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In Memoriam: An Analysis of *Texts of Terror*

by Elizabeth A. Wenthe

Texts of Terror by Phyllis Trible relates the stories of four women from the Old Testament: Hagar, the slave who bore a son to Abraham, and then was exiled and rejected (Genesis 16:1-16; 21:9-21); Tamar, the daughter of David who was raped by her own brother and then both rejected and discredited as the consequences of his lust (2 Samuel 13:1-22); an unnamed concubine from Bethlehem who was attacked and raped by "three wicked men of the city," then dismembered and discarded (Judges 19:1-30); and finally the daughter of Jephthah who was sacrificed as the victim of a faithless vow made by her father (Judges 11:29-40). We are separated from these women by hundreds of years, yet the abject horror of their stories crosses the intervening years to speak to our generation as Trible points out the silence, the absence, and the opposition of God, as well as the active human cruelty.

A key to understanding the need for study of the *Texts of Terror* and their victims is the parallels to women abused and terrorized in our so-called civilized contemporary society. Trible explains her selection of these stories: "hearing a black woman describe herself as a daughter of Hagar outside the covenant; seeing an abused woman on the streets of New York with a sign, 'My name is Tamar'; reading news reports of the dismembered body of a woman found in a trash can; attending worship services in memory of nameless women" (1). In addition, a troublesome aspect is the apparent absence of God in response to the cries of these women. If I am to learn about myself in the feminist context, and how I relate to Christian belief and practice, I also must hear these stories of sisters who have suffered. Trible states, "I tell sad stories as I hear them" (1). By hearing these stories from Trible we will bring the sufferings of these women to light for our own generation.

The story of Tamar will serve as our example. The Old Testament text tells of three children of David the King: his sons Absalom and Amnon, and their sister Tamar. Amnon "desire(s) her" (v. 1), but is prohibited from sexual intercourse with her by her virginity and her relationship to him. As a virgin, Tamar is protected property, inaccessible to all males; the family ties are cited to underscore the tragedy of the ensuing events. Amnon conspires with a cousin to feign illness in order to secure Tamar's presence

in his chambers. King David's concern for Amnon's condition results in David commanding Tamar to enter the chambers and serve Amnon with her own hand. When Tamar is within reach, Amnon grabs her and says: "Come, lie with me, my sister" (v. 11). She appeals to his knowledge that this act is wrong; she even suggests that should their father, the king, allow this act she will have to submit out of female servitude!¹ Amnon dismisses her pleas, overpowers her, and rapes her. Following the act, lust turns to hatred, and Amnon orders her away. Tamar protests, knowing that the expulsion is worse than the rape: in sending her away Amnon is condemning her to a life of desolation and despair. Her protests are in vain. She seeks refuge with Absalom who becomes her advocate, takes her into his home, and eventually avenges her by arranging Amnon's death. However, in the culture of the time, the remainder of Tamar's life is lived as if in death. She can never marry or have children; for the rest of her life she must pay the penalty for her brother's lust. She is "desolate"—a description applied in Old Testament usage to persons destroyed by an enemy (Lam. 1:16) or torn to pieces by an animal (Lam. 3:11). She has been violated and cast out, dismissed without intervention from her father the king, or from God.

Some persons hearing of the *Texts of Terror* and Tamar's story have difficulty understanding a need to dredge up the lives of women from thousands of years past. "The present is what is important, not horrid stories from the past," they believe. That may be true, but a familiar truism tells us that if we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it. In reality we study ancient events in depth in many disciplines and gain valuable insights from them. In this essay I shall explore in greater depth reasons for telling and reflecting on these stories, reasons for travelling backward to the time of Tamar.

I. Travel Guides for a Journey of Remembering

Trible helps us to study ancient events so that they speak to us on a contemporary level. She first mentions some pitfalls in studying the stories of terror. I agree with Trible in rejecting the argument that they do not deserve study because they come from a primitive and inferior past, and that the Christian Era is superior. Justice and humanity are not more characteristic of modern times. All of us are aware of many instances that indict Christianity for actions (and omissions of action) in the name of God. The Crusades, the Inquisition, and the witchhunts of the Christian Era are appalling examples of official forms of Christianity in action! The silence of most of the Christian world during the Holocaust of the 20th century proves that omissions of action are just as barbaric. It also might be claimed that these stories from the Old Testament do not reflect Christian

experience. Commonly the Old Testament pictures a God of wrath contrasted with a God of love in the New Testament. However, even in that respect, God is not so much wrathful as absent in these tales of terror, and perceived as distant and unconcerned.

Another argument against studying Trible's women has been that the suffering of Tamar and the others was less than that of Jesus Christ on the cross, and therefore of no consequence. A related argument suggests that the final redemption of these women takes place through the resurrection of Christ and so should be sufficient. Both of these arguments are used to explain suffering even today, but neither brings comfort to the victims, nor do they prevent new suffering and inhumanity.

Much of the language of these stories hides meaning from anyone unfamiliar with scholarly writing and Old Testament interpretation. One style of old Hebrew writing was ring composition, involving a circular patterning. In the story of Tamar (v. 1) the syntax shows two males surrounding a female: "To Absalom, son of David, a sister beautiful, with the name Tamar, and desired her Amnon, son of David." As the story progresses, the two males move in action around a female who relates to both of them but who also has her own identity.

Of additional importance in understanding Hebrew writing is to read further in the account to chapter 14:27. Here we may read that, long after the tragedy of Tamar, "There were born to Absalom (her brother) three sons and one daughter; her name was Tamar." The significance of only mentioning the name of the female child gives importance to Tamar and places the female in a more important position than the three sons. This serves as a memorial for the first Tamar and reinforces the need for these efforts of ours to remember and redeem this sister of terror. Thus the method of studying the writing from the Bible enhances our understanding of these victims' stories.

Another study help is the perspective from which Trible tells the stories of the terrors. She approaches these tales from the stance of feminism, a hermeneutic that may be used in several ways. One feminist strategy documents the oppression of women using long neglected data that shows their inferior position, and the abuse of women in ancient Israel and the early Christian Church. Another examines the patriarchy in the Bible by exposing old stories in a new way which gives us a chance to refute the invisibility and silence of women and their voices. Trible states that she incorporates these into a third approach, which "recounts tales of terror *In Memoriam* to offer sympathetic readings of abused women." Trible's essays "interpret stories of outrage on behalf of their female victims in order to recover a neglected history, to remember a past that the present

embodies, and to pray that these terrors shall not come to pass again” (3). Indeed, I had read the story of Hagar, but certainly never from the viewpoint of Hagar; nuances that speak to her terror escaped my comprehension entirely. The other stories have no doubt also been read by millions of women through the years, but did any of us hear their cries?

II. A Journey of Remembering

Methods of studying the stories of terror provide a foundation for our further examination and help us to see the parallels in our own time: the incest victim, the rape victim, the battered wife, the single mother and the poor woman. For specific stories of terrors we need only to read our local paper, to talk to friends and neighbors, even perhaps look within our own lives. Tribble suggests we use the Bible as a mirror, and in that context we can see that these sad stories have indeed “yielded new beginnings” (2). New people have read them and many will learn from them. We will study these tales to remember and therefore will “redeem” their victims. We will keep them in memory and hold them up for all time to remember. We will hear Hagar as she becomes the suffering servant, and wanders in the desolation of the wilderness without the protection of the tribe or the promise of the covenant. We will remember the concubine of Bethlehem, helpless against the brutality of male power that resulted in the atrocity of her death. And lastly, we will remember the daughter of Jephthah, a victim of her father’s faithless vow that cost her her life.

Jephthah offers to sacrifice to Yahweh “whosoever comes forth from my house to meet me” in return for victory against the Ammonites (Judges 11:30). As his daughter runs to greet him, her fate is sealed, but she requests a delay for “two months to go and wander upon the hills and lament my virginity—I and my female friends” (11:37c). Her lament is not for her approaching death, but rather for her unfulfilled life. Tribble tells us that “where the female who has never known a man is typically numbered among the unremembered, in the case of the daughter of Jephthah the usual does not happen” (106). The postscript to the story develops as the text continues. “Although she had not known a man, nevertheless she became a tradition in Israel. From year to year the daughters of Israel went to mourn for the daughter of Jephthah . . . four days in the year” (11:40). This victim inspires a tradition because the women she chose for her final companions have not allowed her memory to die. In remembering the daughter of Jephthah we join those generations of women of Israel for whom she was a tradition; in remembering all of the victims of the terrors we will carry them forward to our own time in honor and memory.

Readers must also understand the perspective from which we view these stories. If I am to learn with a feminist viewpoint, I must make an identification with these women which I have not done previously. In this feminist stance I must attempt to examine the situation of women in the pre-Christian and Christian past, and attempt to open new possibilities to all women in the Christian arena. I must be alert to occurrences of incest and rape and poverty in our own time, and seek meaningful changes in the lives of women who are the victims of today.

Best of all reasons for this study is that of offering these women's stories "In Memoriam." Long ago I found an anonymous saying: "Those whom we love die only when we have forgotten them." This now has meaning in a new context. If we continue to open these stories to the light of day, and to study and discussion, Tamar and the others cannot die. Their redemption occurs because we remember them and we care. The wonder of the fact that these stories have even survived in the Bible we know today—a book composed of letters and writings selected by males of the early church—is to me an indication that God and even man did not intend for them to be lost and forgotten. Persons and events seen formerly only as "props" for the main story now take on a new and enriched meaning and importance. Perhaps then God is not really absent as I first perceived when reading the stories. The interpretation of their message may have differed in past generations, but these sisters speak to us now across the years for justification and remembering.

The subjects of this text are thus meaningful and timely, and certainly not boring! In studying these sad and terror-filled tales "In Memoriam" we will seek to remember, to redeem, to make right and to heal future injustices. In addition, women who place themselves with communities of the Jewish or Christian tradition may in telling these stories "In Memoriam" pray that these injustices and terrors will never happen again. They may, from within that stance of faith, believe that for the rape victims, the abused women, the victimized women and the forgotten women of our time, God is not absent.

For those who have that hope in the face of terrors, Tribble offers a final story to sustain those who journey "In Memoriam." She recounts the story of Jacob wrestling at the well of Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-32) wherein Jacob spends a night alone in combat with an opponent presumed to be the deity. Jacob escapes with his life and the blessing of the deity, but at the cost of a wound that leaves him limping as he leaves Jabbok (4). As women struggle with the terror in their own being and experience, they may feel they too are struggling alone with God to seek understanding and blessing. However, with the strength of those whom they remember, all together

can hold on to the hope that the healing of wounds, the restoration of health, and the redemption of spirit is for all who love God.

Note

¹ Tribble notes that marriage customs of the day would permit Amnon, Tamar's half-brother, to marry her if he asked the King for her (45, 60 n. 35).

Work Cited

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