



200500975

# *The Rape of Dinah (Genesis 34):*

## *Reading Scripture in the Contemporary Church*

### **A Colloquium**

#### **Introduction**

**O**n the evening of Thursday, 15 July 2004, a seminar concerned with reading Scripture in the contemporary church was held at St Mark's. Rather than devoting the seminar to unpacking this idea in itself, a 'top-down' approach, the seminar took the 'bottom-up' approach of lingering attentively over a particular text in all its complexity and difficulty. The messy details of a difficult passage, Genesis 34, set the agenda for our reflections.

The seminar comprised four presentations, edited versions of which appear below, followed by questions and discussion. The first presentation by Matthew Anstey offers a responsible, close reading of the text of Genesis 34, using core exegetical methods such as rhetorical criticism, literary analysis, contextual analysis and so forth. It provides a shared framework of understanding for the respondents and is a ground-clearing exercise in which attention is drawn to various aspects of the passage, especially those that raise significant questions for the contemporary church.

The remaining presentations examine the story of Dinah in Genesis 34 from a variety of perspectives. From a homiletical perspective, Jeanette Mathews explores the place of this text in the church by posing various questions relating to preaching on Genesis 34. Ranjini Wickramaratne-Rebera offers a cross-cultural reading of the story of Dinah by demonstrating links between group-oriented societies today and the group-oriented cultural context of Dinah's story. Finally, Heather Thomson reflects hermeneutically on the story of Dinah, focusing especially on issues of violence and power.

*Shechem, a local  
Hivite prince, sees  
her, takes her, lies  
with her, rapes her;  
his 'soul clings to  
her', he loves her,  
and he 'speaks  
upon her heart',  
that is, he  
reassures her.*

## Remembering Dinah's Story

Matthew P. Anstey<sup>1</sup>

### Overview of Genesis 34

#### *Scene 1. Verses 1–4*

Dinah, the daughter of Leah, Leah the wife Jacob did not love, goes out to see, to visit the daughters of the land. From such an innocent beginning we are plunged headlong into a rapid staccato of events, a concentration of six tender words clustering around the central, seventh word 'rape': Shechem, a local Hivite prince, sees her, takes her, lies with her, rapes her; his 'soul clings to her', he loves her, and he 'speaks upon her heart', that is, he reassures her. Scene 1 concludes with Shechem's abrupt request (lacking politeness) for his father to arrange their marriage. Here ends scene 1.

In reading Hebrew Bible narratives, geography and characterisation are crucial, this story being no exception. In terms of geography, the story divides into three regions: the household of Jacob, the household of Hamor and the land that lies between them. Our story begins and ends in Jacob's household, Dinah's home. She goes out into the space between the two ethnic groups, ostensibly to see the daughters of the other group. Shechem sees her in this in-between place and takes her to his father's household, where he rapes her and keeps her. Dinah and Shechem will later be referred to as young woman and young man, respectively. Scene 1, therefore, begins with the two young people of the story, meeting in a contested space, with the stronger displacing the weaker from her household to his.

#### *Scene 2. Verses 5–7*

The second scene shifts the location from Shechem's household back to Jacob's, where some crucial information is revealed about this less-than-ideal family. They are physically located in two locations, a poignant symbol of their deep estrangement at all levels — Jacob is at home and his sons are in the fields with their herds. Jacob is silent 'until they come'. While we wait for their arrival, Hamor and Shechem arrive (verse 6) to speak with Jacob. Verse 7, however, suggests that the sons found out through some other means: 'And the sons of Jacob came from the field when they heard and they were furious and very angry'. The inability of Jacob to respond or communicate is therefore clearly presented in the second scene, contrasting with the initiative of Shechem and Hamor. Likewise, Jacob's emotional absence contrasts with the fury of Dinah's brothers.

#### *Scene 3. Verses 8–17*

The third scene consists of three speeches: Hamor pursues a negotiated settlement leading to marital

and trade bonds, a sharing of the in-between space in many ways — economic, cultural, ethnic, familial and agricultural. Hamor's measured diplomacy is postscripted by Shechem's impassioned plea: 'I will give a dowry of any size; just give me the young woman!' The sons of Jacob reply in the third speech, obviously in place of Jacob, whose silence only gets louder. The narrator cleverly emphasises this by shifting the descriptions of Dinah to 'your (plural) daughter' (verse 8). At this point, the narrator lets the reader in on a secret: the brothers speak with deceit (although Targum Onkelos changes this to 'with wisdom!'). They continue the negotiations with Hamor and Shechem, who take them on good faith. The plot thickens, as we are yet to discover where the deceit will lead.

### *Can we really justify the 'shock and awe' tactics of Dinah's brothers?*

#### *Scene 4. Verses 18–24*

The fourth scene mirrors the first geographically in the hurried movement from the household of Jacob to the household of Hamor, motivated by Shechem's infatuation with Dinah (verse 19). At the Hivite household, the diplomatic Hamor continues his course of action in pleasing his son and improving their socioeconomic lot by convincing the town elders to consent to the Israelite request for circumcision. Hamor is convinced of Dinah's brothers' good will, using the rich word 'shalom' to describe their relationship with the brothers. The resultant Free Trade Agreement (circumcision notwithstanding!) is basically too good to reject. It will result in the contested space between them becoming a hospitable space: 'Will not their herds and goods and animals be for us?'

#### *Scene 5. Verses 25–29*

On the third day — a literary motif that alerts readers to significant events: Abraham, Joseph, Esther, Jesus — there is the third movement from Jacob's town to Hamor's. The details are clear: Simeon and Levi slaughter every male, rescue Dinah, and then the other sons plunder the town, taking sheep, cattle and donkeys ('Hamors!'), women, children and everything else they can. Many commentators call this scene 'The Rape of Shechem', since the scorching violence seems out of all proportion to the rape of Dinah.

Here I think Meir Sternberg's reading of Genesis 34, which exonerates the violence of Dinah's brothers, is flawed. He views the massacre as justified because the narrator only reveals in verse 26 that Dinah is in Shechem's house. This implies that Hamor negotiated using Dinah as leverage. He writes:

[The Hivites] have largely brought down that violence on themselves by seeking to

impose their will on Jacob's family. With Dinah in Shechem's hands, the option of polite declining is closed to her guardians. And once the brothers refused to submit to the Hivite version of a shotgun wedding, they were left no avenue to the retrieval of their sister except force. Hence also the need for 'deceit'. Considering the numerical superiority of the troops behind the 'prince of the land' — 'two of Jacob's sons' faced a whole city — no wonder the brothers resorted to trickery to make odds more even . . . [T]o rescue their sister . . . they had to deal with all possible resistance, let alone future retaliation.<sup>2</sup>

But can we really justify the 'shock and awe' tactics of Dinah's brothers on the basis of the narrator's comment in verse 26? I think the narrative clearly implies that Dinah is already in Shechem. Consider these verses:

1. And Dinah went out (*yatsa'*) and Shechem took (*laqach*) her (vv. 1–2)
2. And Hamor went out (*yatsa'*) to speak to Jacob (v. 6)
3. Hamor: 'Intermarry with us and take (*laqach*) our daughters for yourselves' (v. 9; also v. 16)
4. Brothers: 'If you do not listen to us . . . we will take (*laqach*) our daughter and walk' (v. 17)
5. The brothers took (*laqach*) Dinah from Shechem's house and went out (*yatsa'*) (v. 26)

In each case, 'go out' (*yatsa'*) implies movement from one place to another (in this story, one household to another) and 'take' (*laqach*) implies transfer from one place to another. So verses 6 and 17 strongly imply what verse 26 explicates, that Dinah is in Shechem's household. This is also what would be expected from Bronze Age marital customs.

#### Scene 6. Verses 30–31

The story ends back at Jacob's fractured household, with a brief interchange between father and sons. Jacob's speech, his one and only response to the entire series of events, is solipsistic — defined in Miriam Webster as 'extreme indulgence of and concern with the self at the expense of social relationships' — to say the least. Here is a more transparent rendering of the Hebrew:

You have brought *me* ruin, making *me* a stench among those who reside in the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites. And *I* am few in number. And they will gather against *me*, and strike *me*, and *I* will be destroyed, *me* and *my* household.

The sons respond with a rhetorical question, a common Hebrew Bible narrative technique: 'Like a prostitute should he treat our sister?' (One could argue that the narrator perhaps leaves open the

possibility that the antecedent is Jacob rather than Shechem, that Jacob treated his own daughter like a prostitute.)

*It is an understatement to say that Dinah, daughter of Leah, the unloved wife of Jacob, is marginalised in this story.*

#### Characters and geography

I now examine in more detail the subtleties of the characterisation of the story, specifically, Dinah, Shechem, Hamor, the brothers and Jacob.

#### Dinah

It is an understatement to say that Dinah, daughter of Leah, the unloved wife of Jacob, is marginalised in this story. She is marginalised in the patriarchal stories by being the only child of Jacob whose name is not given a meaning and by not being counted among Jacob's 'eleven children' who crossed the Jabbok (Gen 32:22). She is mistreated by Shechem and promptly forgotten about in the story, referred to by a string of impersonal terms: the young woman, the girl, wife, his daughter, your daughter, their sister, our daughter, our sister, terms that define her in relation to thoughtless people around her.

Her only action as an agent is to reach out to the ethnic others, to enter the inhospitable space between two people groups to meet with other daughters. Even in this one act, the tradition condemns her. Rashi (1040–1105 CE), drawing from *Genesis Rabbah*, a Jewish commentary compiled in 300–600 CE, wrote:

'The daughter of Leah' — not the daughter of Jacob; rather, because of her going out she is called the daughter of Leah, because Leah was also a *yatsa'nit* (a 'wanton woman'), as it is said, 'And Leah went out to meet him' (Gen 30:16). And because of her they say the parable, 'Like mother, like daughter' [Ezek 16:44].<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the twentieth century, Gordon Wenham suggested that 'Dinah was at least sailing close to the wind'.<sup>4</sup> I suggest such readings are unfounded attempts to minimise, negate and silence Dinah's trauma.

In every scene in the story after her going out, Dinah is the object of someone else's agency: seeing, taking, laying with, raping, clinging to, loving, reassuring, rescuing. The trade rounds following her subdual are not concerned with her welfare but with that of the community, particularly the men, who hope to gain from this incident an unlimited number of daughters to meet supply and demand.

Dinah suffers further marginalisation in her disappearance in the canon and the omission of Genesis 34 from the lectionary. She is a stark paradigm for absence, silence and marginalisation.

### *Shechem*

Shechem is the most complex character in this story, whose true actions and motives remain opaque. Almost all commentators, myself included, think that the narrator, for whatever reason, wants readers to sympathise with Shechem. He is said to love Dinah, his soul clings to her, he speaks reassuringly to her, he delights in her, he begs the brothers for her, he embraces circumcision with a vigour most men would shudder at, and he dies for her. Shechem, in other words, excepting his one terrible sin, is the ideal Israelite. Is there another character in the Hebrew Bible about which so many positive words are said in such a short story?

Shechem, I submit, can be taken two ways. One way is to see the narrator's ambivalence/sympathy as indicative of the whole problem of sexual assault: the typical minimising of the severity of the crime, the protection of important people (princes of the land) against nobodies like Dinah, the vagueness of the act itself (as '*anah*' can mean 'subdue, oppress, humiliate' as well as 'rape'), the personalisation of the victimiser and the concomitant depersonalisation of the victim. The other way is to grant at least some of these ambiguities as reflecting the reality of what transpired and who Shechem is. I myself am ambivalent between the two portraits.

### *Hamor*

Note first that Hamor and Shechem are like peas in a pod. They are normally referred to together, 'Shechem, Hamor's son', 'Hamor, the father of Shechem'. They speak together, act together, negotiate together, live together, are circumcised together and die together. Their geographical intimacy contrasts with the distance between Jacob and Dinah and her brothers. Hamor also contrasts most strongly with Jacob. As fathers in the story, they are a picture of opposites. Hamor is always on the move, taking the initiative on behalf of his 'young man', unlike Jacob who ignores his 'young woman'. Hamor listens, plans, speaks, moves, all for the sake of his son. His name, 'donkey', represents a strong, domestic animal, and does not have the negative connotations of English.

But if Shechem can be characterised as *the terror of sincerity and passion*, Hamor is equally *the blind acceptance of kin over the other*. He typifies the familial closing-of-ranks that is unable to accept guilt in its own members.

### *The brothers*

For all their faults, and they are aplenty, at least the brothers show a genuine and appropriate emotional response: indignation, fury and deep anger.

That this led to a sorry tale of deceit, death and desecration should not cause us to forget that in contrast to their father, they believe themselves to be acting for Dinah's honour (although the reference to '*disgrace in Israel*' makes one think that perhaps they are more concerned with public shame than Dinah's shame).

*What was understood to be an intimate sign of God's favour on people and a sign of inclusion and life becomes for the Hivites a mark of exclusion and death. This is perhaps akin to receiving people into baptism, then poisoning them at their first communion!*

We need to pay careful attention to the way Dinah's relationship with her brothers is presented. The first point of note is in Hamor's speech (verse 8), when he says, 'Shechem, my son, his soul is attached on your (plural!) daughter.' Dinah is referred to as the brothers' daughter, which concurs with Jacob's neglect of paternal care. Similarly, Shechem asks to 'find favour in your (plural) eyes'. The negotiations are clearly between the brothers and the Hivites. The brothers themselves, in the negotiations, state, 'But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take *our daughter* and be gone' (verse 17). This language all emphasises Jacob's cold inattention.

Mark Brett notes that the brothers use the worse form of deceit, that is, the use of the religious regulation of circumcision. What was understood to be an intimate sign of God's favour on people and a sign of *inclusion and life* becomes for the Hivites a mark of *exclusion and death*.<sup>5</sup> This is perhaps akin to receiving people into baptism, then poisoning them at their first communion!

Brett also sees further hypocrisy in Simeon and Levi, as indicated by Gen 46:10, 'Simeon's sons: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Saul the son of a Canaanite woman.' If they were so concerned about ethnic purity, Simeon seems to have been lax about it later on. Simeon and Levi are also justifiably 'blessed' ('to bless' in the sense of 'to reveal the true nature of') by Jacob in this way (Gen 49:5-7):

Simeon and Levi are brothers — their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly, for they have killed men in their anger and hamstringed oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel.

Jacob

If there is one character towards whom the narrator is most negative, it is Jacob. His catastrophic failure to respond at all to Dinah's humiliation is unforgivable in itself, but his speech (verse 30) begs belief: eight times he says 'me' or 'my' or 'I'; not once does he refer to Dinah. His concern is clearly with protecting his own space at all costs.

*If we characterise the brothers' portrayal as the brutality of unfettered revenge, I suggest Jacob is the paradigmatic example of the paralysis of self-interest.*

So what shall we do with this portrait of a patriarch, a founding father of the faith. I find Wenham's reading, what I call *theological assimilation to the dominant status quo*, difficult to accept. He writes:

Here we see that despite Jacob's lack of affection, moral principle, and courage, he survives. Indeed, he prospers in an unexpected way from his sons' fierce anger. He is greatly enriched by the seizure of the Shechemites' flocks, herds, wives, and other properties . . . The promise made to Abraham, that 'he who disdains you I shall curse', is once again demonstrated despite fear and unbelief . . . The covenantal promises come true despite human frailty.<sup>6</sup>

According to such reasoning, Shechem and Hamor are cursed for raping Dinah and the Israelites are blessed, through the violent slaughter and subjugation of the Hivite people group. And all this is to be understood as fulfilment, albeit in a messy way, of covenantal promises? Is this how Genesis 34 is to be read? Is this how all such Godless, God-forsaken stories of trauma are to be interpreted — by homogenising their protest to the canonical main game?

If we characterise the brothers' portrayal as the brutality of unfettered revenge, I suggest Jacob is the paradigmatic example of the paralysis of self-interest.

**Concluding reflections**

I have offered four summaries of the four men in our passage, whom I take as four paradigms of dysfunctional responses to Dinah's personal trauma:

1. Shechem, the terror of sincerity and passion — so wrapped up in his desires that his sincerity only compounds the wreckage he inflicts as a person of power.

2. Hamor, the blind acceptance of kin over the other — blind to the guilty member of his own household, protecting the well-being of one's own, irrespective of ethical concerns.
3. The Brothers, the brutality of unfettered revenge — maddened into violent revenge, a law unto themselves, determiners of their own destiny, using violence to achieve their ends.
4. Jacob, the paralysis of self-interest — so disconnected from people around him that his own daughter's trauma becomes a further opportunity for self-advancement, compounding her abandonment.

This leaves Dinah, whose grief is multiplied by these four dysfunctional reactions, whose private geography is sacrificed for the sake of the body corporate and intertribal relations, whose story is dismembered (the biblical opposite of re-membered) by her family and her victimisers, whose name is given no meaning, and whose story is conveniently dropped from the preaching lectionary, letting us all off the hook of having to linger over her troubled narrative, her painful memory, and of having to have her hermeneutical silence penetrate the loud clamouring of -ologies and -isms.

But *someone*, for *some reason* preserved her story. Someone judged it to be canonical, to be included in the whole story of God and the world. That is, if the word of God witnesses to the absence of God in stories like that of Dinah, perhaps we dare to think that the Word of God as Christ experienced the absence of God in his own death and trauma? But in thinking about the story this way, am I also assimilating Dinah to some great cosmic theodrama? In our rush to Easter Sunday, will Dinah's silence be ruminated over sufficiently to allow it to speak into our own troubled and hostile places?

Whatever the answers to these questions may be and wherever our reflections on this passage may lead us, I would argue that the practice of attentive lingering over troubling texts such as Genesis 34 is a *sine qua non* for the contemporary church in its struggle to articulate and practice faith in troubling times.

1. Charles Sturt University, School of Theology, Academic Associate; Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, PhD candidate. Contact: manstey@csu.edu.au
2. Meir Sternberg, *The poetics of Biblical narrative: Ideological literature and the drama of reading*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1985, p.468; cited in Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2, Word Books, Dallas, 1994, p.315.
3. My translation.
4. Wenham, *op. cit.*, p.310.
5. Mark Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the politics of identity*, Routledge, London, 2000.
6. Wenham, *op. cit.*, pp.318-19.

## Homiletical Reflections on the Rape of Dinah:

### The place of Genesis 34 in the church

Jeanette Mathews

#### What is preaching?

The church is called to evangelise — to 'speak out' to the world around us, to tell the liberating story of the gospel. The preacher has the particular task of guiding the congregation in this calling by being trusted with the task of interpretation — both of scripture and of human experience in its psychological, sociological and cultural dimensions; that is, we must speak faith and meaning into particular contexts.

But preaching doesn't only try to interpret; it aims for transformation. How will our understanding of our scriptural heritage in the light of current experience provide the basis for discipleship, mission and our life in community?

#### What is our view of Scripture?

The way we preach cannot help but be influenced by our view of Scripture and its authority. Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* was groundbreaking for me. I was profoundly affected by its literary interpretation of difficult texts, along with its honest appraisal of their failure to portray the message of God's love. Ironically, in the light of this discussion of Genesis 34, she uses a story about Jacob as a paradigm for dealing with such difficult texts. Trible suggests that Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok can be a metaphor for those of us who want to hold on to our biblical heritage, wrestle with it and refuse to let go without a blessing.<sup>1</sup>

So, even 'texts of terror' can be a blessing — helping us to redefine what Scripture is, showing us that people of faith can question Scripture, that interpretation includes freeing the message of the Bible from its prisons of patriarchy and other social institutions. Moreover, there is a relationship between Scripture and us as its readers. Our experience and the issues of the day can critique Scripture, but we must also allow Scripture to critique our experience, as well as remembering that it critiques itself. Following this story, for example, we find a judgment on Levi and Simeon in Genesis 49.

There is also a relationship between text and community. There are many communities that are important for understanding and responding to a text such as this. There is the community that gave rise to biblical traditions — those who preserved stories, who edited them and shaped them to give a particular message for their time. There is the community of faith who passed the stories on over thousands of years and communities of faith who

receive them today and interpret them. Amongst this group are feminist theologians, interpreting the stories from a particular point of view. Finally, there is the broader community (society, our neighbours locally and globally) that sheds light on the story. At each level we are aided in wrestling with the story to understand why it has been passed on.

*Misogyny is still a reality; rape is still a weapon in war, and women are still sacrificed for the comfort of the more powerful, even within the community of the church.*

#### How could this story be preached?

It is difficult to know the exact purpose of preserving this story. Was its main purpose tribal aetiology or an explanation of Israelite-Canaanite marriages? Was it a rape account justifying inter-tribal conflict? Is it part of the trajectory pleading for God's inclusive covenant? Was it a tragic love story? Biblical texts such as this function best as a springboard for reflection and transformation.

Below I select a few of the issues in the story, make links with issues in our world, then make some suggestions about how these might interact if we were preaching this text.

##### 1. Rape and the spiral of violence

To choose to 'speak out' about this story as a rape story is to recognise its relevance. Misogyny is still a reality; rape is still a weapon in war, and women are still sacrificed for the comfort of the more powerful, even within the community of the church. Sexual abuse in the church has become an issue that can no longer be ignored. To preach on this story with an emphasis on violence against women may hold a mirror up to our own lives and ask us to be committed to a different way, inviting us to bring the sadness and violence and suffering of the world together with our faith. We may be asked to take action on behalf of victims of violence or be prompted to embrace nonviolence as a lifestyle.

##### 2. Tribal conflict, fear of 'the other'

The struggle over pride, principles and land is ongoing between Israel and Canaan, and indeed in most communities. The church is always faced with changes in society and asked to decide whether to embrace these changes or maintain a stance against them. Examples might include slavery in the United States, apartheid in South Africa, women's roles and perhaps the issue most pertinent in our time — our attitude towards homosexuality.

Could Dinah and Shechem represent a 'new generation' — crossing over traditional boundaries and opening up new possibilities? When Jacob's

sons refused to integrate a community of Canaanites into their tribe, were they being racist or were they holding on to the principles of their exclusive covenant as Yahweh's chosen?

A sermon on this text may invite us to consider the ambiguous relationship between religious fervour and ecumenical (even interfaith) vision, between holding on to the fundamentals of faith and being pragmatic. We may need to ask when 'being in the world but not of it' becomes bigotry? We could be challenged to leave safe spaces to relate to others; it may even have something to say to us about relationships with refugees in Australia.

*We may need to ask when 'being in the world but not of it' becomes bigotry?*

*3. Sacrificing principles for material gain*

It is possible to interpret the motivations of both Jacob's sons and Hamor as economic pragmatism; religious ritual was demanded and accepted in the hope that it would lead to material benefits. In our day, too, economic rationalism may demand that progress and growth are the most important principles determining policy and behaviour. This raises the question whether economic gain could become more important than relationships and more important than religious ritual and its meaning? Hamor persuaded his people to accept the condition of circumcision without making it clear that they would accept the meaning it had for Israel. But note that the sons of Jacob didn't value the religious ritual any more than the Canaanites; their insistence on circumcision wasn't for the purpose of faithfulness, but for social control. A symbol of faith became a tool for violence. There is a certain irony that in Israel the tribe of Levi becomes the priests, so that a Latin American theologian makes the comment that 'the use of religious practices to attain economic gains is not an invention of modern times'.<sup>2</sup>

*4. From whose perspective is the story told?*

The point has been made that Dinah has no voice in her own story. Re-reading the text from the perspective of women opens up new possibilities. Was it really rape, or is it only assumed so because of the implied insult of such a relationship? While the dominant perspective in this story is that of the winners — with its message being to maintain the purity of the tribes of Jacob — there are enough disquieting aspects to it to suggest other possibilities. For example, notice Jacob's change of name to Israel shortly after this incident (Gen 35:10), sug-

gesting that his tribe was so tainted by the incident that it had to move away from the area with a new identity. The novel, *The Red Tent*,<sup>3</sup> suggests all sorts of possibilities for an imaginative re-reading of the story.

These are just a few of the issues we might pick up. There is no single, definitive exhortation arising from this story. In taking issues arising from this text as a starting point for a homiletical response, we echo the richness of Scripture itself — that it is able to be reinterpreted in the light of new experience. This is how much of the Christian Scriptures approach the Hebrew Bible, but even within the Hebrew Bible itself we see old traditions being reworked and transformed. If we want to aim for transformation in our preaching, we must allow the story and its issues to interact with our own experience and the issues relevant in our community and our day.

*Dinah's name is a feminine form of the Hebrew verb din — to judge. Since Dinah has no voice in this narrative, and since victims of violence and the marginalised today also rarely have a voice, could the narrative be a reminder to us of the plea for justice originating in the silent voice of the victim?*

**A final word**

Dinah's name is a feminine form of the Hebrew verb *din* — to judge. Since Dinah has no voice in this narrative, and since victims of violence and the marginalised today also rarely have a voice, could the narrative be a reminder to us of the plea for justice originating in the silent voice of the victim? The story begins with Dinah reaching out but ends with the negative assessment of her violent brothers, justifying their excessive action with a false excuse. There is no happy end to this story, but there is an invitation for us to make a judgment and to act in a way more consistent with a God of love (not a God of the tribe).

1. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, Fortress Press, 1984, pp.4-5.
2. Pablo R. Andiñach, 'Dinah, a woman victim of sexual and ethnic violence', *Journal of Latin American Hermeneutics* 2004/1, p.6.
3. A. Diamant, *The Red Tent*, Picador, 1997.

## The Rape of Dinah: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

**Ranjini E. Wickramaratne-Rebera**

We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.

This is not your fault or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say that I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honour was avenged.<sup>1</sup>

These are words of Dinah in the prologue to a novel based on her story by Anita Diamant. Since Dinah is the silent subject at the centre of our reflections, it is fitting to begin with words from Diamant's novel, which gives life to Dinah.

Having lived my formative years in an Asian (Sri Lankan) society in which personal identity is closely linked both to family identity and, through family, to community identity, it is not difficult to see links between many ground rules for behaviour that existed in ancient Israelite culture and my own birth culture. In both these societies, individual well-being is controlled by the well-being of the household, which in turn contributes to the well-being of society. Lyn Bechtel names such societies 'group-oriented societies'.<sup>2</sup>

Together with the attachment of individual to family, there is a deep sense of obligation nurtured within the family. I recall many occasions when my family's sense of obligation took precedence over all other considerations. At such times, dissent was not an option. Fulfilling one's obligations within the family and extended family added to the respect and social standing of the group. In Genesis 34, the importance of obligation is evident in the response of Dinah's brothers, who were obliged to defend family honour through murdering the Shechemites. However, when Shechem and Hamor offered to meet their obligations after Dinah's encounter with Shechem, the offer was not only rejected but led to the killing of the two men and their community. In this instance, 'obligation' could not overcome the honour code because it was an 'outsider' who made the offer. Despite this double standard, inter-marriages between Hebrew men and 'outsiders' are recorded in the Hebrew

Bible (for example, Simeon's Canaanite wife in Gen 46:10).

When accepted patterns of behaviour or traditions are violated by an individual, this reflects negatively on the identity of the household, which in turn impacts negatively on the identity of the community. In multicultural, multifaith Australia, it is possible to trace some of these boundaries. For example, a woman holding a responsible academic position in a well-known university in Melbourne continues to be alienated from her family because she moved out of her home to live with her partner, who belongs to a different Asian community. She recalls her father's anger when he said, 'You have brought disgrace and shame on our entire family!' She also remembers the tears of her mother, who claimed that her actions would now make it almost impossible for them to find a suitable partner for her younger sister. She has not been permitted to enter her parental home for nearly ten years.

Connections between group-oriented societies of today and similar societies in ancient Israel are not difficult to recognize. It is within the boundaries of such a group-oriented society that Dinah and her community functioned.

*Having lived my formative years in an Asian (Sri Lankan) society in which personal identity is closely linked both to family identity and, through family, to community identity, it is not difficult to see links between many ground rules for behaviour that existed in ancient Israelite culture and my own birth culture.*

The theme of honour and shame emerges from texts in the Hebrew Bible that deal with the violation of women. In ancient Israelite culture, honour was closely linked to a person's or community's ability to achieve autonomy. Lilian Klein, exploring honour and shame in the biblical story of Esther, claims that 'one of the principal determinants of honour is sexual autonomy', and '... only men could be autonomous' in ancient societies.<sup>3</sup> It was understood in group-oriented societies that men were honour-bound to defend not only their personal honour but also, and more importantly, the honour of the family and tribe or ethnic group. Male identity was linked closely to honour. Therefore any challenge to a man's honour had to be defended, even if by violence. Such interpretations of honour are integral to group-oriented societies, as opposed to the interpretation of honour in our predominantly individualistic society.

Did women have honour? I have not found instances in the Hebrew Bible where women are associated with honour. Although women had no claim to honour, however, one reads of claims of dishonourable acts done by women, which led to the need for men to defend the honour of such women! Klein claims that in such a social structure women could achieve honour only through shame. Since women were not considered to be autonomous persons, and since female sexuality was closely linked to shame and guilt, a woman could come close to claiming honour through patterns of behaviour that brought honour to men in her household. Protecting her virginity and accepting social patterns of behaviour relating to her sexuality were the closest a woman could come to accessing respect within her household.<sup>4</sup> The reactions of Jacob and his sons to Dinah after her encounter with Shechem illustrate this honour code. It lifted 'feminine shame' associated with Dinah's intercourse with a foreigner, whether it was rape or consensual sex, to the level of a 'positive value'. Her act was also the basis for validating the killings carried out by her brothers, also sanctioned by Jacob's silence.

While we are aware of the subordinate roles played by women in patriarchal cultures, we often fail to recognize the boundaries placed around women by codes of honour and shame. By linking domesticity and sexual functions to the identity of a woman, the segregation of women to a women's space was acceptable and became a vehicle for male control and dominance. Despite such segregation, there were some positive aspects to being confined to a women's space. The privacy offered at such times enabled women to support each other (Ruth 1:8; Song of Songs 3:4; Gen 24:28). Perhaps it was here that feminine power emerged to enable them to survive and to overcome the harsh codes of shame and honour that held them captive and defined their identity. Perhaps it was in times of such segregation that women passed on inherited stories and acquired wisdom to the next generation.

*Genesis 34 has been referred to as a story of crime and punishment. It has also formed the centre-piece for examining issues relating to sexual violence, ethnocentrism, gender and identity, as well as the use and abuse of power.*

When exploring texts such as Genesis 34 in the two-thirds world, issues relating to exclusion and inclusion also provide a focus for discussion. In South Asia such discussions include boundaries

that govern the caste system, which is the vehicle for differentiation and exclusion. Most women and men from these group-oriented societies have little difficulty understanding patterns of behaviour that governed the household of Jacob. Integration with other communities would not have been an option. Closely linked to the need to exclude foreigners from a community were concepts of purity and impurity. The relation of the rights of 'outsiders' to those of community 'insiders' was also significant.

Do we in Australia have clearly defined boundaries that govern matters of inclusion and exclusion? Most of us are aware of subtle rules that determine acceptance within our social structures. Whether we articulate them or not, we know they exist, and in moments of honest reflection we may even recognize our own responses to the foreigner or 'other'.<sup>5</sup> There may even be times when we are prepared to acknowledge the existence of exclusion within our communities of faith.

Genesis 34 has been referred to as a story of crime and punishment. It has also formed the centre-piece for examining issues relating to sexual violence, ethnocentrism, gender and identity, as well as the use and abuse of power. But let us not forget that the writer of this account places before us a woman named Dinah, whose story continues to challenge us on behalf of all people who wear the label 'victim'.

Should texts such as Genesis 34 be included in the lectionary? I believe they should, but not solely for exploring issues of sexual violence or the right of choice for women and men. They should challenge us to examine the subtle presence of honour and shame, inclusion and exclusion that continue to influence patterns of behaviour in Australian society. Texts such as these also challenge us to be sensitive to deeply rooted codes of honour and shame that are significant for those who trace their roots to group-oriented societies. They also point us to the need to examine our understanding of God at a time when codes of honour and shame play themselves out in violent confrontations across the world.

Let me conclude with the voice of Dinah from *The Red Tent*:

And now you have come to me. You came hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me and my mothers and my grandmothers before them.

If you sit on the banks of a river you see only a small part of its surface. And yet the water before your eyes is proof of unknowable depths. My heart brims with thanks for the kindness you have shown me by sitting on

the bank of this river and visiting the echoes of my name.

Blessings on your eyes and on your children.  
Blessings on the ground beneath your feet.  
Wherever you walk, I go with you.<sup>6</sup>

1. Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent*, Allen & Unwin, 1997, p.3.
2. Lyn M. Bechtel, 'What if Dinah is not raped? (Genesis 34)', *JSOT* 62, 1994, pp.19-23.
3. Lilian R. Klein, 'Honor and Shame in Esther', in Athalya Brenner (ed), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, pp.149-75.
4. Naomi Graetz, 'Dinah the Daughter', in Athalya Brenner (ed), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, pp.306-317.
5. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, Abingdon Press, 1996.
6. Diamant, *The Red Tent*, pp.394-95.

## Hermeneutical Reflections on Genesis 34: The Rape of Dinah

Heather Thomson

I approach my reading of this Scripture with certain questions in mind. They come in part from my own world, my own interest in the power that we exercise in relation to each other and the misuse of that power typified by acts of violence. I look to Scripture for answers, for guidance, for revelation and salvation. What has Genesis 34 to say to our violent world on the question of power and its misuse?

My questions also come in part from the text itself. It is unclear what exactly happened to Dinah, although it is fairly clear on the actions taken by her brothers. In reading Genesis 34 we are left with unanswered questions about motives, justifications for actions taken, and how to view the violence theologically. What status do we give to the rape, pillage and murder contained in our Scriptures? More specifically, what do these actions have to do with God?

For my purposes, the text as it stands is too small a part of Scripture to be illuminating on the question of violence. I need to look at this text as a small part in a larger whole. In doing this I intentionally enter the hermeneutical circle. Interpretation of Scripture is circular and moves between the parts and the whole.<sup>1</sup> Any particular part that we read is interpreted in relation to what we think the whole thing is about. Yet we only get to a picture of the whole by building it up from the different parts. So the parts inform the whole of what the Scriptures convey or reveal, and the whole helps us place the parts within it, to read each in relation to the larger picture of God's love and salvation.

No one person can adequately articulate a picture of the whole. However, I stand on fairly sure ground to say that the hope of the Old Testament prophets, and the promises of God, do *not* include the hope of a *more* violent world. To say that one hopes ultimately for violence is almost laughable, so far is it from the truth of what we know to be in Scripture, let alone the longing of our own hearts. Rather, when the prophets of the Old Testament looked forward in hope, it was for a world *better* than the one they knew. They hoped for peace, for reconciliation between God and humanity, and human beings with each other and the rest of creation. They looked forward to freedom rather than oppression, to mercy and compassion rather than tyranny, and to peace on earth, not violence.

*However, I stand on fairly sure ground to say that the hope of the Old Testament prophets, and the promises of God, do not include the hope of a more violent world.*

Some characters in the scriptural story, including occasionally the character of God, do act violently and set themselves against their enemies with hatred.<sup>2</sup> I contend, however, that these are also smaller parts in a larger whole. Violence is 'justified' as a means to an end, and that end is still peace, shalom, healing and reconciliation. I also argue that there is a growing realisation through scripture, culminating in the New Testament, that peace will not be gained through hatred, that reconciliation will not be achieved through hating enemies, that purity of religion cannot occur through sacrifice and victimage. You cannot love God and neighbour, and engage in murder. Jesus' teaching on love of enemies and his acceptance of the victims and marginalised unties the knot between God and violence. God-like power does not abuse or kill. Violence is not in the end theologically justified.

Genesis 34 needs to be situated in this larger picture. Both acts of violence there — the 'taking' of Dinah and the retaliation by her brothers — are actions we are being called to be healed from. They are all-too-human actions that need redeeming if peace, rather than violence, is to be our hope.

How can we be saved from these actions? More to the point, how can our hearts be changed so that we desire and long for things greater than vengeance and violence? Genesis 34 confronts us with these questions. But further questions remain. If Dinah was 'taken' against her will, and if her brothers really did care about her, can their actions be in any way justified? Can their violence be seen as a sign of love for her?

In answering these questions I am helped by the work of Rene Girard, whose theories on religion and violence are illuminating. Girard offers insights into the social construction of vengeance and violence, and how this process may be undone. He sees Jesus' revelation as the deconstruction of violence in human society, in line with certain traditions of the Old Testament. In other words, it is through Jesus that we are saved from ourselves in terms of the violence so prevalent in our world. How is this so? Two points must suffice.

First, Girard draws our attention to the way in which human desire is socially constructed. We are born into cultures, and our desires are formed by them. We want what others have, and we want to be as others are. The fashion industry and the market economy all work to this premise, and foster it. We are only barely aware that our desires are not particularly original to us, but are formed by imitation of others. Even if we try to set ourselves apart from others, it can still be rivalrous, an attempt to be 'better' than others in a way that does not transcend competition. Even religious people compete with each other to be right, to be true, to be in God's favour, and some would even kill to get there and stay there. So, our socially constructed desires make us competitive, turn us into rivals, and are the source of violence. Further, violence tends to be deflected onto victims and scapegoats who, we decide, 'deserve' it.

Second, the antidote to our being caught in systems of violence is to have our desires mediated to us from a *truly* transcendent source, that is, God. Although the source of our desires are transcendent to us (our culture, history, our neighbours), this transcendent is limited. It remains within the human realm. However, just as a snorkeller can be immersed in water yet live from the air above, we too will only be able to break out of rivalry and violence if we live from a truly transcendent source, beyond the merely human. To do anything less is to fall short of the glory of God.

We would, however, have no need of the incarnation and cross for this insight. For Christian theology, Christ is significant in this matter. He reveals God as one who does not require victims and scapegoats for us to win God's favour. We don't need to fight for it — it is sheer gift. Further, by siding with the marginalised, Jesus questions human societies that are violently constructed, rendering some as no-bodies. And, by bearing violence in the name of religion, Jesus shows that the love of God does not ask for or desire punishment and victims. That is fatal. Jesus stands as a dangerous memory of freedom, free of all human mechanisms of rivalry and violence.

Reading Genesis 34 from this angle, the vengeance of the sons of Jacob is judged. They

cared more for their own purity as a tribe than any bigger vision of peace and reconciliation. This does not mean that we should do nothing if faced with abuse, but it questions the source of our response. If we are breathing the air of God's vision for the world, we would not, could not, engage in vengeance and murder.

Nelson Mandela is a contemporary example of one who could have been understandably bitter about his treatment and sought ways of avenging himself. But for the twenty-seven years he was in prison, he lived by a vision larger than his individual life, and larger than his tribe. He desired the healing of South Africa as a whole, and this allowed him to renounce vengeance for his own sake.

*If we are breathing the air of God's vision for the world, we would not, could not, engage in vengeance and murder.*

I agree with the statement that 'violence is a failure of the imagination'. Violence is being caught in a reaction. Someone presses your buttons and you respond. But that is not freedom and will not create freedom. Note how Jacob in Genesis 34 had to move away because it was no longer safe to stay. We, however, are called to be free, to be children of God, not slaves. We need to see our own lives as small parts in a much larger whole if we are to participate in God's redemption of the world.

Who will tell of the dangerous memories of the marginalised? All of us! Christians are called to follow Jesus into the realm of the powerless and marginalised, and keep alive his dangerous memory of freedom. This is the only legitimate power we have — to live according to the breath of God, and to work with God who so loves the world.

1. A.C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1992, pp.204ff.
2. See Ezek 25:15-17; Deut 32:35, 41; Micah 5:15; Ps 5:5; 94:1; 139:21-22.
3. My reflections have been informed by the following works: R. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Continuum, London, 2003 (first English translation, Athlone Press, 1987), and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 2001; R.-G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992; W.M. Swartley (ed.), *Violence Renounced: Rene Girard, Biblical Studies and Peacemaking*, with a response by Rene Girard, Pandora Press, Telford, 2000; J.G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence*, foreword by Rene Girard, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, 1991.