rage will move with relentless force until a sister’s debt is paid in full, with nothing less than Amnon’s blood.

What are we to make of this sordid account?

### IV. The Sins of the Fathers

#### (a) A Distant Mirror of Our Depravity

There is much that we can learn from this story. On one level, it is a painful portrait of our own culture, which raises its sons to be spoiled princes, in contaminated courts of ease. Uncle Jonadab is everywhere, beckoning to us, telling us to feed the sexual cravings of our souls, assuring us that there is no harm done.

But the problem with this, as Amnon was to learn, is that when you feed the lust of the eyes, rather than satisfying the soul, the cravings become uncontrollable and cannot be satisfied outside of illicit sex—and violent sex at that. As far as Amnon is concerned, it took seven years to live out the consequences of this one act;

but for Tamar, it would take a lifetime.

We live in a culture that seems hell-bent on feeding our sensual cravings. We are told that if there are dangers to such choices to just lay a condom over the whole affair, for easy protection. But into our culture comes Tamar's penetrating cry to awaken us, and the tearing of her robe to haunt us. The consequence for her was not just an unwanted pregnancy, or AIDS, but something far worse: Tamar lost her purity, her virginity, her dignity; in short, everything she had to give a man.

### **(b) The Tool of a Daughter to Shape a Father's Heart**

But there is a much deeper level to the story. This incident is aimed primarily at David. This is the Diary of an Old King, who in his remaining years is watching his life reflected in the mirror of the lives of his own children, as his sins are visited upon him through a son and a daughter. But in the lives of these children the voice of God breaks through even louder, and the images and reflected brighter than ever before.

Can you hear the beckoning voice of God breaking through at night, when David is alone on his bed?

*Look at your son, David,  
what do you see?  
A prince, a future king,  
or a fool to lust?  
That's you, David.*

*And you, David, used like a pawn,  
for someone else's private jest,  
the court joker in a game of secret seduction,  
your royal touch its faithful service,  
servicing his untamed lusts.  
How does it feel, David?  
Weep, David.  
That was you, David.*

*Look at your daughter, David,  
beautiful Tamar, succulent palm tree,  
princess in Israel.  
What do you see, David?  
Innocence gone,  
seized in a moment,  
royal robe rent in violent song.  
She's crying, David.  
Are you angry that she cries, David?  
Would you rather she keep silent, David?  
She's crying for you.  
She wants her daddy, David.  
She's crying for justice.  
Where are you, David?  
Why can't you hold her?  
Why do you look away, David?  
Does that gaping wound of desolation*

*stare bloody back at you?*

*Why are you weeping, David?  
Is it because you could have,  
but didn't?  
Your once quick, decisive hand  
that played the harp,  
seized the spear and shot the sling,  
now frozen in silence, paralyzed  
by sin's deafening blows.*

*Why are you weeping, David,  
an absent father now purged tender,  
by a daughter's inconsolable grief?  
That was how I felt, David,  
plagued with pain, unable to reach  
my daughter, whom you touched.  
So weep your weary eyes dry, O David,  
I love you, David,  
for today she, your daughter  
has made you a father.*

And so we leave David, the man who became king only to fall into his own demise and doom, now being reshaped through sorrow, the very finger of God.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 1, *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 101. I have depended heavily on Fokkelman for many of my insights into the story line.

2. Fokkelman, *King David*, 100.

3. Fokkelman, *King David*, 105.

4. Fokkelman, *King David*, 105.

5. Fokkelman, *King David*, 106.

6. Fokkelman, *King David*, 106.

7. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 288.

8. Fokkelman, *King David*, 107.

9. Fokkelman, *King David*, 104.

10. Brueggemann, 288.

11. Fokkelman, *King David*, 111.

12. Brueggemann, 289.

13. Fokkelman, *King David*, 100.

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