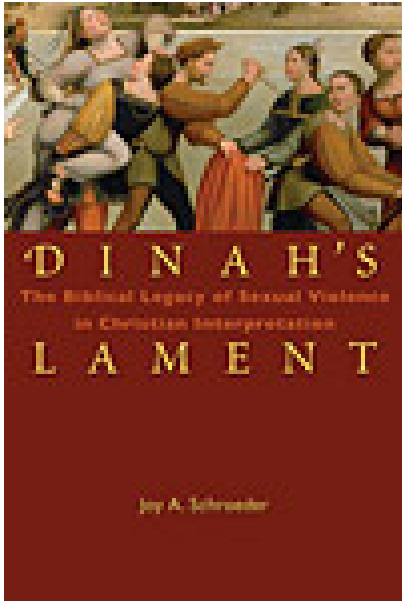


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**Schroeder, Joy A.**

***Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation***

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Two years ago, a scandal erupted in Australia following the publication of remarks by Sheikh Taj el-Dene Elhilaly, Australia's leading Muslim cleric, justifying a series of gang rapes committed by Arab men in Australia. He blamed the victims for what happened, because they had not had covered their bodies according to the tenets of Islam. In his words: "If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden or in the park, or in the backyard without a cover, and the cats come and eat it, ... whose fault is it: the cat's or the uncovered meat? The uncovered meat is the problem."

*Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation*, by Joy A. Schroeder, brought that episode to mind, because one of the key topics discussed in the book is the tendency to blame the victim, that is, the woman who is raped. This evidently exists in all three of the monotheistic religions, because it can also be found in ancient Jewish texts I looked at in my study of biblical accounts of rape.

Schroeder's book is an erudite, meticulous, and for the most part fascinating production (although the detailed enumeration of the very similar views of many scholars can become tedious). The book examines the way in which Christian works in various genres, dating from the early church period, Middle Ages, and Reformation—roughly between

150 and 1600—deal with biblical narratives about sexual violence. In particular, it shows how commentators brought their own cultural assumptions to the text. I was particularly interested in the responses of women who endeavored to defend their sex against male attempts to restrict their freedom (e.g., the seventeenth-century Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti) or to blame them for sexual predation against them (Tarabotti again, as well as Marguerite of Navarre in the sixteenth century, who vigorously rejected the assertion that women enjoy being raped). Sometimes, to complete the picture, Schroeder cites the views of contemporary feminist commentators as well.

Chapter 1, “Fallen Virgin, Violated Daughter: The Rape of Dinah (Genesis 34),” reviews the extensive use of that story, starting with St. Jerome (fourth century), for purposes of gender construction: teaching women to remain in the private sphere and to avoid the dangers lurking in the public sphere. The indictments of Dinah were couched in various ways. Reflecting the formerly widespread belief that a woman could not be raped against her will, some accused her of cooperating with her assailant. But even commentators who believe that she was forcibly violated accused her of causing her own catastrophe by going out alone to visit the daughters of the land. She is castigated for her curiosity; in allegorical exegesis she represents the curious, wandering soul that, when it departs from its sheltered abode, is corrupted by Satan and brings disaster on itself and its surroundings.

Chapter 2: “Virgin and Martyr: Rape Threat Narratives and Divine Protection,” looks at the figure who is the antithesis of Dinah: the early Christian virgin martyr who preserves her chastity at all costs. In general, these stories convey the message that pure women are the beneficiaries of divine protection that preserves them from sexual assault (although not from torture and death). Here we encounter the notion that being raped contaminates the victim’s soul; consequently, a woman must sacrifice her life to safeguard her virginity. Augustine, by contrast, maintained that the rape victim remains pure in body and soul. Particularly interesting is the reference to Marguerite of Navarre’s *Heptameron*, where some of the stories illustrate that pure women may be raped even though they resist their assailant with all their might.

The third chapter, “Dismembering the Adulteress: The Levite’s Concubine (Judges 19),” cites the many commentators who see the concubine’s gang rape as divine punishment for her infidelity. The chapter also reviews diverse opinions as to whether it is proper to abandon women to certain rape, as in this story and that of Lot (Gen 19). Many believed that one may consent to a lesser evil in order to avert a greater evil; consequently, in this situation women may be sacrificed to save men, given that sexual intercourse with a woman is “natural” but homosexual relations are not. It follows, as Schroeder shows, that “attention to categories of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ often overshadowed issues of

violence” (149). But she also quotes Augustine and Martin Luther, who held that Lot was wrong to offer his daughters to the mob and that protecting one’s guests cannot justify betraying one’s daughters.

Unlike the story of Dinah, the episode of the concubine of Gibeah was almost never used to teach women their place. An exception is the fourteenth-century French nobleman Geoffroy de la Tour Landry, who drew on the story to warn his daughters against the consequences that may ensue if an angry woman leaves her husband (this may be compared to the seventh lesson that Gersonides, slightly earlier, had derived from the concluding chapters of the book of Judges: that a woman must patiently bear her husband’s abuse and never leave him, lest she bring down disaster on herself and on others). It is instructive to see how Geoffroy and others describe the Levite—whom I see as one of the most repulsive characters in the entire Bible—as a noble and moral man who went to retrieve his concubine out of concern for her soul!

Chapter 4, “Violated Sister: The Tears of Tamar (2 Samuel 13),” shows how some pointed an accusing finger even at women whom the Bible clearly presents as blameless, such as Tamar. Calvin, for example, condemned Tamar for daring to suggest to Amnon that he ask the king for her hand in marriage, even though they were half-siblings. He saw Tamar as “squatting in her filth,” more concerned with her good name than with a clean conscience. He even denounced as hypocrisy her desire to identify her assailant in public and prove her innocence, maintaining that she ought not to have done so. No less revolting are the allegorical or tropological readings of the story that praise Amnon for throwing Tamar out of doors after the rape. Tamar, according to these commentaries, represents sin, while Amnon is the sinner who loathes his transgression after committing it.

The fifth chapter, “The Treacherous Speech of Potiphar’s Wife and the Silence of Susanna (Genesis 39 and Daniel 13),” focuses on commentators’ attitude toward the female voice: distrust of a woman who cries that she has been raped, in contrast to praise for a woman who remains mute and makes no attempt to defend herself against her accusers (Susanna). As Schroeder shows, since Jerome, who maintained that Susanna’s great exclamation was heard by the Lord and not by human beings, her voice has been stifled in Christian exegesis, which read her cry as a silent prayer to God. Some interpreters even assert that a woman who is assaulted should remain silent and trust in the Lord, just as Christ did not answer the charges made against him. Some employed the story of Susanna in support of the idea that rape victims must not publicly accuse their assailant: if a woman is truly chaste, the Lord will find a way to punish her attacker.

Chapter 6, “Portrayals of Sexual Violence in Medieval Christian Art,” discusses the treatment of biblical rape stories by visual artists. The violent dimension that is generally played down in written commentaries on these stories is, by contrast, expressed in several paintings, reproductions of which are accompanied by the author’s explanations.

To conclude, I would like to focus on two of the book’s insights about the link between an original text and its interpreters. Schroeder shows how personal experience can influence a commentator’s stance. Luther, for example, who had daughters, understood Dinah’s need for female companionship and identified with the pain of her father, Jacob. Abelard, whose painful history (he was castrated by Heloise’s male relatives) has something in common with Shechem’s, has Dinah utter a lament (whence the title of the book) in which she mourns for Shechem and blames herself and her brothers for his bitter fate. That is, the voice that speaks in the lament is not that of the rape victim but the poet’s, who identifies with her assailant, Shechem.

Schroeder also looks at the political use made of biblical stories. For example, the reformist theologian Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) exploited the tale of the concubine of Gibeah to condemn the Roman Church, in which, he asserted, sodomy was rife (a common theme in Protestant literature of the time). The story of the rape of Tamar was used to condemn monks and priests for their sexual exploitation of women (by understanding “brother” in its religious sense). Various commentators employed the rape stories to deter women from dancing. When the concubine of Gibeah is invoked in this context (by Vermigli), the link is plain (the daughters of Shiloh were abducted while dancing in the vineyards), but the same use is made of Dinah (by the Swabian Reformer Johannes Brenz [1499–1570]) and of Tamar (by Calvin, who applies the story to warn against dancing and fashionable clothes).

One criticism I would make of the book is that it fails to draw a clear distinction between the view of the Bible, the views of Christian interpreters, and the views of modern readers. For example, Schroeder criticizes the idea that Tamar was raped on account of David’s sin (1 Sam 11): “For many readers of our day, one of the more shocking claims may be certain statements about the Deity’s role in this narrative” (155); “Calvin’s deity is one who punishes a man through the rape of his daughter” (179).

But does this idea (already advanced by the talmudic sages [b. Yoma 22b]) really have no basis in the text? In the biblical order, the Lord does indeed “visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Exod 34:7 *et passim*). David’s wives, too, suffered on account of his sin with Bathsheba, by divine decree (2 Sam 12:11; 16:20–23; 20:3). The analogy between the rape of Tamar and David’s seduction of Bathsheba has led modern scholars, too, to conclude

that the Bible presents the former as David's punishment for the latter (see, e.g., Shimeon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* [Sheffield, 1989], 281–82). Thus the Christian commentators surveyed and criticized by Schroeder do seem to be reflecting the Bible's own perspective, even if it is remote from the author's, and her criticism of them is unjustified.

On the other hand, in the case of Potiphar's wife, Schroeder accepts the misogynist reading of the story and maintains that the tale teaches that "women are sexually aggressive and untrustworthy" (192). In fact, the biblical text does not target all females, only a specific foreign woman, an Egyptian (a member of a race that the Bible depicts as wanton and licentious).

Despite this criticism, I would certainly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in feminist biblical criticism or in the interaction between interpreters and the original text.