GENDERED HISTORIOGRAPHY: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CASE STUDIES

SHAWNA DOLANSKY
AND SARAH SHECTMAN (EDS.)
GENDERED HISTORIOGRAPHY:
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND
CASE STUDIES

EDITED BY
SHAWNA DOLANSKY
CARLETON UNIVERSITY

SARAH SHECTMAN
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

2. Susan Ackerman, Ritual Undertones in Genesis 21:9–21?
3. Alison L. Joseph, “Is Dinah Raped?” Isn’t the Right Question: Genesis 34 and Feminist Historiography
4. Mark Leuchter, The Song of Miriam between Memory and History
5. Megan Warner, Finding Lot's Daughters
"IS DINAH RAPED?" ISN’T THE RIGHT QUESTION*: GENESIS 34 AND FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

ALISON L. JOSEPH
THE POSEN LIBRARY OF JEWISH CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

The story of Dinah in Gen 34 has been fertile ground for feminist scholars.1 In this story, Dinah, daughter of Jacob and Leah, walks out among the women of the land. Shechem, son of Hamor, prince of the local Shechemites, sees her and has sex with her. Following their sexual union, Hamor urges his father to enter into negotiations with Jacob so that he can marry Dinah. With deceit, Dinah’s brothers agree to Hamor’s proposal that Shechem and Dinah marry and that they continue to intermarry with the Shechemites. The sons counter that they can only give their sister or sisters to a circumcised man. Hamor and Shechem agree and have all the male Shechemites circumcised. While they are recovering, Simeon and Levi massacre the town ירי לעי, “by the sword,” activating the laws of holy war and

---


demonstrating that the prospect of intermarriage is completely offensive to them.

Dinah is barely present in this narrative. The story is not even about her. Dinah does not speak; she acts only once, in 34:1, after which she is referred to only as an object and never as a subject. After the brothers appear, she is only mentioned by name one time between verses 6 and 25. Even beyond Gen 34, she is something less than a character. She is included as the last child born to Leah and her handmaiden, Zilpah. Her birth is reported in Gen 30:21. She is not described as a full character like her brothers; she is born, but no other information is given beyond her name. The naming of her brothers includes explanations of the meanings of their names. From the beginning, she seems to be an afterthought. Immediately after Dinah’s birth, the text transitions to Rachel’s fertility. Beyond chapter 34, she is only mentioned again in the genealogy in 46:15.

I have to wonder though, can we even do a good and responsible gendered reading of this story with so little to work with? And if we cannot do a good gendered reading, is no reading better than an irresponsible one? For feminist theologians, the answer is easier; feminist theologians attempt to dig out the hidden power and agency of women in biblical texts in order to make the biblical narrative contemporaneously relevant. It is essential to help women and/or “feminist interpreters” connect to the biblical texts, especially in cases of a story like Dinah’s, in which the only woman is immeasurably disparaged. In contrast, feminist historiography seeks to use the historical-critical method to read the text, basing its analysis “in the historical context of ancient Israel rather than in the political, social, or religious concerns of modern feminist hermeneutics.” And while, as feminists, our modern sexual values are so in conflict with those of the story, imposing those values on ancient Israel and their story is not methodologically responsible.

Ken Stone argues that “no word exists, in the Hebrew Bible, which corresponds exactly with our word, ‘rape.’” We recognize


this as a problem because women in ancient Israel did not have legal or sexual autonomy—the power to give or refuse consent. Their sexual consent belonged to their fathers and brothers and later husbands. For Harold Washington, “the lack of a legal category or even a word for rape as such in the Hebrew Bible illustrates the fact that the cultural meaning of sexual violence against women is a complex social production that is inextricably tied up, in experience and in representation, with exchanges of power.” Modern concepts of rape rely on the FBI definition of rape as “penetration . . . without the consent of the victim.” If we define rape in this way, with no power of consent, a woman in ancient Israel can technically never be raped. Yet, declaring there is no rape in ancient Israel does not help us reconcile how we read examples of sexual violence, which, from a historical-critical perspective, surely was a phenomenon in ancient Israel. Also, by even addressing the question of Dinah, are we giving more attention to her character and story than the ancient Israelite writers intended? Gen 34 seems entirely unconcerned with


5 Even in the laws pertaining to “rape” in Deut 22:23–29, there is the appearance that a woman’s un/willingness is important (does she cry out?) to the consequences of the sex act (i.e., who is punished and how?); this concern is not about her consent but rather the wrong done to her husband/father because his exclusive claim on her sexuality is taken from him. The perpetrator of the crime (the man and/or wife/betrothed) and subsequent punishment depends upon who takes the power from him.


8 In fact, Washington compellingly argues that the so-called Rape Laws in Deut 22, instead of offering protection to women, “are productive of violence; they render warfare and rape intelligible and acceptable, providing a means for people both to justify and endure violence” (Washington, “Lest He Die in the Battle,” 186–87).

9 Meir Sternberg suggests that the text instead of generating sympathy
issues of consent. But, at the same time, is “interrogating” the categories of women and gender not essential to fully understand the text? When reading with the historical-critical method, linguistic evidence is often at the center of investigations. In this vein, many feminist readings of this text have focused on the precise definition of the word "ענה" in 34:2. Traditionally and frequently this verb has been translated as “rape,” but many scholars, myself included, insist that "ענה" does not mean “rape.” The interpretations that perhaps Dinah was not “raped” span the spectrum from a teenage love affair between Dinah and Shechem, to a case of statutory rape, to a marriage by abduction. Is there even controversy here? Why is there a conversation about “not rape”? Should not this be anathema to our compassionate responses to sexual violence? All too often, the scholarly discussions about feminist perspectives are that they are incompatible with the historical-critical method. Historical scholars have a different set of limitations from feminist theological and literary scholars. But how can we leave it at, “That’s the way it was back then”? Nevertheless, the linguistic perspective seems to demand the inquiry; there is ambiguity concerning the acts of Shechem in Gen 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 ["ענה"].” All are waw consecutive forms. It is necessary to recognize the correct meaning of "ענה." Ellen van Wolde writes convincingly on the semantic range of "ענה" concluding that “the widespread opinion that the verb "ענה" in the piel refers to ‘rape’ or ‘sexual abuse’ is not acceptable.” Instead, she argues that it implies a downward social


10 Dolansky, “Rejecting ‘Patriarchy.’ ”
movement and should be translated as “debase.” The term denotes an act that debases another person. It covers a wide semantic field, but in all contexts, the term denotes the maltreatment of someone in a way that degrades or disgraces him or her. In non-sexual contexts, it is used to denote debasement in the form of harsh, abusive, and/or exploitative treatment.

Similarly, Washington states, “In Deuteronomy the word designates the sexual violation, or ‘misuse of,’ a woman (vv. 24, 29), but this is different from a recognition of the crime as an act of sexual violence against a woman.”

I agree that we should not translate it as rape, for the reasons above; still, of the thirteen instances of the verb in the piel 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 so as not to “debase” them (Gen 31:50), which would lessen their status and divide the inheritance of his grandsons. Sex is involved in these cases (taking surrogate or additional wives), but it is not the sex act itself that causes‐. In contrast, the other eleven occurrences all concern sex explicitly, often unwanted sex, but not necessarily what we would legally define as 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. Lipka states that “is always an act of sexual trespass, either against the woman or against her male guardians or, in some cases, a combination of the two,” but it is not concerned with sex by coercion. In seven of these eleven instances where appears, 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 rape of Tamar by Amnon (2 Sam 13).

There is also ambiguity in Gen 34:2 in the expression of the second verb, . The translation choice may be influenced by the

---

15 Lipka, Sexual Transgression, 87.
17 Interestingly, in his seminal concordance, Abraham Even-Shoshan does not even include these instances in the grouping of with as object (A. Even-Shoshan, A New Concordance of the Hebrew Bible [Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sefer, 1996], 902.)
18 For more, see Joseph, “Understanding Genesis 34:2”; also, Lipka, Sexual Transgression, 88–89.
19 Lipka, Sexual Transgression, 89.
20 Pamela Tamarkin Reis makes an interesting but unconvincing argument in which she suggests that Tamar is not raped by her brother Amnon and instead coyly encourages him in a miscalculated plan to marry the crown prince, in P.T. Reis, “Cupidity and Stupidity: Woman’s Agency and the ‘Rape’ of Tamar,” JANES 25 (1997), 43–60.
subsequent understanding of נָעָה and vice versa. In a violent reading of this narrative, נָעָה could mean “to abduct, take by force,” as translated by NRSV, NAB, NJB (“seized”), and the Vulgate. 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 לאָשָׁה. The meaning of נָעָה as “to take a wife” may be appropriate in the context of this story.

So what do we make of the linguistic evidence? On the one hand, we cannot precisely translate נָעָה as rape. Perhaps this makes our feminist readings even more difficult. Dinah has no agency, no subjectivity, she is less than a character, yet we have this narrative in which she is sexually violated. But on the other hand, by suggesting Dinah is not raped, are we further objectifying her, removing the only memorable and significant thing about her story? The historical-critical treatment of examples of sexual violence sometimes feel like attempts to rehabilitate the sexually violent aspects of the texts, which should be avoided. Feminists have long argued for a heightened attention to rape and its ramifications, including a sustained critique of the general treatment of victims of rape. A victim of rape often fears that her story will be minimized or denied and/or she will be blamed for inviting the violent assault.” In denying Dinah’s “rape,” do we silence her and other victims? At the same time, can we equate Dinah’s situation with that of so many other women? “Though an offense to Dinah’s family, the fact that Shechem has committed ‘innâ on Dinah does not—and cannot—carry with it the psychological and emotional implications for the woman that the contemporary notion of rape suggests.”

Dinah’s subrole in this narrative is in contrast to Tamar in 2 Sam 13. Scholars, among them Yair Zakovitch, have highlighted many similarities between the narratives. Like Dinah, Tamar is subject to the sexual and gender values of ancient Israel. Her power of sexual consent is much the same—nonexistent—but Tamar protests and refuses consent, even if it is not hers to give, articulating that the power of consent lies with her father, David. She says no, but her brother Amnon ignores her protest. In the Dinah story, the sex act is “offstage.” We know nothing of her attempt to refuse or submit,

---


23 Dolansky, “Rejecting ‘Patriarchy.’ ”

perhaps because it is irrelevant to the function of the story. The question “Is Dinah raped?” leaves us as feminist scholars in an uncomfortable situation—historically, we cannot call this rape, neither linguistically nor conceptually—but, we have taken away the only thing that happens to Dinah in the narrative, further objectifying her.

If “Is Dinah raped?” is not the right question for feminist historiography to ask, what is?25 Maybe it requires us to look at the function of this chapter within the larger Jacob narrative. The previous chapter details the tense reunion between Jacob and Esau, while in the following chapter, God changes Jacob’s name to Israel and reaffirms the promise. Chapters 33 and 35 could continue seamlessly without the Dinah interlude. Genesis 33 ends with Jacob’s arrival in Shechem, and chapter 35 begins with God telling him to set out for Bethel. The Rabbinic principle of שותספמוכת פּר, “proximity of topics,” may be helpful here. An explanation for Gen 34’s placement could be the Shechem connection.26 At the end of Gen 33, Jacob arrives in Shechem and here is a story about something that happened in Shechem. Or, perhaps, just as Gen 33 narrates the tense and questionably dangerous reunion between Jacob and Esau, Gen 34 represents another story with a potential threat to Jacob and family by foreigners that mostly turns out okay (for Jacob’s family). The story certainly seems not to be about gender. It does not tell us much about women in ancient Israel, except that they have no control over their sexuality, which we already knew.

Without getting into a long redactional conversation, along with many others, I read two levels of redaction in the story.27 The earlier version is focused on the shame that is brought to the house of Jacob because their daughter has been taken from them without the opportunity to give consent to her marriage. This shame can be reduced by marrying the victim to her perpetrator, as suggested by Shechem and Hamor, and similar to the laws in Deut 22:28–29 and Exod

---

25 Dolansky instead suggests a social-scientific inquiry: Why is the text not concerned with consent? (Dolansky, “Rejecting ‘Patriarchy’ ”).


22:15. A later, postexilic redaction is focused on the issue of intermarriage, consistent with the values expressed in Ezra-Nehemiah, in the attempt to define the people’s identity. The primary message and function of the final version is a didactic one to the reader—“Intermarriage, don’t do it!” The prohibition against intermarriage in this text is quite clear, setting up exogamy as a capital offense. The narrative intends to disabuse the returnees of the notion that intermarriage may have been permitted. Those who intermarry will be dealt with harshly—perhaps even with a violent massacre when they are at their weakest. Genesis 34 does not seem to condemn the brothers’ actions. Jacob does, both in 34:30, in an expression of concern for the safety of the clan but not for the disproportionate reaction to the wrong done Dinah, and in Gen 49:5–7, but the rebuke of Simeon and Levi is not directly connected to the Dinah story, nor do we need to assume any compositional connection between the two chapters.\(^{28}\) The absence of the narrator’s judgment in Gen 34 should be seen as a silent endorsement of their actions.

Is the better question, Why is the story of shame and honor and intermarriage told through this bad thing that happens to Dinah? Sexual violence against Dinah is only the pretense for the story, which is about intermarriage and ancient conflict with Shechemites. Language of defilement, belonging to a vocabulary of ritual purity, is applied to Dinah and what happens to her. The violent massacre at the conclusion of the story equates the defilement of Dinah to an act that requires capital punishment; Shechem should be killed for defiling their sister just as the adulterer is killed for defiling the wife of another man (Lev 18:20). The laws of war should be activated, heeding the warnings delivered in Josh 23:12: If you intermarry, “they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and

\(^{28}\) Furthermore, I view the singling out of Simeon and Levi among the brothers in Gen 34:25 as a later addition to the text, likely a literary response to their treatment in Jacob’s blessing in Gen 49:5–7. That text is an example of archaic biblical poetry, pre-dating Gen 34 (N. Pat-El and A. Wilson-Wright, “Features of Archaic Biblical Poetry and the Linguistic Dating Debate,” Hebrew Studies 54 [2013], 387–410, esp. 406, 409–10; A. Gianto, “Archaic Biblical Hebrew,” in W.R. Garr and S.E. Fassberg [eds.], A Hand-book of Biblical Hebrew, 2 vols. [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016], 1:19–29; 2:5). In the context of Jacob’s blessing, the punishment of Simeon and Levi, has no specific explanation: “Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords . . . in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.” The violence is not explicitly connected to the event at Shechem in Gen 34. Emphasizing the role of Simeon and Levi in Gen 34, two of Dinah’s full brothers, in the massacre of Shechem, gives context to the unexplained curse in Gen 49. The influence does not need to be read in both directions; the curse of Simeon and Levi is not an explicit negative judgment of their actions in Gen 34. To be clear, the treatment of Simeon and Levi in archaic Gen 49 influences Gen 34, but not the reverse.
thorns in your eyes.” The story in Gen 34 is one of a proposed and violently rejected marriage alliance. Hamor suggests (and his men agree to) connubium, that they intermarry, become as one people, share their land, property, and livestock. In doing so, he agrees to erase any differences between the two peoples, even physical ones (i.e., circumcision). The offense is his suggestion of intermarriage, the hithpael of חתן, rather than Shechem’s unauthorized sex with Dinah. The brothers reject the alliance and see the threat to their uniqueness as a people as a declaration of war or as foreigners trying to turn them toward idol worship. As such, the brothers engage the rules of holy war in their vengeance.29

A historical question here relating to gender may be one about whether the prohibitions against intermarriage only apply to cases of Israelite men and foreign women, or if they apply to Israelite women as well. In a theoretical context, the prohibition is egalitarian, imposed on both Israelite men and women. In Ezra 9, after the description of the return from exile and the rebuilding and rededication of the temple, the people are reminded not to intermarry with the local peoples—the people who defiled the land with their transgression. The prohibition stated in Ezra 9:12 includes not giving their daughters to the peoples of the land, as well as not taking foreign daughters for Israelite sons—likewise, Deut 7:3, Neh 10:31 and 13:25. Yet, the most prominent stories that illustrate the prohibition are focused on the mixing of Israelite men and foreign women. In Ezra, the offense is so great it is a warning not only about future behaviors, but also that the men who took foreign wives while in exile must put them off. Similarly, the apostasy of Solomon in 1 Kgs 11 is directly related to his marrying foreign women and their ability to sway him from complete loyalty to Yahweh. Also, in Num 25:1–5, the episode at Peor, the men begin having sex with Moabite women; Moses calls on the judges of Israel to kill anyone who has yoked themselves to Baal Peor (v. 5). These examples make clear that the concern is primarily about Israelite men and foreign women; the charge is their seductive ability to sway good Israelites away from Yahweh.

The threat of foreign women is a construct against which male Israelite identity is defined. They must stay away from foreign women, who do not guard their sexuality and will lead the men astray. Foreign women are seen as dangerous, and Israelite women who act like foreigners should also be regarded as dangerous. In the Hebrew Bible, a woman is only considered good if her sexuality is controlled. This leads to the regulation of women’s behavior to reduce the threat of women’s sexuality. It has been argued, in other contexts, that the threat of physical harm is one way that men control women.30

30 J.C. Exum, “Feminist Criticism: Whose Interests Are Being Served?”
While the concern with the intermarriage of Israelite women to foreign men appears as primarily theoretical and legalistic, the Dinah story demonstrates that it could be a serious concern and poses a dangerous threat to Israelite identity. The rhetoric against intermarriage is necessary because earlier biblical traditions allow for it. In the patriarchal narratives, Abraham, Judah, and Joseph all marry foreign women with no censure. Similarly, Moses’s marriage to a foreigner is only criticized by his brother and sister and embedded within a jealousy-infused greater charge, for which they are rebuked. Genesis 34 is a cautionary tale; it should not be tolerated that the daughters of Israel, and specifically this daughter of Israel, marry foreign men. In order to prevent it, drastic and perhaps violent measures must be taken.

“Is Dinah raped?” is not the right question because our modern definition of rape does not exist in ancient Israel, and the contextual understandings of ענה do not support it, but furiously arguing that this narrative is not rape further demeans Dinah, while the focus of the narrative is not on her. Still, we are left with the question of what to do with this conversation and the story. I understand the feminist tendency to look to female characters in the Hebrew Bible, the desire to either valorize or victimize them, especially since the text itself often does one or the other. The traditional and even modern readings of this narrative do Dinah no favors. Second Temple interpretations glorify Simeon and Levi for their zealotry, further writing Dinah out of the story. The rabbis accuse her of bringing it on herself, having left the camp of Israel (v. 1), a well-known trope of “she shouldn’t have been walking alone” (Gen. Rab. 80:1). Susanne Scholz, in an interesting feminist cultural study of Gen 34, chronicles the nineteenth-century German, male, scholarly approaches that minimize or deny the rape, more concerned with the brothers’ actions and/or Shechem’s love for Dinah. Similarly, in her critique of the Red Tent, Adriane Leveen, argues that “Diamant turns the rape of Dinah into a love story. Thus the rapist of the biblical text becomes the hapless lover, himself a victim” creating a situation in which feminists who “have long argued for a heightened attention to rape and its ramification, including a sustained critique of the general treatment of victims of rape. A victim of rape often fears that her story will be minimized or denied and/or she will be blamed for inviting the violent assault.”

The linguistic understandings of ענה and the historically contextualized perspectives on women’s sexuality in ancient Israel (as discussed above) eliminate rape from the narrative. There is a limit


32 Leveen, “A Tent of One’s Own,” 94.
to how feminist historiography can approach the text. We cannot conjure historical details where there are none. Dinah has no voice; we cannot invent one for her. We cannot definitively say what happened to Dinah or what might have constituted rape in ancient Israel. Instead, feminist historians can contextualize lacunae between cultural (and temporal) differences. We can ask other historical questions, such as: Why did the author use violence to establish Israelite identity? Why is the prohibition against intermarriage told through the sexual violation of Dinah? And, is the prohibition evenly applied to Israelite women and foreign men, as well as Israelite men and foreign women? Why is consent not a concern for these ancient writers?

These questions, as well as recognition of our historical-critical limits, are personally disturbing. Do we as feminists have a social responsibility to empower women’s voices as regards sexual violence that even from the lens of historical-critical scholarship we cannot get around? The sexual violence in the Bible, as well as Greco-Roman literature, has contributed to the normalizing of rape and the development of rape culture. In an age of #MeToo, are these biblical stories adding more examples of women who are literally and literally unheard and ignored? How do we, not only as scholars but often as responsible teachers, present this material on college campuses where sexual assault and the failure to address it sufficiently is rampant? What is the pedagogical impact if we remove rape from the narrative, does this sanction a pervasive rape culture? Is it socially responsible to conclude with these historically supported readings without regard for their contemporary impact? My answer: Yes, we can do feminist historiography, we can use the critical tools of the historical approach—linguistics, archaeology, contextual readings—but we have ethical obligations beyond the historical-critical method.

---