

READING THE TEXT—READING THE OTHERS—  
 READING OURSELVES  
 (A DIALOGUE BETWEEN GERMANY AND INDONESIA)

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During the process of reading 2 Sam 13:1–22 with German and Indonesian partner groups, it became clear that the German group did more than just read the text and the response of the partner group: they indeed *read the others*, and only by discussing this point did they begin to *read themselves*.

Due to her commitment to ecumenical contacts, I asked the minister of the small village of Oberrosophe to form a German group for the reading cycle of 2011–2012. The group comprised about ten persons, all from the rural area north of Marburg, a traditional university town in central Germany; the group called themselves BibelWeltWeit (Bible World Wide). The age of the participants was between forty and eighty, all Protestants and active members of their communities. Four members of the group, including the leading persons, had theological training; the others came from diverse backgrounds. The discussions were in German, which I translated for the partner group and vice versa.

Via the Internet linking process of the intercultural reading program, we found our partner group—the Metanoia group:

The Metanoia group has sixteen members, prisoners in the local jail of Maumere town, Flores Island, eastern Indonesia. All but two are men! A majority are Catholic, a small minority Protestant (Reformed). Many are jailed for sexual offenses (rape, molestation, adultery, etc.), others for murder (problems of land or women), a few for corruption or robbery, one for male prostitution and trafficking. We have been gathering more or less weekly for the past five years—the group changing as some members are released and others incarcerated. The members come

from the islands of East Nusa Tenggara.... All have small-scale farming backgrounds, though their professions, apart from farming, range from teaching and the civil service to NGOs and small-time traders. Formal education: lower high school.... We work in the national language of Bahasa Indonesia; our facilitator, English-born priest and seminary lecturer John Prior, translates our sharing into English. (see original at [http://www.bible4all.org/Content/view\\_group.aspx?groep\\_id=281](http://www.bible4all.org/Content/view_group.aspx?groep_id=281))

### Reading the Text

Of the two texts proposed for the reading process—the story of Tamar and the one of Jesus and Mary Magdalene—the BibelWeltWeit group chose the story of Tamar’s violation in 2 Sam 13:1–22 due to its relevance today: though the story is situated in ancient times, the issue of violation is very much a present-day problem, especially within the church. The story is taken from real life, and the roles both of women and of families are important.

The German group started a close reading of the selected text. The discussion brought a number of issues to the fore. To begin with, none of the persons acting in the story is really transparent; all are ambivalent. This becomes clear by the many questions raised about the characters of the story. Did Yonadab (Jonadab), Amnon’s friend and adviser, really not suspect Amnon’s bad intentions? Or did he know what Amnon actually wanted? Did he perhaps even consciously want to harm Amnon by bringing him into this situation? With regard to Amnon, did he initially really love Tamar, or does what the text calls “love” only refer to his sexual desire? David, too, plays a dubious role. Why does he send Tamar to Amnon? The group totally denounced his reaction after the rape: when David as the king becomes “very angry,” he has to act; doing nothing is no solution. Absalom also acts in an ambivalent manner. He shelters his sister and even later avenges her, but he also downplays the affair. His later revenge is ambivalent as well. It is not clear whether Absalom acts for the benefit of his sister or whether he only wants to remove the successor to the throne so that he himself becomes the next crown prince.

The person discussed the most was Tamar. Is she really the only unequivocally “good” person in the story? Is she “good” because she is the victim? If we look at Tamar as a “good” person, do we not lock her up in the role of the victim? Could Tamar have acted differently at the beginning? The text states that Tamar was a virgin. Did she not perhaps expect

an erotic adventure? Could she have contradicted the orders of David to go into the house of her (half-)brother? Was this a realistic option for a woman in a patriarchal society?

The group appreciated the fact that Tamar made a reasonable proposal to solve the conflict before it came to violation. All agreed that after the rape she made things public by running outside crying. After the rape she was paralyzed and had no means of resisting the ensuing developments. Tamar was traumatized, perhaps even unable to feel anger and no longer able to resist. The members of the group suffered together with Tamar.

The group then asked how the story made them feel. Words like *depressive* or *nightmarish* were used. These feelings arose from the fact that the story at every point could have developed in a different way; there could have been an alternative. Nothing in the story was mere fate. Everything depended on the decisions taken by the actors.

At the next meeting the group tried to get closer to the actors by interviewing them. Three members of the group became Yonadab, Amnon, and Absalom. The interviews confirmed the ambivalence in the characters of each of these figures.

After the interviews, the group discussed why this story is in the Bible. They concluded that it is a sort of memorial to Tamar. Especially the interview with Amnon demonstrated that: though she is the victim, Tamar is the only strong person in the story. Criticizing Amnon, she assumes the role of the prophet Nathan in the story of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his killing of her husband Uriah. In the story of 2 Sam 13 males are the active persons, and Tamar comes from the outside. Coming in from the outside is exactly the role of the prophet in 2 Sam 11–12.

The last meeting before linking up with the Metanoia group was dedicated to the one question that remained open from the first meeting: Where is God in the story? God is not mentioned. What does this mean? Where in the story could God find a place? In the preceding chapter, God announced judgment on the house of David because of his adultery and murder: "Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house" (2 Sam 12:10). This becomes reality. God does not intervene directly. The story belongs to the traditions in the Hebrew Bible that are critical of the monarchy (1 Sam 8).

God does not act directly in this story, nor do the actors seek contact with God. No one prays. They all only look out for themselves. No one admits making a mistake; no one pleads guilty. Though all the actors had alternatives, but they did not take them. That is their guilt.

At the end, the group was looking forward to reading the comments of the far-away partners from Indonesia.

### Reading the Others

The German group met three times to discuss the reports of the Metanoia group from Indonesia. In the following paragraphs, I articulate my personal impressions based on the group's utterances while reading the reading report from Indonesia.

The group's attitude toward the report from Indonesia manifested a mixture of curiosity and gratefulness, as well as reflected upon the idea of being a neutral observer or analyst of the partner group's reading. The group was curious about the situation of the members of the Metanoia group. How do they live in prison? How long have they been there, and how long will they be incarcerated? Why are there two women in the group? The German group was also thankful for the partner's reading. It opened their eyes to new aspects of the text that they had not thought of. Eventually, the reading of the partner group provoked new discussions about their own situation in the light of the partner's reading, for example, the impact of traditional (family) structures.

The third aspect (the idea of being a neutral observer of the other's reading), however, was the most difficult. Sometimes it was as though the group found itself in the role of having to analyze the partner's reading from a neutral point of view. The (virtual) dialogue with the group was in danger of being replaced by an analysis of the partner's reading as objective observers. It was necessary at times for the facilitator to intervene in the process. True dialogue is characterized by questions like: What do they read? What can we learn from their reading? Where do we disagree with their reading? The attitude of analysis is characterized by the questions like: Why do they read the way they read? Are we able to find out the deeper reasons for their utterances? This attitude can reflect a lack of respect for the partners, though it could also indicate a sincere wish to understand the partners better. However, in this case it indeed appeared to be more like a feeling of superiority.

Nonetheless, the danger of replacing the dialogue by analysis did not have the upper hand in the meetings. The dominant feelings were curiosity and gratefulness, though sometimes intermingled with the third aspect. The latter was strengthened by the German group knowing from the Internet presentation of the Indonesian partner group that some of the prison-

ers were jailed for sexual offenses, even rape, as in the story of Tamar. How would a rapist read a story about the violation of a girl? Would he defend himself? Would he try to avoid the question? It seems evident that questions like these are inevitable. At the same time, however, they are ethically problematic. The members of the partner group were then no longer treated as real partners with their personal points of view, but became objects of curiosity.

An example can serve as illustration. The German group was irritated by reading in the report from the Indonesian group: "The group, many of whom are in prison for sexual crimes, decided that the theme of the passage was 'sexual transgression between a brother and sister.'" The German readers rebutted: "Is the story not about rape, a violation committed by a brother against his half-sister, and not only about 'sexual transgression between a brother and sister'?" To the German group, this description sounded like an attempt to soften the impact of the story. They suspected that this was motivated by the fact that many of them "are in prison for sexual crimes." However, the question remains: what gave the German readers the right to draw such conclusions?

Only after having discussed these ethical problems was the group able to progress to benefiting from the partners' readings. By starting to read the text through the eyes of the other, they could learn about themselves. Only then could the reading process come to a good conclusion.

### Reading Ourselves

When the group began to read the text through the eyes of the partners, they began to question why they themselves read the text the way they did. There are three points in which the German group learned much about themselves.

The first point is the role of family structures. When the German group read the Indonesian reports, they noticed that they themselves had not discussed David's role as a father, while the partners' report stressed David's role as a father who had failed in raising his children. One member remarked: "Before the discussion of the reports from Indonesia, I saw David as a wise man who is ready to forgive. But now I have learned that he simply is a man who lets things be." Generally, the German group noticed that family constellations played a much more important role for the Indonesian partners than they did for Germans. This might reflect the social situation in Germany, where the role of family is increasingly less

important due to various factors such as the emancipation of women and older children, the necessity of mobility for jobs, and a high income that allows for independent housing. These factors may not exist in Indonesia.

A second point that the German group learned from the partners was the emphasis on the dark sides within themselves. Generally, the German group appreciated that the partners discussed not only the dark sides of the characters in the story, but also the dark sides within themselves. The German group noticed that they themselves had avoided this question. Some of the partners, for example, detected the "Yonadab within themselves": "I also recognize elements of Yonadab within me, when I prefer to provoke and incite another for my own benefit, when I use a friend to smooth the way for my own purpose." Another said about David: "David is myself when I see a situation that needs putting right and yet I do nothing." No one in the German group had ever made such a clearly self-critical statement, and the group was thankful to the partners for opening their eyes.

The last point concerned God's role within the story. The members of the Indonesian group were asked by their facilitator to answer the question: "What God do the biblical characters pray to?" The answers were enlightening:

In Tamar's eyes God is her father, her helper; this is the God she believes in and worships by doing good and by not sinning.... Tamar is sure that God is her advocate and so, when face to face with insuperable problems she does not give up or lose hope.... Tamar's whole life is in God's hands. Whatever she experiences or suffers, she is convinced, is part of God's plan. Whatever the predicament, she is in God's hands.

The German group found readings like these to be mainly speculative, because the story tells nothing about the religious feelings of the actors. Though they did not deny the positive possibilities seen by their Indonesian partners, the German group was more ambivalent. They could imagine that perhaps the situation was quite different with Tamar: she could just as easily be seen as having fallen into depression and despair. The end of the story is open to both possibilities.

The greater role of family in the thinking of the Indonesian group has already been explained by the different social situations in the two cultures. Maybe this is also true for the differing views on Tamar's future after her violation. It is generally agreed that for solving conflicts traditional

societies often have mechanisms that have been lost in more industrialized societies. Perhaps it is true that in a Western type of society, characterized by individualism and a lack of social networks, a victim of violence runs a greater risk of isolation and consequent depression and despair. Perhaps a more traditional society has the means to help such a person, but this idea may also be a Western romanticizing of traditional societies. The reading of two groups in the frame of the intercultural Bible reading project cannot answer the question. It is, however, important to have raised the issue.

In spite of some critical remarks of the German group on various readings of the Indonesian partners, they admitted learning much about themselves from the Indonesian partners' reading. The Indonesians said they had had a "heated discussion on Yonadab and his God." The Germans wondered how much the Indonesians had found out about this person who plays only a marginal role in the biblical story.

The differences between the readings were conspicuous and caused the Germans to take a fresh look at their own situation and beliefs. For the Indonesian readers, God is much more an intervening God who organizes things concerning their lives. According to the German reading, it is mainly we ourselves who organize things. This understanding may be due to the more settled context of the German group in a wealthy country, where one is able to cope with the problems of daily life. This situation has perhaps made them blind to the things that they in fact cannot manage, and perhaps blind to God's possibilities.

After having overcome the ethical problems of analyzing instead of dialoguing, the German group learned to read through the eyes of the others and thus had their own eyes opened.