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# From Divinely Equal to Violently Oppressed

## *Brutality Against Women in the Bible*

THE OLD TESTAMENT TELLS US THE FIRST WOMAN ON earth, Eve, was created from the rib of the first man, Adam. To many, this symbolizes equality between the sexes. A historical theologian said, “to be formed from the side symbolically indicates equality rather than domination or subjection” (O’Loughlin, 1993). Wheelwright-Brown (2020) stated how the effect of mankind’s view of Eve’s brave choice to partake of the fruit of the tree of life had serious, harmful consequences for women:

There’s the effect it had on men, and the way they have been subtly influenced to perceive women and think of women. I think some men have felt justified treating women poorly, because if they cling at all to this so-called origin myth, and they believe that [Eve] blew it—it’s her fault—[that] we’re living in this hard, mortal, fallen world—then it’s just this insidious, perpetuated notion that when life gets hard, it’s her fault—a woman was the cause of that.

Women of the Old Testament endured sexual violence because of the way Eve was viewed. In this paper, I will discuss the effect Eve’s story has had on the way women have been viewed in the world, analyze select biblical accounts of the treatment of these ancient women, and identify how their stories can help women today heal from their own experiences with sexual violence.

Almost one in three women in the world has been subjected to intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence, or both at least once in their life (*United Nations*, n.d.). This can be seen as mainly a modern problem, but biblical texts dating back to the book of Genesis reveals this is not the case. The book of Genesis, which is purported to have been written by Moses sometime between the 15th and 13th centuries B.C. (The Church, n.d.) shows a graphic and violent history of the treatment of women and gives us a better idea of how this treatment became an expected male behavior that was often seen as

acceptable. How did we go from equality to brutality in such a short amount of time? According to Lynch (2020):

Genesis says, “Look through these lenses to understand the biblical story.” Genesis 1–2 begins with a compelling vision of male-female equality. Men and women in Genesis are made in God’s image, called to rule in creation (Genesis 1), and to share in the sacred task of keeping the garden (Genesis 2). *But once humanity rebels*, male dominance enters the picture. As an awful consequence of sin, men would now “rule over” women (Genesis 3:16). Male dominance and rule represented a distortion of God’s intention for men and women.

Equality was deeply fractured by the rebellion of humanity after the Fall and the subsequent distortion of “God’s intention for men and women” (Lynch, 2020).

Because Eve’s choice in the garden began humanity’s journey she is often viewed by many religions, and much of the world, to be the origin of temptation and sin. Hence, the female sex has been seen as needing to be ruled by male dominance, that women might not be allowed the opportunity to fail humanity again. Niehaus (2020) confirmed this idea when he said,

If one asks when the woman did sin, the Bible provides an obvious answer: “The woman ... was deceived and became a sinner” (1 Timothy 2:14). The woman was ensnared by the deceptiveness of sin (Hebrews 3:13), and at that moment she became a sinner in her thoughts. Next, she took the fruit and ate it, and became a sinner in her act. This sequence of events has become all too human, and it is no doubt against this very thing that Paul affirms, with an implicit exhortation: “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, *and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*” (2 Corinthians 10:5, emphasis added).

Thus, the idea of a woman’s thoughts and actions leading to the origin of sin, and hence all sin, indicate the need to master or control her.

This captivity becomes a recurrent theme throughout the Bible. Women like Bathsheba, Lot’s daughters, and Tamar outline patterns of male domination and sexual violence against females. But Bathsheba, who has commonly been viewed as a seductress and adulterer with King David, is now being seen with new eyes by some biblical scholars. As Garsiel (1993) says regarding King David:

The [word] series, “he saw ... sent ... inquired ... sent ... took her ... lay with her ...” indicates that the main initiative was David’s. Apart from this, others have interpreted David’s actions in this phrase as devoid of

any affection and have rather reduced Bathsheba as a mere object of sex. (Ademiluka, 2019).

In 2 Samuel 13: 1-22 we learn about Tamar. She was a young woman raped by her own brother. He deceived her by pretending to be sick and asking her to take care of him. When she had made him the little cakes he had requested and complied with his request to be fed by her, he then forced her to lie with him despite her protests and sent her away from their home and locked her outside the gate. She was left destitute and alone. Ademiluka (2019) outlines other accounts of gross mistreatment of women in the Old Testament.

In Genesis 19:8–11, Lot offers his two daughters to certain men of Sodom who desire to rape his male guests. This story is reminiscent of the narrative of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19, which “many consider ... to be the most heinous of sexual abuse acts in the Old Testament.” A Levite and his concubine had to spend the night in Gibeah in the land of Benjamin, and in the night, the men of the city demanded to rape him. Their host offered instead the concubine and his own virgin daughter, but the men refused, and the Levite pushed out his concubine to them. She was raped to death and her body was discovered in the morning. Graybill (2019) points out some intertextual connections in the Genesis and Judges narratives. In both texts, alternate targets are provided for the rapists, which points “to the larger economy of sexual violence [and the representation] of women as interchangeable sexual commodities” (Graybill 2019). With an estimated 5 billion copies sold or given away, the Holy Bible is the bestselling book of all time (Guinness World Records, 2022). With such a wide audience it may be wise to turn our attention to the benefits these ancient texts can provide to survivors of sexual trauma. In our modern age we can utilize biblical stories to teach important lessons about the treatment of women, and we might feel encouraged that violence against women was considered important enough to be included in this generally quite male (and male-authored) book. (Christianity, n.d.) It is estimated that over 181 million people read from the Bible in 2021 (Registry, n.d.). If we taught more openly and frequently from the stories of these women, things could change for the positive. West, et. al. (2004) explains:

Certain biblical texts are seldom read, and never on a Sunday. The story of the rape of Tamar is one such text, which even when it is read, is never read publicly. And yet this text, we have found, has the potential to create a safe and sacred place in which women can articulate and own their experiences of sexual (and other forms of) abuse. Tamar’s story, though a story of a brutal rape at the hands of her brother, Amnon, has

been used in collaborative acts of reading to construct abuse-resisting and life-giving practices and theologies.

An example of these “life-giving” readings of sexual abuse can be seen in African Christian groups. With multiple countries in Africa having some of the highest rape statistics in the world, African women are turning to their biblical predecessors for strength and inspiration to heal from sexual trauma (Nation-Master). They are taking text from the accounts of women like Tamar and studying them. They’re pulling apart what happened to her, and in her misery, they are finding solace and sisterhood.

These women are turning trauma into triumph through the study of women in the Bible at the Ujamaa Centre at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Typically, their Bible study begins with a generative theme that emerges from the reality of a particular local community (Friere, 1970). Through this study, victims strive to hear the transformative word from God for [their] context (West et al., 2004). “Transformative” is the keyword as women search for modern new meanings in ancient narratives.

One of the center’s most successful Bible studies focuses on the text of Tamar found in 2 Samuel 13:1–22. The text is read aloud to the group as a whole. Small groups are then asked to reread the text together and answer a series of questions regarding their reading. Questions include identifying the main characters and their roles in Tamar’s story. They also guide groups in recognizing Tamar’s ability to approach her own traumatic experience with clear and careful articulation of her own defense (West et al. 2004). In studying verse 12, we learn that Tamar gave clear non-consent language to her brother’s advances with the words, “No, my brother.” She reminds him of their relationship as brother and sister and of their cultural heritage and communal values when she states, “for such a thing is not done in Israel” (New International Version Bible, n.d.). She concludes by stating his intentions and subsequent act would be wicked. Tamar does not equivocate in her assertions.

The study’s questions, and the ensuing discussions they create, allow women to dissect Tamar’s ordeal. The slow pace of the story, with the graphic description of Amnon’s plan and then its execution (West, et al. 2020), allows women to learn all they can about the part each male figure plays in Tamar’s rape and subsequent treatment, including her banishment from her home and family, the sanctuary she finds in her protector Absalom’s offer of a new home, and the final silencing of her story by that same protector. Perhaps the strongest opportunity for healing comes from Tamar’s trauma as stated in one short verse in the book of Samuel about her attacker, Amnon: “But he refused to listen to her, and since he was stronger than she, he raped her” (New Inter-

national Version Bible, 2 Sam. 13:14). This text names and recognizes rape for what it really is: a violent, forced assault on the physically weaker victim. It also highlights that in cases of rape and other sexual violence, the victim has no voice. Amnon “refused to listen to her” (NIV). This void of choice and voice contributes dramatically to the lasting trauma of violent attacks like Tamar’s.

With the exception of Bathsheba, these biblical women’s stories are accounts most women have never heard. There are other neglected scriptural stories like the women and children who were raped and then cannibalized by the Nephites at the end of the Book of Mormon. What must the cultural environment have been like in biblical times that women were seen as having so little worth or power? Why is a brave, strong, and courageous woman like Eve portrayed by most of the world as a naked, sinful, selfish, and weak woman with a snake seductively wrapped around her body and a ripe red fruit at her lips? Eve should be every woman’s biblical mentor.

The final question of the Ujamaa Centre’s Bible study is: *What will you now do in response to this Bible study?* This pivotal question, and the safe space wherein it is asked, has led women to find effective tools such as shared communal comfort, counseling opportunities, and the ability to visualize creative action plans to further both church and community support for survivors of rape and sexual trauma. In other words, they have begun speaking of their experiences in a way women like Tamar never could in her place and time. This open dialogue of shared trauma brings healing.

While the Bible begins with a direct and crystal-clear model of equality in God’s creation of Adam and Eve, this paper examines the way in which humanity’s Fall places the blame of mankind’s troubles squarely on Eve’s shoulders. The success of groups like the Ujamaa Centre in discussing often ignored biblical texts as a means to help mistreated women provides a step-by-step opportunity to relate the accounts of the Bible to our own lives today. As the Bible laid out the foundation of equality between men and women in Genesis, it has given survivors of sexual abuse and trauma an avenue of healing, strength, and understanding through the study of later books of scripture, including the story of Tamar in the book of Samuel.

It is often said that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1998). However, from studying the ancient stories of women like Tamar, humanity’s definition of a woman’s individual and collective worth can return full circle to Eve’s original example of courage, confidence, and strength. Instead of repeating past aberrations, reinventing our

view of women from unearthing our biblical past is an attainable goal with real potential for a more equitable and safe future for all.

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