

The Defilement of Dinah and the Disproportionate Response

(Genesis 34)

Genesis 34 allows the student of Genesis to engage with the source of morality, victimization, applying the principle of proportionality of punishment, and what a Christian response is when one is a victim of a crime. After twenty years of separation, Jacob and Esau reconcile, and Jacob settles in the city of Shechem, having bought a piece of land from Hamor, Shechem's father. There, Jacob erected an altar and worshipped God, the God of Israel. Then, the nightmare of a lifetime happened. This chapter contains one of the more disturbing stories in the entire Bible. In chapter 34, there isn't a single mention of Yahweh (LORD) or Elohim (God). He is present but absent. Dinah, the daughter of Leah and the only daughter of Jacob, visits the women of the city of Shechem. During this visit, Shechem rapes her. He "saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her" (v. 2-3). She became the victim of sexual assault. He claimed to love her and demanded that his father get Dinah to be his wife. What was an appropriate punishment? Can she marry a Hivite?

Having found out that someone raped Dinah, her brothers declare that what happened to Dinah was an "outrageous" thing that should not have happened. Why are they very angry and indignant (v. 7)? By what authority could they claim this was wrong? What transgression of the law had occurred? At this point, Deuteronomy 22 had not been written. Yet the brothers know what Shechem has done is morally wrong. How do they? They know this is morally wrong because God wrote the works of the law on the hearts of all humans (see Rom 2). The conscience of the brothers declared raping their sister was wrong despite the absence of a societal law. Jacob gives no guidance as to what must or must not be done. So, the sons of Leah, in particular, take matters into their own hands. They deceitfully convince Hamor and Shechem that if they and all the men of the city are circumcised, they will give Dinah to be the wife of Shechem (is that why she is staying with Shechem v. 26?), and intermarriage can begin between them and the Hivites. They agree and are circumcised. Ironically, Hamor and Shechem motivate the men to be circumcised through greed (v. 23).

Three days later, when the men are sore, Levi and Simeon enter the city with swords in hand and execute ALL the males. You read that correctly: all the males, including Hamor and Shechem. They rescue Dinah. And the rest of the brothers plunder the city (v. 27). "They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered" (v. 28-29). This story is a case study of the principle of proportionality of punishment. Dinah was already a victim. Now, the males murdered are victims (except Shechem, or is he?), and the women and children are victims like Dinah. The failure to limit Shechem's punishment to what is proportionate to what he did led to hundreds of men, women, and children being victimized. Nothing in the text indicates this was a judgment from God like Sodom and Gomorrah.

After 25 verses of Jacob's silence, he finally speaks up. "You have brought trouble on me...I shall be destroyed, both I and my household" (v. 30). To which the brothers respond, "Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?" Then, Genesis 35 begins with nothing more recorded about the massacre until Genesis 49:5-7. Here are the highlights. Jacob says, "Simeon and Levi are brothers: weapons of violence are their swords...in their anger they killed men...cursed be their anger, for it is fierce and their wrath, for it is cruel." Jacob knew what they did was wrong. We all know the punishment must fit the crime. It must be proportionate. God gave us Exodus 21:23-25: "But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." What the brothers did was far more outrageous. The same moral compass that told them what happened to their sister was wrong failed them (or was it ignored?) in determining what an appropriate response was to the crime Shechem committed. Without a higher moral authority present (i.e., law enforcement), the brothers had to regulate their own behavior. For the unsaved, the Torah communicates principles of proportionality of punishment in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. If you damage my car, I won't torch your house. Instead, I may insist that you pay for the damages. "Eye for eye" ensures the punishment is not more or less than what should be applied. What was his "eye for an eye"?

But for the genuine follower of Christ, everything is different. Christ calls us to a higher standard of conduct. We forgive. We love our enemies. We turn the other cheek. We don't respond in kind. If you tell me to "go to ____." I don't tell you the same. Read the Sermon on the Mount (Mat 5-7). Forgiving does not mean we don't pursue justice, but we never take matters of justice into our own hands. We appeal to the God-ordained justice system and understand that vengeance is God's; He will repay (Rom 12:19). Finally, when we must decide someone's punishment, we follow life for life, eye for an eye, seeking to issue a punishment that is proportionate to the wrong done.