

JONADAB, "FRIEND" OF AMNON

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The sordid tale of the rape of Tamar by her half-brother Amnon, the crown prince and eldest son of King David, is related in II Samuel, chapter 13. Jonadab, a nephew of King David and supposedly a confidant of Amnon, offers advice to the crown prince, who is madly in love with Tamar's advice that leads to Tamar's rape and eventually to Amnon's assassination.

THE RAPE OF TAMAR AND DEATH OF AMNON

It is a most intricate story, which might be seen as a two-act drama. In Act I, King David's beloved firstborn son Amnon has an obsessive lust for his half-sister Tamar. She is described as both beautiful and a virgin. Jonadab, *a very subtle man* (II Sam. 13:3), devises a plan to bring Amnon and Tamar together by having Amnon feign illness. The king, having a great love for Amnon and hearing that his supposedly ailing son wishes Tamar to take care of him, asks Tamar to enter Amnon's house and bring him food. Amnon not only rapes the girl but cruelly humiliates her, for love has turned into hatred. *Now Tamar put ashes on her head, and rent her garment of many colors that was on her; and she laid her hand on her head, and went her way, crying aloud as she went. And Absalom her brother said unto her: 'Hath Amnon thy brother been with thee? But now hold thy peace, my sister: he is thy brother; take not this thing to heart'* (II Sam. 13:19-20). Absalom thus requires her to keep silent and (temporarily) hush up the shameful affair.

Jonadab makes his next appearance in Act II. Although Absalom has kept the outrage under wraps, he is intent on killing Amnon and only awaits a favorable opportunity.

Now it came to pass after two full years, that Absalom had sheep-shearers in Baal-hazor, which is beside Ephraim; and Absalom invited all the king's sons. And Absalom came to the king, and said: 'Behold now, thy servant hath sheep-shearers; let the king, I pray thee, and his servants go with thy servant.' And the king said to Absalom: 'Nay, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome unto thee.' And he pressed him; howbeit he would not go, but blessed him.

Then said Absalom: 'If not, I pray thee, let my brother Amnon go with us.' And the king said unto him: 'Why should he go with thee?' But Absalom pressed him, and he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him (II Sam. 13:23-27).

Crucial to the execution of his plan was Absalom's request that his father join in the festivities, hoping that the king would say no but allow Amnon and his brothers to accept Absalom's invitation. The plan succeeded and then *Absalom commanded his servants, saying: 'Mark ye now, when Amnon's heart is merry with wine; and when I say unto you: Smite Amnon, then kill him, fear not; have not I commanded you? Be courageous and valiant.'* And the servants of Absalom did unto Amnon as Absalom had commanded (II Sam. 13:28-29).

Fearing that they, too, would be assassinated, *All the king's sons arose, and every man got him up upon his mule, and fled.* A rumor spread that they had all been killed: *Now it came to pass, while they were in the way, that the tidings came to David, saying: 'Absalom hath slain all the king's sons, and there is not one of them left.'* David then rent his clothes and lay down on the ground. At this point, Jonadab resurfaces and allays the king's grief with the following words of comfort: *'Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men, the king's sons; for Amnon only is dead; for by the appointment of Absalom this hath been determined from the day that he forced his sister Tamar. Now therefore let not my lord the king take the thing to his heart, to think that all the king's sons are dead; for Amnon only is dead'* (II Sam. 13:29-33).

After the princes are spotted on their way to Jerusalem, Jonadab tells King David: *'Behold, the king's sons are come; as thy servant said, so it is.'* And it came to pass, as soon as he had made an end of speaking, that, *behold, the king's sons came, and lifted up their voice, and wept* (II Sam. 13:35-36).

Thus, we have two brief appearances of Jonadab, once giving Amnon advice and later informing David of Amnon's death. We will now explore different ways of understanding what motivated Jonadab to act as he did. Was he himself guilty or innocent?

Jonadab is described as a friend of Amnon (II Sam. 13:3). Taken at face value, this suggests that Jonadab wanted only what was best for his friend, not anticipating that his advice would have disastrous consequences. Malbim and Keli Yakar view Jonadab in a positive light and explain that it never occurred to Jonadab that Amnon would rape Tamar. Malbim intimates that Jonadab's advice was a hint to David that Amnon was in love with Tamar and wished to marry her. The plan was to obtain David's approval of this marriage, which (as we will see) was technically permitted. Keli Yakar indicates that Jonadab merely suggested that the two be in the same room together, which would perhaps cool the relationship. However, when Jonadab discovers that Amnon raped Tamar, he severs all contact with him, even when aware that Tamar's brother Absalom seeks to avenge her and kill Amnon.

The Talmud and most commentators endeavor to absolve Amnon of the crime of incest, and remain silent on the matter of rape. Thus, when Tamar pleads that King David will not disfavor her marriage to Amnon, Rabbi Judah commented: "Tamar was a daughter of a *yefat to'ar* [gentile woman captured in war], as it is written: *Now therefore, I pray thee, speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from thee* (II Sam. 13:13). Had she been the offspring of a legitimate marriage [to David], how could Amnon's sister have been permitted to him as a wife?" (TB *Sanhedrin* 21a).

According to that talmudic passage, Tamar was the daughter of Maacah, daughter of Talmai King of Geshur. Maacah, whom David had made captive, belonged to the *yefat to'ar* category (see Deut. 21:11). Since Tamar was conceived while her mother was still a gentile and had not yet converted, she also had the status of a convert and, under Jewish law, was not held to be related to any of her Jewish kin. Thus Amnon, who was born to David by a different wife, was not her brother under Jewish law, nor was David legally her father since Tamar was conceived while her mother was still a gentile. Tamar was thus "permitted" to Amnon. Only because Tamar was raised in King David's court was she called his "daughter" (Tosafot d"h *de-i salka da'atakh*, TB *Sanhedrin* 21a). Amnon's heinous crime was Tamar's public humiliation.

In accordance with this view, the fact that Jonadab brought news of Amnon's death is significant only because he was intimately involved in the af-

fair from beginning to end. He could therefore say that avenging the rape and humiliation of Tamar had been Absalom's plan all along.

JONADAB THE VILLAIN

The vast majority of commentators (Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, Metzudat David) follow the approach in TB *Sanhedrin* 21a and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (ch. 9) that Jonadab was evil. His advice to Amnon was at best inappropriate for a friend who could not control his impulses, and at worst meant to facilitate Amnon having his way with Tamar. Why would Jonadab act in this way, seeing that it would bring shame on the royal family, and especially in view of the fact that Jonadab himself was a nephew of King David (II Sam. 13:3)? He may simply have wished to ingratiate himself with Amnon, who was of course David's eldest son (II Sam. 3:2) and heir to the throne.

According to this opinion, Jonadab was not a true friend of Amnon, as we see later when Jonadab discloses that he had known all along of Absalom's plan to kill Amnon (II Sam. 13:32), but never warned Amnon of the danger to his life. Jonadab's lack of any real concern is also apparent when he says twice *for Amnon only is dead* (II Sam. 13:32-33). What he chiefly seems to care about is having his report to David verified (II Sam. 13:35), evidently to preserve his reputation as a wise man.¹ It follows that Jonadab was never a real friend to Amnon: he gave him bad advice and, when that advice resulted in a heinous crime, he severed his relationship with Amnon, allowing him to be killed in a scheme of revenge.

The question that now arises has to do with the extent of Jonadab's villainy. Many modern commentators assume that after the rape of Tamar, Jonadab became Absalom's confidential adviser, as the fact that he knew of Absalom's plot seems to demonstrate.² Solomon Goldman thus observes: "Jonadab seems to have been as intimate a confidant of Absalom as he had been of Amnon".³ However, there is no evidence of any collusion between the two. Ararat offers the most radical opinion: Absalom had intrigued, from the start, to reign after David and so, of necessity, Amnon had to be eliminated. To that end, he obtained the services of Jonadab to operate as a "double agent."⁴ Absalom even sacrificed his own sister, Tamar, to make his plan succeed.⁴ Ascribing such ghoulish motivations to Absalom clearly goes beyond anything implied in the text, however sinister Jonadab's aims may have been.

In royal contexts, the term *re'a*, generally translated as "friend", is the title of an official counselor or companion to a king or a prince.⁵ As such, Jonadab was never really a friend of Amnon and, if anything, he was an Iago-like figure who plotted Amnon's downfall. Jonadab cleverly used the rape of Tamar, initiated by his fiendish advice to Amnon, to induce Absalom to seek revenge. From this moment on, the motives of both Absalom and Jonadab coincided. We know from II Samuel 13:32 that Jonadab knew of Absalom's plot and did not inform Amnon of it. Perhaps Jonadab sensed that Amnon was a pathetically weak figure, lovesick for his "sister" yet unable to do anything about it (II Sam. 13:2). Jonadab realized that Amnon, though David's eldest son, was completely unfit to rule and therefore set in motion a plot to eliminate him from the royal family. He is the one who orchestrates Amnon's fall and triumphantly informs King David that Amnon has been assassinated. His scheme fulfilled, Jonadab walks off the biblical stage.

NOTES

1. Yigal Ariel, *Oz Melekh – Iyyunim be-Sefer Shemuel* (Hispin: Midreshet ha-Golan) pp. 206-7.
2. Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Sefer Shemuel*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1981) pp. 437-8.
3. Rabbi Dr. S. Goldman, *Samuel* (London: Soncino Press, 1949; ninth impression, 1974) p. 263.
4. Nisan Ararat, *Emet va-Hesed ba-Mikra, "Ormat Avshalom be-Sippur Amnon ve-Tamar"* (Jerusalem: Sifriat Elinor, 5753).
5. Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999) p. 265.