

Review of Caroline Blyth, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah's Silence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, xii+277 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-95845-6

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A lecturer in Biblical Studies and Religious Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Caroline Blyth takes on the story of Dinah in her first book. She argues that the silence of Dinah in the biblical text echoes a larger silence about sexual violence that extends across time and culture. This study not only delves into feminist readings of the biblical material, but also explores mythologies about rape and gender stereotypes, thinks through what makes rape experiences unique as well as ties such acts together, and reads the testimonies of contemporary survivors of rape against Genesis 34. With her lively and engaging writing style, Blyth effectively makes a case for reading this story with sensitivity toward persons who endured the trauma of sexual violence and thus to make the on-going relevance of this text clear.

The book opens and closes with the testimonies of women who were sexually assaulted. Blyth uses these stories to contextualize her work on the biblical narrative in terms of what she labels rape 'myths,' or the ways in which cultures perpetuate falsehoods about such acts. For her, a social system's laws about rape as well as the understandings of this act within a community often rest on inaccurate notions. The impact of these assumptions, she contends, results in an underreporting of the crime and a diminished number of convictions.

In her second chapter, Blyth launches into a lengthy exploration of the story of Dinah. A close reading of the text incorporates and interrogates scholarly commentaries on the passage in addition to featuring a careful study of the Hebrew verbs describing the interaction between Shechem and Dinah. Looking at the verbs *šākab*, *lāqah* and *'innāh*, Blyth thoroughly cross-references and explores related stories and legal texts. She defines rape as an act of aggression

and concludes that Genesis 34:2, with its amalgamation of verbs in short succession, tonally suggests force and even brutality.

The chapter on "The 'Real' Victim of Rape" discusses how many cultures recast rape into an act that challenges male honour or the property rights of a man. In this regard, women often lose status within a social system in addition to suffering from the effects of a physical attack. Here, Blyth examines how Genesis 34 presents the true victim as Dinah's father Jacob and how this conceptualization of his role influences his actions in the narrative. Further, she considers how Dinah's brothers react to the power dynamics between the Hivites and their family and see Shechem's act as one of war more than of sexual violence. The status of women as a border between communities and what Dinah's 'defilement' signifies comes into focus here.

'She asked for it,' chapter four, centres on Dinah's one action (verse 1) of going out to visit the women of the land. It introduces the assumption of the woman at fault in cases of sexual violence and how such preconception influences both ancient and contemporary commentary on this text. Among the most interesting aspects of the chapter comes with the cognate evidence for the verb *yāsā* and the possibility of reading it as a case of sexual impropriety on the part of Dinah. Blyth further explores other biblical narratives to see how women 'going out' may relate to courtship as well as to prostitution.

In the last substantive chapter, Blyth delves into the character of Shechem and considers how his actions might read as atypical of how many cultures define a rapist. She again demonstrates how assumptions often determine what exactly might constitute an act of sexual violence and the ways in which those conclusions shape who is understood as capable of such an action. In the biblical story, Blyth focuses specifically on the potential to see Shechem's confession of love and willingness to marry Dinah as a narrative valourization of his character which mediates against a reading of rape. Blyth suggests that Shechem's feelings likely are motivated more by self-interest, and a startling lack of self-awareness, rather than any real concern or feeling for Dinah. Further, she contends that the prospect of Dinah being forced to marry her rapist must be read as an outrage. For Blyth, to do less reaffirms the profoundly disturbing ideologies of honour–shame cultures and while it might improve Dinah's social standing and prospects, must be seen as an odious outcome.

Throughout the book, Blyth advances her argument in clear and logical fashion. Her exegetical efforts centre on scrutiny of key terms and phrases as they appear in this text as well as in other biblical material. She makes accessible the nuances of the Hebrew text to a non-academic audience while still contributing to the body of scholarship on this story. Her research is thorough as evidenced by a sound bibliography and inclusion of the key writings in both commentaries and journals on Dinah.

She intersperses this kind of traditional textual commentary with a contemporary focus on the ideas conveyed. Much like a courtroom attorney, Blyth spends considerable effort generating strong feeling in her reading audience with dramatic ties to modern understandings about the rights of women and present-day western conceptions of rape. In this regard, her argumentation often seems in service of a predetermined conclusion. Blyth starts and ends with the presumption that Genesis 34 depicts a violent sexual encounter the impact of which is similar to the trauma many women suffer when raped. In spite of consistent statements that ideas about rape differ

from culture to culture and thus scholars cannot essentialize the impact on a victim, she falls into that trap.

For example, while her first chapter links theory with reality in a way that resonates with anyone who has experienced rape or interacted with those persons victimized, Blyth falls short of making a successful argument about the ways in which rape functions by focusing exclusively on male rapists who attack women. In this regard, she perpetuates one of the most persistent myths about rape – that it is solely a crime victimizing women. Her conclusions concerning how the healing process of victims is stymied by a social milieu in which these myths function assumes that women face a unique burden in this regard and thus she misses the nuances of how rape shifts dynamics of social power. Further, she assumes that women, even when removed in time, space and social setting from one another, respond to such acts of violence in a consistent and predictable manner.

Feminist readers who accept Blyth's contention that allowing the victimized to tell their stories provides an empowering option over and against the more typical silence about sexual violence will find her unambiguous agenda appealing. Biblical scholars will see insights in her readings of the text which come across as well thought out and adequately supported. It is in the marriage of the two approaches where some discomfort exists. Reading any biblical text without sensitivity to its own cultural norms is problematic. Thoroughly interrogating the ideologies of a culture is certainly necessary and Blyth accomplishes such. But her elision of the distinctions between ancient and modern requires a careful balancing of both. Blyth tends too much to push a modern, and incomplete, understanding of rape in her writing and thus will not receive as fair a hearing in the circle of biblical scholarship as her excellent reading of Genesis 34 deserves.