Understanding Genesis 34:2: *ʿInnâ*

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Abstract

Feminist scholars have debated what happens to Dinah in Genesis 34:2. Was she raped? These short notes explore a contextual understanding of the meaning of *ʿinnâ*, in this verse and other occurrences.

Keywords

Genesis 34 – Dinah – *ʿinnâ* – Deuteronomy 21-22 – Ezekiel 22:10-11 – 2 Samuel 13

Scholars have debated what happens to Dinah, daughter of Jacob, when she has sex with Shechem, son of Hamor. Is she raped or abducted? Does she consent?¹ Understanding this event hinges on the interpretation of the verbs of Genesis 34:2. In this verse Shechem is the subject of four verbs, three in rapid succession: “And Shechem son of Hamor, the Hivite, prince of the land, saw her and he took her, lay with her, and debased her (*wayēʿannehā*).” All are *waw* consecutive forms. Shechem sees Dinah. The action is slowed—he is introduced

¹ Among others, including: Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Dinah Affair,” in *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 179-98; Adele Berlin, “Literary Approaches to Biblical Literature: General Observations and a Case Study of Genesis 34,” in *Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 45-75; Susanne Scholz, “Back Then It Was Legal”: The Epistemological Imbalance in Readings of Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Rape Legislation,” *Bible & Critical Theory* 1, no. 4 (2005); Yael Shemesh, “Rape Is Rape: The Story of Dinah and Shechem (Genesis 34),” *ZAW* 119, no. 1 (2007): 2-21; E. J. van Wolde, “Does *ʿInnâ* Denote Rape? A Semantic Analysis of a Controversial Word,” *VT* 52, no. 4 (2002): 528-44; Lyn M. Bechtel, “What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34),” *JSOT*, no. 62 (1994): 19-36; Blyth, Caroline, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah’s Silence* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

between the verb of seeing and his next action. This is followed by three quick actions: “He took her, lay with her, and debased her.” Multivocality in understanding the verse begins with the ambiguous meaning of *lāqah*. In a more violent reading of this narrative, *lāqah* could mean “to abduct, take by force,” as translated by NRSV, NAB, NJB (seized), and the Vulgate: *quam cum vidisset Sychem filius Emor Evei princeps terrae illius adamavit et rapuit et dormivit cum illa vi opprimens virginem*. But this verb is also a standard way to express “to take as a wife” (similar to the use in v. 4), although it is usually articulated as *lāqah l’iššā*.² The meaning of *lāqah*, as to take a wife, may be appropriate in the context of this story.

With this in mind, it is necessary to recognize the correct meaning of *wayē’annehā*. In this story, and elsewhere, the *piel* verb *’nh* is often translated as “rape.” Ellen van Wolde writes convincingly on the semantic range of *’innā*, concluding that “the widespread opinion that the verb *’innā* in the *Pi’el* refers to ‘rape’ or ‘sexual abuse’ is not acceptable.”³ Instead, she argues that “this verb is used as an evaluative term in a juridical context denoting a spatial movement downwards in a social sense. . . . Thus, *’innā* should be translated as ‘debase.’”⁴ While I agree with her retranslation of the verb, her conclusion does not give enough credence to the sexual context of almost every one of her examples. It is this context that influences translation and understanding of forced sex. *’Innā* is indeed, as van Wolde argues, social shaming, but it is particularly sexual, although need not be translated as “rape.”

Of the thirteen instances of the verb in the *pi’el* that have a female object, only two are not in a context (immediately) involving sex. These are the stories involving Hagar and Sarai, in which Sarai abuses Hagar after she has conceived (Gen 16:6), and Laban and Jacob, in which Laban makes Jacob swear to not take any other wives besides his daughters as not to “debase” them (*tē’anneh*), lessening their status (Gen 31:50) and dividing the inheritance of his grandsons.⁵ Sex is involved in these cases (taking surrogate or additional wives), but it is not the sex act itself that causes *innā*. In contrast, the other eleven

2 Joseph Fleishman, “Why Did Simeon and Levi Rebuke Their Father in Genesis 34:31?,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*, 2000, 102. Fleishman also suggests an ANE practice of marriage by abduction, in which consent by the parents is not given before consummation. Also, Helena Zlotnick, *Dinah’s Daughters: Gender and Judaism from the Hebrew Bible to Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 33-48.

3 Van Wolde, “Does *’Innā* Denote Rape?,” 543.

4 Ibid.

5 Interestingly, in his seminal concordance, Even-Shoshan does not even include these instances in the grouping of *’innā* with *’iššā* as object (Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sefer, 1996), 902.)

occurrences all concern sex explicitly, often unwanted sex, but not necessarily what we would consider rape. In these cases, the sex act is often a violation of some other kind of standard: social, cultural, legal, and economic. The issue hinges on the power and ability to consent. In ancient Israel, young women did not have control over their sexuality.⁶ A woman's sexuality was governed by the decisions of her father or brothers and after marriage, her husband. In seven of these instances the consenting party (father, brother, or husband) is not given the opportunity for consent. These include the Dinah story, the laws governing captives (Deut. 22:11-14), and even the so-called "rape" of Tamar by Amnon (2 Sam 13).⁷

Another context in which we see this verb used as related to sex is in Ezekiel 22:10 and 11. This chapter contains a list of "abominations," including bloodshed and idol worship. There is an overall concern with defilement (*ṭm'*). Verse 10 includes two prohibitions. The first is against uncovering one's father's nakedness, and the second is against defiling a menstruating woman, that you 'innâ. This verse is reliant upon, or even quotes, the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:19. Verse 11 contains two prohibitions: if a man "lewdly defiles" (*ṭimmē' b'ezimmâ*) his daughter-in-law, and another 'innâ his sister, his father's daughter. These verses are concerned with issues of defilement, namely violating the laws of *niddâ* and incest. We should not also read in here a crime of forced sex. The issue is the violation of taboos prohibited by ritual law, not rape. According to Leviticus 18:19 and the Holiness Code (H), the prohibition against menstrual sex is a serious offense similar to incest, bestiality, and child sacrifice to Molech. The consequence is similarly serious: *karet*, the cutting off from the community.⁸ The prohibition against menstrual sex in Leviticus 18:19 is addressed to men only, assuming they are the initiators of sex. Given this context, and the solemn approach with which H deals with the prohibition, we should not insist on a further offense of rape in this context. Furthermore, Ken Stone argues that "no word exists, in the Hebrew Bible, which corresponds exactly with our word, 'rape'."⁹

6 Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped?"; Frymer-Kensky, "The Dinah Affair," 182-87; "Law and Philosophy: The Case of Sex in the Bible," *Semeia* 45 (1989): 93.

7 Pamela Tamarkin Reis makes an interesting argument in which she suggests that Tamar is not raped by her brother Amnon, in "Cupidity and Stupidity: Woman's Agency and The 'Rape' of Tamar," *JANES* 25 (1997): 43-60.

8 Tarja S. Philip, "Gender Matters: Priestly Writing on Impurity," in *Embroidered Garments* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 52.

9 Ken Stone, "'You Seduced Me, You Overpowered Me, and You Prevailed': Religious Experience and Homoerotic Sodomasochism in Jeremiah," in *Patriarchs, Prophets and Other Villains*

Similarly, in the story of Tamar and Amnon the verb *'innâ* appears four times: 2 Samuel 13:12, 14, 22, and 32. While this narrative is usually interpreted as a clear case of rape, the concern with *'innâ* is also social. Tamar is not opposed to sex with (and marrying) her half-brother, but she does not want to engage in intercourse with him before the proper marriage arrangements have been made with their father David (v. 12). According to Bechtel, "It is not the sexual act itself she turns down, but the fact that there is no legal arrangement settled."¹⁰ Similarly, Pamela Tamarkin Reis, who argues this is not a case of rape, sees Tamar as a consenting party, although perhaps urged to consent, who encouraged and even sought the affection of Amnon, but one whom wanted her father's approval of the coupling and after the fact considered herself "married" to Amnon.¹¹ Both Reis and P. Kyle McCarter contend that Tamar should not have thought the coupling between her and her half-brother would have been permitted.¹² Is the social shame, expressed both in the *'innâ* and *něbâlâ* (v. 7), the violation of the incest taboo? After this event, Tamar cannot return to the palace among the virgin princesses; she has no husband's house to enter, so she takes up residence in her brother Absalom's home. She insists that the wrong of sending her away is worse than the wrong of forced or incestual sex (v. 16). Tamar acts the mourner, putting ashes on her head, lamenting, and tearing her clothes (v. 17). Perhaps she is raped, but the rape is not her shame. She now inhabits a liminal social position in which she has no place. Concern for *'innâ* comes from sex, but is not the sex act itself.

Innâ is about social shame. The Tamar and Amnon story is one in which *'innâ* can most readily be read as "rape." Her brother Absalom avenges her honor (2 Sam 13:32), but is it because she has been sexually violated or because her status has been lowered? Because of Amnon's violent sex act against Tamar, she cannot return to her father's house, and she remains, unheard from, languishing in the house of her brother. *Innâ* in this context, at the least, must encompass social debasing, similar to the occurrences in Genesis 16 and 31.

(London: Equinox, 2007), 104. Also, Sandie Gravett, "Reading 'Rape' in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language," *JOT* 28, no. 3 (2004): 279.

10 Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped?," 539.

11 Reis, "Cupidity and Stupidity," 49-50, 55. Reis translates *te'anēnî* as "subdue." Amnon urges her, "Come lie with me, my sister" (2 Sam 13:11). She initially protests, "No, my brother. Do not subdue me . . ." (Reis's translation).

12 P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, Anchor Bible Commentary 9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 323-23, 327-28.

Similarly, the laws governing illicit sexual couplings and the consequences for doing so in Deuteronomy 21 and 22 reinforce this understanding. Deuteronomy 21:14 requires that if a man marries a captive and no longer wants her, he cannot sell her because he did *'innâ* to her. Her participation in sex with the man may not have been consensual, but the law does not consider it rape. Also, in Deuteronomy 22:24 if a man has sex with a betrothed virgin in the city and she does not cry out (implying consent) it is considered adultery, because the man did *'innâ* to the wife of his neighbor. This is a case of consensual sex, although the woman does not have the power to consent. The coupling is forbidden because the woman is betrothed and her sexuality belongs to her husband-to-be, but it is certainly not rape. As a consequence, they are both punished by death. Even though the woman is the object of the *'innâ*, the offense is done to the neighbor. The parallel to this law, the case of a man who has sex with a betrothed virgin in the field (implying that if she were to scream, there would be no one to hear her), is also illuminating on the issue of *'innâ*. The sex act here is clearly considered rape, signified by the use of the *hip'il* of *ḥzk*, *heḥezîk* "seize." She is considered a victim and not culpable. Only the man is punished by death. It is significant to recognize that in this context, a clear case of rape, that no *'innâ* verb is used. This is in contrast to the case in Deuteronomy 22:28-29 in which a man has sex with an unbetrothed virgin. If they are discovered (*w^enimṣē'û*), the man pays the girl's father 50 shekels and marries her and may never divorce her.¹³ The public nature of this coupling is crucial to this practice. By taking her virginity, he devalues her and humiliates the girl and her family, even if she consents. This law is not primarily concerned with rape, instead a situation in which the father of the woman does not have the opportunity to give consent (i.e. through marriage negotiations) and is forced to concede to the marriage because the loss of her virginity and the public nature of their sex act. In this context, *'innâ* is clearly social.

These understandings allow us to return to the reading of the Dinah story, specifically Genesis 34:2. The coupling of Dinah and Shechem most similarly reflects the situation in Deuteronomy 22:28-29, in which a man would pay the bride-price for an unbetrothed virgin. The marriage "negotiations" take place following consummation. One would have expected Jacob to concede to the generous offers of Shechem and his father Hamor. Instead, the brothers respond with the brutal massacre of the entire city of Shechem. The violent conclusion to the story may influence us to read a violent sex act in the beginning of the narrative, but we should not understand the verb *'innâ* in

13 A similar law in Exodus 22:15 allows the father to refuse the marriage, but the man must still pay the bride-price.

Genesis 34:2 as “rape.” Instead, we can read *‘innâ* as a social shaming, which has the potential to lower Dinah’s value as a non-virgin. This situation could have been rectified by the acceptance of Shechem’s proposal. Instead, the brothers are more concerned with the social shame of intermarriage and setting precedent for their inability to choose husbands for the daughters of Israel, relinquishing their control of women’s sexual consent.¹⁴

14 Bechtel, “What If Dinah Is Not Raped?,” 22-23; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 189.