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Parry, Robin

Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study

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Genesis 34 generates many differences of opinion among its readers and students. Their disagreements about the key question on the plot level—whether it is a story of rape or of seduction—leads to divergent moral evaluations of the characters. Even starting from the assumption that Dinah was raped fails to resolve all of the disagreements. There is still room for questions about the narrator’s implicit stand with regard to the massacre of the Shechemites by Dinah’s brothers or whether Shechem himself is described as an irremediable villain or in more complex terms.

Robin Parry’s book, based on his doctoral dissertation, seeks to clarify these and other questions. The series in which it appears, Paternoster Biblical Monographs, may indicate that the book has not only exegetical but also theological goals. As the author announces in the very first sentence, “this book is an attempt to argue that Old Testament stories are ethically valuable and to set up some guidelines for *Christian* ethical reappropriation of such OT narratives” (3, emphasis original).

The overt religious commitment of the author, who sees the Bible as an inspired text that a believing Christian cannot gainsay, may be viewed as an obstacle to objective exegesis. But as many have argued, there really is no such thing as objective exegesis. A commentary from an atheistic perspective or based on a fundamental rejection of the biblical text, too, is tainted by subjectivity. What is more, if we judge by the outcome, Parry’s study is balanced and scholarly. Although one may disagree with some of his conclusions, none of them is unreasonable or clearly forced.

Parry's canvas ranges far beyond Gen 34. The first chapter, "Philosophical Reflections on Narrative Ethics" (3–47), deals with philosophical hermeneutics and offers a sympathetic presentation of Paul Ricoeur's theory about the decisive role that stories play in the shaping of individual and communal identity. The second chapter, "Biblical-Theological Reflections on Christian Ethical Appropriation of Old Testament Stories" (48–84), moves from philosophical hermeneutics to theological hermeneutics, with the goal of showing that "story is the context within which Old Testament ethics lives and moves and has its being" (48). To this end, Parry draws on John Barton's three models of biblical ethics: divine commands, natural law, and the imitation of God. Parry maintains that only in the framework of story can these three models find full expression in the Old Testament (53). He sets himself a second goal: "to outline the biblical metanarrative which plays a primary role in the shaping of Christian communal and individual identity" (49).

Part 2 of the book, "The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study," turns to the story of Dinah in the context of Old Testament ethics, on the one hand, and to the ways in which a believing Christian can draw ethical lessons from the story, on the other hand. This part consists of four chapters.

Chapter 3, "A History of the Interpretation of Genesis 34 with Special Reference to Its Use in Ethics" (87–122), is a fascinating journey in the footsteps of exegesis of the story from the second century to the present. Reading the contradictory interpretations, one cannot avoid wondering how the same basic data can be read in such widely varying fashions by different people and what this means for the eternal question of whether one can ever arrive at the "correct" interpretation. For example, some argue that Dinah was seduced rather than raped (e.g., Bechtel); some lay the blame at her door (e.g., Ambrose, *Genesis Rabbah*). Some describe Dinah in a positive fashion and emphasize her guiltlessness (e.g., Philo). Some justify the massacre (e.g., *Jubilees*, the book of Judith, Philo), while others describe it as wicked (e.g., John Calvin, Fewell and Gunn). Some believe that the story portrays Jacob favorably (e.g., Martin Luther, Fewell and Gunn), while others think that he is depicted in an unflattering light (e.g., Sternberg). Finally, some see Hamor as a devoted father (e.g., Sternberg), whereas others argue that he failed in his duty to educate his son (e.g., Luther).

The chapter is also a fine demonstration of how various authors have exploited Dinah's story for political and ideological purposes: *Jubilees* uses it to accent the sinful nature of intermarriage; the *Testament of Levi* utilizes it for a polemic against the Samaritans; and Luther appropriates it to denounce a common phenomenon of his age—the marrying off of prepubescent girls.

Particularly prominent is the use made of the story for gender construction. Parry presents many examples of the phenomenon of blaming the victim, Dinah (and every woman who is raped), and the attempt to use the story to educate the parents of daughters, and daughters themselves, to eschew curiosity, maintain their modesty, and seclude themselves at home. For lack of space, I cite only one example among the many interesting sources presented in the book. In the thirteenth-century English *Ancrene Wisse* (i.e., guidebook for anchoresses), the story of Dinah is cited to justify the seclusion of nuns and as a warning to women not to peak out the window—both to avoid seeing inappropriate things and also to avoid being seen. After all, it was Dinah’s curiosity to “visit the daughters of the land” that led to the traumatic results both for her family and for the people of Shechem.

Chapter 4, “An Interpretation of Genesis 34” (123–78), offers a reading of the chapter in its historical and literary context. It examines linguistic, structural, and stylistic questions, analogies and type scenes, and the way in which the narrator shapes the characters. The discussion is balanced, and I found myself agreeing with most of its conclusions, such as that the story is about rape and not seduction; that exogamy is definitely an issue; that Shechem is presented in a complex fashion, so that even though he commits a heinous crime when he rapes Dinah, 34:3, which avers his great love for her, softens the negative judgment against him (*pace* Scholz); and that, from the biblical point of view, marriage to the rapist is a lesser evil for the victim (again, *pace* Scholz), for all that modern readers are horrified by the idea of a woman’s marrying her attacker. I should add that even in modern times, in societies that practice abduction-marriage and the abductor rapes his prey, in most cases the latter chooses to marry her kidnapper-rapist (see William G. Lockwood, “Bride Theft and Social Maneuverability in Western Bosnia,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 47 [1974]: 254; Brian Stross, “Tzeltal Marriage by Capture,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 47 [1974]: 340–42).

The main question raised by Parry has to do with the narrator’s attitude toward the massacre. As he shows, the story contains elements that justify it and others that condemn it. Parry believes that the implicit author agrees with Jacob and sees the massacre as an overreaction and immoral deed, even though he also makes an effort to get readers to identify with the brothers’ motives.

Chapter 5, “Genesis 34 in Intertextual Communion with the Canon” (179–218), looks at Gen 34 in the light of other biblical stories: Gen 49:5–7, Exod 32, and Num 25 and 31. In Gen 49, the last word in Simeon and Levi’s dispute with their father about how they should have acted in Shechem is not given to the brothers (as it is in Gen 34) but to Jacob, who on his deathbed curses them and denounces their violent tempers. In Levi’s case, however, the curse turns into a blessing when the members of the tribe of Levi or one of

its sons (Phinehas) wreak vengeance out of their zeal for the Lord (Exod 32, Num 25). Parry accepts Gordon J. Wenham's argument that the story of Phinehas in Num 25 is a mirror image of Gen 34 and even adds new elements to Wenham's analogy. But rejecting Wenham's argument that Phinehas's zealous act sheds positive light on Simeon and Levi, Parry sees Num 25 as a corrective to Gen 34: it is because the violence of Levi's descendants derives from their zeal for the Lord (unlike the massacre perpetrated by Simeon and Levi) that the curse is transformed into a blessing; the Levites are indeed scattered among the other tribes, but this is to enable them to fulfill their spiritual mission.

Later in the chapter Parry examines the relations between the patriarchal story in Gen 34, on the one hand, and the Mosaic period and the New Testament, on the other. He enumerates continuities, of which the most important is the vigorous condemnation of rape alongside the rejection of the brothers' exaggerated revenge. But he also finds some discontinuities, notably the attitude toward the Canaanites: *herem*—proscription—was not yet the law at the time of the patriarchs, when peaceful relations with the Canaanites are described as the ideal. Accordingly, he proposes that implied readers have a complex grasp of Gen 34: "They will see in the massacre *at one and the same time* an ethical model to be avoided *and* a partial type of the conquest which is to be approved of" (204, emphasis original).

Chapter 6, "Can Biblical Stories Be Bad for Us? Feminist Hermeneutics and the Rape of Dinah" (219–42), is an interesting attempt to create a dialogue between faith-and-trust exegesis and feminist exegesis, which is at its core a hermeneutics of suspicion. Parry surveys different and contradictory approaches in feminist exegesis and, not surprisingly, feels comfortable with the revisionist line that calls for reinterpreting the Bible in a nonpatriarchal reading, as well as with the integrationist approach that emphasizes that the main message of the Bible is human freedom. His position and analyses are very similar to those of Phyllis Trible in her pioneering article (not cited in the book), "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *JAAR* 41 (1973): 30–48.

When Parry turns to examining the story of Dinah from a feminist perspective, he does not find any trace of the indictment of the victim that is so common in midrashim and in commentaries. He distinguishes between the fact that the story (like the entire Bible) is patriarchal and the question of whether it means to encourage patriarchalism—which he answers in the negative.

The book concludes with two appendices: "A Discourse Analysis of Genesis 34" (249–92) and "Genesis 49:5–6" (293–97). Personally, I found the first appendix tiresome and technical, with its method detracting from the reading experience, but those who are

interested in the method may benefit from it. All readers will certainly do so from the body of this important and engrossing book, which is warmly recommended to anyone interested in biblical narrative in general and in Gen 34 in particular, on the one hand, and to those who are interested in theological hermeneutics and the possibility of interweaving faith and academic scholarship, on the other.