

The Lost Voice of Dinah

A Jewish Perspective by Dalia Marx
and a Christian Response by Ursula Rudnick

„Every schoolboy knows today that Jacob had twelve sons, some even know their names by heart –whereas large circles of the population are unaware that the unhappy little Dinah ever existed, and when she is mentioned display surprise,” (99) states Thomas Mann in his novel *Joseph and His Brothers*, published in Berlin in 1933. In the meantime, while the names of the sons of Jacob have become less well- known among Christians in Germany, little has changed with respect to Dinah. The story of Dinah is hardly known to members of my congregation, and only few pastoral colleagues know of its existence. The story of Dinah is not part of the liturgical reading order on Sundays or other occasions during the year.

Let us look at the story: “Now Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the land; and when Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he seized her and lay with her and [he] humbled her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob; he loved the maiden and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, Get me this maiden for my wife.” (Gen. 34.1-3)

The reader stumbles: What is this? A love story? Or is this the report of a rape? It all depends on how the words “and [he] humbled her” are interpreted. Most English and German translators and exegetes interpret the Hebrew word *Vaye'aneha* in the sense that Shechem uses force and acts violently towards Dinah. Recent translations openly speak of “rape.” This translation is also chosen by the Hebrew Bible scholar Susanne Scholz who reflects on this question at length.¹

How does the story continue? When Jacob learns of the rape of his daughter, he keeps silent. He does not show any emotion: neither empathy for Dinah nor anger toward Shechem. Her brothers react differently: they become angry.

Hamor, Shechem's father, goes to Jacob and asks him to give Dinah as a wife to his son. He invites Jacob to settle down, conduct trade and intermarry with the Hivites. Jacob and his sons consent on the condition that all the Hivite men get circumcised. Hamor speaks to the men and convinces them with the argument: “Will not their cattle, their property and all their beasts be ours?” (Gen. 34.23)

The Hivites undergo the circumcision. While they are still weak from the operation, Simeon and Levi move into the Hivite dwelling and slaughter all the men. Their brothers then join them in plundering the city.

Jacob reproaches his sons Simeon and Levi: “You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land... But they said: “Should he treat our sister as a harlot?” (Gen. 34. 30-31)

Of the 31 verses forming chapter 34 in the book of Genesis, only the first two verses talk about Dinah. The following 29 verses speak of Shechem, his feelings, the negotiations of his father with Jacob and his sons, the deliberations of the Hivites, their circumcision and their murder. At the end, the reader learns of Jacob’s reaction and his sons` response.

A common interpretation of this story is given by Claus Westermann, who sees it as an exemplification of the divine instruction expressed in Deut. 7: “When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you are entering ... you shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons.” (Deut. 7.1-3).²

Often the focus - be it of a scholarly exegesis or a literary exposition – rests on Shechem. This is also the case in the novel of Thomas Mann. Shechem falls in love with Dinah during a wine-harvest-celebration. Subsequently Hamor, Shechem’s father, goes to Jacob to ask for Dinah as a wife for Shechem. Jacob and his sons consent on the condition that Shechem gets circumcised. Shechem consents, is circumcised and comes to fetch his wife. “A week later he was back, scarcely healed, still inconvenienced by his sacrifice, but radiating confidence.” (111) Jacob’s sons tell him that the circumcision was not done in the appropriate way and they refuse to let Dinah become his wife. „Then there was the end of his patience... He gave vent to a curse... and rushed away. Four days later Dinah disappeared.“ (112)

Sichem (another spelling of Shechem) had abducted her: „... and Sichem held in haste his much desired nuptials, against which she made no particular resistance. She was an insignificant thing, very yielding, without judgement or power of resistance. Whatever happened to her, provided it was vigorous and unequivocal, she took as natural and right: And Sichem did her no violence, quite the contrary...” (113) Thomas Mann depicts Dinah as an insignificant creature without a will of her own, a characterization that is typical of many Christian interpretations of Biblical women far into the 20th century.

Feminist exegetes and thinkers have analyzed and criticized the patriarchal world of the Bible. They demand a creative reconstruction of the past. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorzena points out that it was not the feminist philosophers or theologians who started this project, but the poets and writers.³

Due to the work of feminist scholars, such as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fioreza, gender has become an important category of Biblical hermeneutics. Thus, it is impossible to ignore the silence of Dinah. Neither her thoughts nor her emotions are described in the Bible. She remains silent. We do not know what she thought or felt. Was it a mutual love story as Anita Diamant (author of *The Red Tent*) imagines? Or was it a case of sexual abuse, a man of the dominant society raping an immigrant woman? We will never know for sure.

Silence often is a reaction of the victims of sexual abuse, even today. And to this very day, sexual abuse is often a taboo in religious communities. It is only in the recent past that Christian congregations have begun to face the sexual abuse occurring in our midst.

What makes it difficult to talk about and deal with this crime? Fratricide, war and the cruel death of crucifixion are themes of Sunday sermons, yet sexual abuse is hardly ever the focus. Why? Because the victims of sexual abuse are mainly – and not necessarily correctly – perceived to be women? Or: because the sermon is supposed to uplift, rather than to confront us with sexual violence? Or: because it would put an end to the myth that sexual abuse does not happen in Christian congregations?

In the late 1980's a button with the words: "Silence =Death" surfaced first in New York and spread quickly to Europe. It related to Aids and the necessity to talk about the disease. Silence equals death. This sentence is true also with regard to Dinah. In our reading and our memory of her, a blank space remains.

All we can do to fill this blank space is to imagine her voice. Thus, I chose the lament of a woman who experienced sexual abuse:

Do you know how many tears have never been shed?
Do you know how many tears I have shed?
I do not know how many unshed tears I still have.
I do not know how many tears have been wiped away
-without you.
God, how many times have I cried out to heavenHave you listened?
How often did I wait that finally a cry would burst from heaven, from you, God.
But you did not answer with the sound of trumpets - You answered in silence, - God.
Still, I hoped for an out-cry, at long last: for mine, for yours.God, if you do not cry out, when

things here on earth cry to heaven, and when words do not enough to express the pain, please never stop to cry in silence with us. Amen 4

Response to Dalia by Ursula Rudnick

My heart prefers to see a love story between Dinah and Sichem, rather than having to face a story of rape.

Although I have taken another road in the interpretation, our texts have two aspects in common. Each of us points out how this story has been used in patriarchal to depreciate women to the present day - and each of us gives a voice to Dina.

I am delighted when I learn of interpretations that find ways to continue the story that lessen the harshness of the Biblical text.

As you point out, there are many women and also some men who have been doing this. There are a number of Jewish and Christian scholars who have interpreted this text in the last decade. And thus, they – and also we -are “enriching the vocal choral of our tradition and challenge the hegemonic conception of the Book of Books.”

Slowly Christians are learning that a symphony of interpretations contributes to a richer and deeper understanding of the Scripture.

And most important: Being in dialogue with you, Dalia, I see in what ways each of our communities are special with challenges of their own: thank you!

¹ Susanne Scholz. “What „Really“ Happened to Dinah. A Feminist Analysis of Genesis 34.” In: *Lectio Difficilior* 2/2001. www.lectio.unibe.ch/01_2/s.pdf

² Claus Westermann. *Genesis*. 2. Teilband. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981. 663.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. *In Memory of Her. A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. 29

⁴ Diese Klage einer Frau fand ich auf der Internetseite Gewaltüberlebende Christinnen & Christen *GottesSuche* Glaube nach Gewalterfahrungen unter www.Gottessuche.de; anonymen Eintrag im Gästebuch vom 28.11.2009.