

sions about what the Bible teaches is an indispensable part of how we use the Bible. No one comes to the Bible with a blank slate. We come instead with a host of presuppositions and habits of mind, some conscious and deliberate, others products of culture, family, denomination, and our personal fallenness and finitude. The same was true of the classic commentators of the Christian past.

One of the dividing factors in this conversation about the Bible and gender roles derives from a disagreement about history and its complexity. There are diverse ways to understand history, especially the nature of the Bible as a historical book. One of the most contentious points is whether the Bible, especially the New Testament, ought to be read as perfectly homogenous or whether the Gospels and Epistles arise from a primitive church that was somewhat diverse in its experiences and practices. Insisting on an original homogeneity will force some sort of showdown between the accounts of women teaching or prophesying and the strictures against women teaching. Yet the historical reality of the early church may have embraced both without dissolving either, perhaps in ways we can, at best, conjecture.

Some Christians abhor such lack of resolution for the uncertainty it seems to impart to the Bible. As one recent writer has put it, "If Scripture does not mean what people have taken it to mean for centuries, then the Bible is obscure, and, due to its lack of clarity, it cannot possess the authority it once had."⁷⁷ Actually, the doctrine of Scripture's *clarity* usually focuses specifically on its message about salvation from sin, and it is generally conceded that not all passages of Scripture are equally clear or have equal bearing on the message of redemption.⁷⁸ With respect to the texts we have surveyed in this chapter, the musings and hesitations of many traditional commentators regarding the limitations of Paul's arguments and conclusion might suggest that these texts are, in fact, neither perfectly clear nor easy to apply. Fortunately, these are not matters that bear on salvation. And just as fortunately, as traditional commentators themselves also acknowledged, behind these matters lie guiding principles — decency and order, faith and love — that *are* clear to all

Chapter Nine

Reading Sex and Violence

Dinah, Bathsheba, Tamar, and Too Many Others

Preachers never really want to preach on rape or adultery, do they? On a Sunday morning, to a congregation of families? Certainly the lectionary, once again, does not let us down: of the stories of Dinah, the Levite's wife, Bathsheba, and Tamar, only Bathsheba appears in the three-year cycle of readings. Of course *she* would: the story of David's rebuke by Nathan the prophet and of how David came to be the father of Solomon by Bathsheba — tied as it is to the classic penitential psalm, Psalm 51 — is simply too important and too extensive to omit. But these other women remain neglected.

The decision is not too hard to understand. Sooner or later the exposition will have to address — or sidestep — explicit deeds of sex and violence. The potential for awkwardness or embarrassment is high, as is the potential for witless disaster. A former student told me of her experience in a preaching class, in which a male classmate read the entire narrative of the incestuous rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon, dwelling on the narrative at length and in detail, only to wind up with this unlikely lesson: *How wonderful that the love of Jesus is so unlike the love of Amnon!* This student preacher had no inkling that his gratuitous retelling of Tamar's rape had scratched open a classmate's memory of her own abusive brothers. His breathless discovery that "Jesus is better than Amnon" only underscored his own insensitivity to the sort of scarring that sexual abuse brings

How should such texts be read and appropriated? Are they simply too painful to read? Or might it be better to say that they are too powerful, precisely in their painfulness, to be used by *beginners*?

When Desire Leads to Violence

The stories of the four women named above are, without a doubt, disturbing details in the history of salvation. Each of these women is caught up in violence stemming from the men who desire them. In Genesis 34, young Dinah goes out to visit the women of the land and ends up raped and nearly married, only to witness the slaughter of Hamor and Shechem at the hands of her treacherous brothers. The Levite's wife in Judges 19 is on the way home with her husband when he surrenders her to the townsmen of Gibeah, who would have preferred to rape him but settled for raping her — over and over, until she was dead. In 2 Samuel 11, while her husband is off at war, Bathsheba is espied and bedded by King David. When David fails to pin her pregnancy on Uriah, he arranges Uriah's battlefield death. In 2 Samuel 13, David's son Amnon sets a trap to seduce his half-sister Tamar, whom he conquers by force only to reject her afterwards in contempt. David's anger with Amnon leads only to his inaction, but Tamar's brother Absalom eventually exacts a lethal vengeance.

Just as the stories about Jephthah's daughter and Gomer elicited poignant responses from contemporary feminists, so also have these tales. We need not review all the details here; the questions should be familiar by now.¹ These women are scarcely actors: instead, they are acted upon. As daughters and wives, they are assumed to belong to fathers and husbands, subject to the control of men. When that control is endangered or contested, chaos among men breaks out and the storyline leaves the women behind, damaged or dead. Yet the Bible says enough about these women for some readers to care about them and wonder about their feelings and fate. What happened to them? Why did they receive such raw treatment? Did anyone speak on their behalf or remember them? Because the Bible itself says nothing about such matters, feminist readers feel constrained to speak on their behalf. But such readers have another concern, too, equally urgent: why is it that even modern commentaries compound the injury to these women not merely by continuing to neglect them but also by adding insult? Dinah, for example, is faulted for the foolish curiosity that led her

from the safety of her father's home; Bathsheba is accused of exhibitionism when bathing.² It's bad enough that Scripture is so silent about these women, but why fill the silences by blaming the victims? Are there better patterns for interpreters to follow?

Reading between Sympathy and Suspicion

The task of the present chapter is not to offer extensive surveys of Dinah, the Levite's wife, Bathsheba, and Tamar in the history of biblical interpretation. Instead, we'll focus strategically on a topic they all have in common: *sex*, as complicated in diverse ways by *violence* or subtler forms of coercion. Today, we tend to speak of *non-consensual sex*, a modern label that not only includes rape but might also cover David's adultery with Bathsheba. Admittedly, some have questioned just how much or what sort of coercion Bathsheba faced; a few have raised similar questions about Dinah. But there is no doubt that the Levite's wife and Tamar were unwilling victims, and it is hard to imagine that any of these women were initiators of premeditated acts.

How, then, did traditional commentators read these stories? How did they address the various misdeeds and crimes recorded in these biblical texts? Whatever else one might say about patristic, medieval, and Reformation interpreters, they were intensely interested in *morality*, particularly as the Bible might be applied to the needs of their readers and hearers. But in these stories, as in so many other passages we have examined, the obvious crimes are accompanied also by obvious *silences* — the details that were not recorded and the behavior that cries out for explanation and motive. It's common for preachers today to fill out a sermon on such texts by filling in the silences. So, how did these early writers fill them?

As we will see, traditional exegetes could be as suspicious of these women as the modern commentators alluded to earlier. But there are seeds of sympathy to be found, too. We will proceed by looking individually at these four women and their stories, concentrating on points of exegesis that have been the most provocative.

Did Dinah Have Only Herself to Blame?

Although the entire chapter of Genesis 34 describes the aftermath of Shechem's rape of Dinah, there are principally three questions that bear on Dinah herself. First, what was the moral significance, if any, of her "going out" in v. 1? Second, while Shechem is explicitly described as smitten with Dinah, was there any reciprocity, or only violation? Third, what finally happened to Dinah? Was she forgotten?

Early Worries about Dinah

Of these three questions, the first is utterly dominant. By blithely "going out" from the safety of her father's house, only to find catastrophe in the person of the first man she met, Dinah offered an uncomplicated lesson that few commentators (all of them men, and often brothers and fathers) could resist. This moral is drawn by the earliest writers. It appears in the midrash on Genesis, which repeatedly intones "Dinah went out" as the explanation for each detail of the catastrophe — and as a link to Eve's immodesty, Sarah's eavesdropping, and other instances of implicitly low or immoral female traits.³ Clearly, women have no place "going out" from home, where they are protected by men, and bad things happen when they do. Jerome does not appear to have derived this lesson from his rabbinic sources, but his view scarcely differs. In 384, in his long letter of advice to Eustochium on the disciplines of virginity, Jerome used Dinah to warn Christian virgins against public life:

Ever let the privacy of your chamber guard you; ever let the Bridegroom sport with you within . . . Go not from home nor visit the daughters of a strange land, though you have patriarchs for brothers and Israel for a father. Dinah went out and was seduced. Do not seek the Bridegroom in the streets. ⁴

As this "lesson" grew over time, Dinah's character declined. A key contributor here was Pope Gregory I, who in 591 wrote an immensely influential book on pastoral care. In a passage on admonishing penitent sinners against overconfidence, he read Dinah allegorically:

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Commonly [our] crafty foe, when he sees the soul which he trips up by sin to be afflicted for its fall, seduces it by the blandishments of baneful security. [This] is figuratively expressed in the history of Dinah. . . . For indeed Dinah goes out to see the women of a foreign land when any soul, neglecting its own concerns and giving heed to the actions of others, wanders forth out of its own proper condition and order. And Sichem, prince of the country, overpowers it inasmuch as the devil corrupts it . . . so that the soul, seduced by these deceptions, may be suspended from its purpose of penitence . . . [and] even rejoices in its transgressions.⁵

For Jerome, Dinah was just an example of carelessness. For Gregory, she came to symbolize a whole series of vices that lead to destruction. Gregory's allegory also imputes to Dinah a degree of consent in this seduction: what else could be meant when Dinah (the careless penitent) comes to "rejoice in its transgressions"?

Later commentators echoed Gregory, often verbatim, and his allegory was enshrined in the *Ordinary Gloss* — that twelfth-century collection of patristic comments on the Bible that was still popular in the sixteenth century. Other medieval writers added to Gregory's depiction of Dinah. Bernard of Clairvaux, in a treatise on pride and humility, identified the first downward step as *curiosity*, often marked by wandering eyes. He cited three examples: Eve, Satan, and Dinah

O Dinah, you wanted to see the foreign women! Was it necessary? Was it profitable? Or did you do it solely out of curiosity? Even if you went idly to see, you were not idly seen. Who would believe that idle curiosity or curious idleness of yours would not be idle in the future, but so terrible in its consequences for you and your family and for your enemies too?⁶

What Shechem did was wrong, of course, but Dinah bears the brunt of Bernard's rebuke. Victim she was, but she could have avoided her fate. The lament for Dinah written by Bernard's contemporary, Peter Abelard, was more sympathetic but drew the same conclusion: "Woe is miserable me," she cried, "ruined by my own doing!"⁷

Not long after, Richard of St. Victor added yet one more complication in a treatise on the steps of contemplation that allegorized all the children

of the patriarchs. The children of Leah represent seven virtues or ordered affections; Dinah, the last, represents ordered *shame*.⁸ The allegory was not deliberately hostile to Dinah: while indeed conquered by Shechem (identified as "love of one's own excellence") and drawn into "scandalous delight," Richard insists that she struggled and was unwilling — even if "she surrenders after being conquered by Shechem's strength." While Dinah's resistance may well be taken for granted by the biblical text, the question loomed large in the minds of many, especially in light of Deuteronomy 22:23-29, which exonerates a woman from complicity in her own rape — *if* she cries for help. Naturally, there are many places where no cry could be heard, and in these cases Deuteronomy 22:25-27 gives the woman the benefit of the doubt. What Gregory and Richard illustrate, however, is that commentators were capable of denying that benefit to Dinah by suggesting that she sinned not only by wandering out, but also by enjoying her ravishment. For modern readers, this is a problematic move and a worrisome precedent, especially when unsupported by the biblical text. But what complicates our assessment of Richard's exegesis is "Dinah's" larger role in his allegorical treatise, where she is properly praised as a *virtue*: the godly sort of shame that can soften the rage of *men* and make them commendable and lovable.

The legacy of patristic and medieval interpretation was to ascribe Dinah's ruin to her foolish curiosity. Both literally and allegorically, she offered a cautionary tale of the danger that looms for women when they stray into the public sphere, outside the home or cloister, where walls (and men) can protect them.

Dinah among the Reformers

With few exceptions, the writers of the sixteenth century continued to find fault with Dinah. "She is not excused by ignorance but accused by her curiosity," wrote Pellican, even as Vermigli stated that the occasion of her rape was "adolescent wanderlust and curiosity." Luther agreed, as did Musculus and Calvin — adding, in the case of Luther and Musculus, that curiosity is a vice to which women in particular are prone.⁹ The lesson isn't subtle. Calvin, for example, urgently warns of the danger that

hangs over weak virgins at this day, if they go too boldly and eagerly into public assemblies, and excite the passions of youth towards

themselves. For it is not to be doubted that Moses in part casts the blame of the offense upon Dinah herself, . . . whereas she ought to have remained under her mother's eyes in the tent.¹⁰

Luther identified another sin on Dinah's part, namely, that she went out "on her own without a companion," indeed, "without the permission of her father and mother" — an especially controversial issue for Protestants, who hotly opposed the way Roman Catholics granted children the right to contract marriage without parental consent.¹¹

Clearly, Reformation commentators saw the place of women as firmly fixed in the private sphere of home and hearth, but some hammered on this point more than others. A prime example is Zwingli, who vented palpable anger at Dinah and her imitators. Convinced that the verb in Genesis 34:1 is best construed in the imperfect past tense, he concluded that Dinah did not go out just once, but habitually, regularly visiting the women of the city. Shechem probably saw her on one of these visits, in the course of which he "spoke to her heart" (v. 3), "so that, having at last been persuaded by him, she might be seized by him."¹² Zwingli seriously faults Dinah, but he also lambastes women who parade their rings and robes in public, who "go out" to see and be seen, indeed, prostituting their chastity. Oddly, it escapes Zwingli's notice that he has reversed the order here: Genesis 34:1-3 puts the rape first, prior to Shechem's attempted consolation. Nothing suggests that Dinah began by conniving with Shechem, despite Zwingli's insinuations.¹³ Dinah's final role in Zwingli's commentary is to illustrate the strange workings of providence: for while God could have ordained to make Jacob great by allowing the pact with Shechem and Hamor to stand, the Israelites were not slated to possess the land for centuries to come. "Meanwhile, God permits Dinah to be violated so that *we* might learn about the ways of young men and the wantonness of young girls."¹⁴

If there are any words of sympathy to be found for Dinah, they are probably to be found in Luther's remarks, which have received more study than most.¹⁵ Luther writes as a father, and his sympathies lie largely with Jacob. Nonetheless, as Joy Schroeder observes, Luther was not only the father of daughters, he himself had lost a daughter of about Dinah's age not long before he wrote on Genesis 34.¹⁶ So while Luther can recap the usual stereotypes about women's levity and curiosity that Dinah epitomizes, he is also emotionally engaged: directly with Jacob, indirectly (but still deeply) with Dinah.

Two of Luther's observations will have to suffice here. First, he takes with utter seriousness the extra measure of suffering both Jacob and Dinah endured on account of their sense of divine abandonment. We saw earlier, in his account of Hagar, how Luther could speak so movingly of the "god-less" dimension of such tragedies, and of how no aspect of suffering brings as much anguish as feeling deserted by God

Who is watching here? Is anyone keeping awake? God and his angels wink and look the other way. God pays no attention and acts as if he does not know or see the daughter being snatched away to be raped. Indeed, he permits this to happen while the angels sit and do nothing.¹⁷

Admittedly, Luther has focused on Jacob's grief here, but Dinah is by no means out of sight. She is sorrowful, grief-stricken, and inconsolable. And it is further typical of Luther to involve her entire family in tears and anguish — including Jacob's wives, servants, maids, and shepherds.¹⁸ Here is a crucial contrast between Luther and Zwingli. Both writers saw this tragedy as wrought by providence and as bearing a lesson for us. But where Zwingli saw a lesson about the faulty morality of others, Luther found a lesson vastly more immediate:

Why does God permit such a godly patriarch to be burdened with this cross, as if he were not pious, pleasing, and dear to God? This happened for our sake, so we might learn patience, be consoled in adversity, and restrain our own mouths if similar calamities happen to us. I mean, we are no better than these great men, so we should not aspire to special treatment. Instead, we should get used to such exercises and tests of our faith, consolation, and patience.¹⁹

A second remarkable aspect of Luther's exegesis is his constancy in defending Dinah. Granted that she sinned through foolish curiosity, she is still the one wronged. There is no need for further severity. As Schroeder observes, Luther refused to suggest, as some medievals (and contemporaries) did, that Dinah had not only been treated like a harlot (v. 31), but had acted like one as well.²⁰ Instead, Luther reserved his contempt for the impenitent presumption of Shechem and his father. And it is a further mark of his "fatherly" concern that Dinah does not soon disappear from his

comments on Genesis 34, or from Genesis at all. She is mentioned often, eventually receiving from Luther what few ever gave her: a happy ending of sorts, or even an ending at all. Feminist critics have observed not only that Dinah's fate is left unrecorded (implying that, like Tamar, she was ever after "a desolate woman"), but also that her brothers' rampage destroyed the sole prospect of marriage she would ever have, to Shechem. Yet Dinah reappears in Genesis 37:1 and 43:5 — not in the Bible, but in Luther's comments — where we learn not only that Jacob brought Dinah and Joseph to the aged Isaac to keep him company, but also that she accompanied Jacob to Egypt, serving as the mother of the household after the death of Jacob's wives.²¹ It is no small irony that in penning this imaginative ending to Dinah's story, Luther has joined some unlikely company: for despite the rabbis' hostile critique of Dinah, there is a strand of midrash that also associated Dinah with the sojourn to Egypt — not as Jacob's housekeeper, but as the mother (by Shechem) of Asenath, Joseph's "Egyptian" wife.²²

Was the Levite's Wife Being Punished?

No story of violence to an individual in Scripture can be more grisly and horrifying than the gang rape, murder, and subsequent butchery of the Levite's wife in Judges 19. It is an obscene event that triggers a civil war that reportedly leads to 65,000 deaths, along with the slaughter of the city of Jabesh-gilead, except for 400 abducted virgins, and the abduction of another 200 virgins from Shiloh. Among these details, three questions bear on the Levite's wife.²³ First, why did she leave her husband (19:2), and what does that suggest about her? Second, when the house of the Levite's host in Gibeah was surrounded by townsmen, clamoring to have sex with the Levite, can any justification be found for his act of forcing his wife into their hands? Finally, was his wife's horrifying death somehow a providential punishment?

Sanitizing the Story: Josephus, Ambrose, and Jerome

The tale's repugnance may be argued from the reluctance with which it is mentioned by commentators. Among the church fathers, only Ambrose, Jerome, and Sulpicius said anything at all. Even Augustine fell mute: hav-

ing addressed a huge set of questions on the first seven books of the Old Testament, he abruptly ended with Samson, at Judges 15. The silence of Augustine, in turn, may well have paralyzed many medieval commentators, who habitually borrowed wholesale from the Latin father. Amazingly, the silence would be broken only in the fourteenth century, when Nicholas of Lyra publicized some "new" information.²⁴

The modest comments that we do have prior to Lyra often seem shaped less by the biblical text than by a paraphrase of the story that Josephus produced in the first century.²⁵ Josephus sanitized the tale, recasting it as a patched-up lovers' quarrel that met a tragic end when the men of Gibeah seized the husband's beautiful wife. After a night of abuse, she died, less from bodily injury than from her grief and shame. The story remains tragic, but Josephus has removed the reference to same-sex rape and endowed the Levite's wife with the classic female virtues of modesty and shame.

Josephus's influence is clearest in Ambrose, who digressed deeply into the story of the Levite's wife in the course of two letters written around 380, advocating virginity and defending a Christian virgin named Indicia from an accusation of unchastity.²⁶ Ambrose's long retelling of Judges 19 was meant to illustrate the importance of character, though it seems an odd excursus. In any case, Ambrose followed Josephus in ignoring questions of homosexual rape and in focusing on the woman's beauty as the cause of the frenzy. Likewise, the Levite does not expel his wife; she was rather seized by the mob, only to die of humiliation the next morning.

The paraphrases of Judges 19–21 in Josephus and Ambrose recur in a few later writers,²⁷ but the silence of Augustine dominates: the *Ordinary Gloss* is remarkably barren, mustering little more than a few definitions.²⁸ What is easily missed, however, is that all these patristic and medieval writers were blinded, even when they were silent, by a special kind of ignorance. All of them were working from either the Latin Vulgate or the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) — neither of which reports what the Hebrew Bible says of the Levite's wife at Judges 19:2. Where the Vulgate and Septuagint say that the Levite's wife "became angry" with her husband and left him, the Hebrew version states, instead, that she "played the harlot" and left. This is truly an inflammatory bit of information, and highly prejudicial to the Levite's wife. Along the way, it is a mystery beyond explanation that Jerome, who translated the Vulgate from what he liked to call the "Hebrew truth," seems to have preferred the

Greek reading here. But what Jerome left hidden emerged at last in Lyra's "literal commentary" on the whole Bible — a work that quickly upstaged the *Ordinary Gloss*, largely because of Lyra's facility in Hebrew and his extensive use of otherwise unknown rabbinic sources.

The "Hebrew Truth" Unveiled: Lyra and the Reformers

Lyra was well aware, then, that the Levite's wife wasn't just angry. Rather, as the Hebrew Bible says, she was an adulteress, so she probably left her husband either because he threw her out or because she ran off with a lover.²⁹ It is therefore all the more surprising that Lyra did not linger to rebuke her but moved on to other ethical issues in the passage. One of these is the shocking offer made by the host in Gibeah to give his daughter to the mob at his door, an offer fulfilled by the Levite when he pushed his wife outside. Where earlier writers equivocated or emended the storyline at this point, Lyra condemned the offer for what it is: a mortal sin. Lyra thus ruled out any excuse based on the notion of *compensatory evil*³⁰ — the idea that a lesser sin (the rape of a woman) may be permitted to avoid a greater sin (the "unnatural" rape of a man). Centuries earlier, Augustine pondered this question when Lot offered his daughters to the men of Sodom in Genesis 19, a tale that mirrors Judges 19. Though he rejected the appeal to compensatory evil, Augustine left a precedent for thinking that the bodies of men are of greater value than the bodies of women. But Lyra countered Augustine's interpretation with a sober and sophisticated analysis of the situation, for the angry men of Gibeah may well have "abused" the Levite's wife by subjecting her to "unnatural" intercourse — what we usually call *sodomy*. So the Levite would *not* necessarily have avoided any greater evil by abandoning his wife.

Lyra's knowledge of Hebrew and rabbinic traditions remained of great interest for the next two centuries, but his findings were often disputed. By the sixteenth century, Christian scholars had come to regard a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek as indispensable for commenting on the Bible, and many now read the sources for themselves. These later scholars were uniformly of the opinion that the "Hebrew truth" was more authoritative than Greek or Latin versions of the Old Testament. Consequently, all agreed that Judges 19 told not of a marital spat, but of adultery — and someone was to blame.

Readers today may be caught off guard by the vehemence with which early Protestants despised adulterers. But for Pellican, Brenz, Bucer, and Vermigli, the adultery of the Levite's wife introduced a volatile issue. Several wondered, for example, why she hadn't already been put to death. That may seem harsh, but were they really out to get her? No, they were merely trying to be good commentators. Elsewhere the Bible tells us that the punishment for adultery is death by stoning, except for the daughter of a priest, in which case the punishment is death by fire.³¹ As a part of Old Testament history, the events in Judges ought to have been governed by Old Testament law. That the laws of Moses were not enforced alerts us to the anarchy of the day, when "there was no king in Israel," and "the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25). These Protestants, moreover, knew what anarchy was. For them, the Reformation had brought not only the glorious restoration of the gospel, but also civil strife, persecution and bloodshed — and accusations that telling people they were saved by "faith alone" would lead to loose morals. Unfortunately, sometimes it did. So it was with a grim satisfaction that all four of these writers concluded that the death of the Levite's wife was also providential: a gruesome but fitting punishment for someone who had violated God's law of marriage. Bucer's comments are probably the starkest:

As she sinned by her own lust, so with the lust of another did the adulterous woman pay a penalty both more savage and more shameful than according to the law . . . God compensates for the lateness of a well-deserved punishment with severity, and he converts into punishments those very things by which pleasure was sought for against God.³²

It would be wrong, however, to draw either of two possible conclusions. First, it would be wrong to infer from their determination to see the Levite's wife punished that Bucer and his colleagues were specially hostile to women. Indeed, they were quite aware that the Bible's punishment for adultery applies to both sexes, and these four Reformers would also be numbered among those in the sixteenth century who contested the double standard by which men were usually favored in matters of adultery and divorce.³³ Second, it would be wrong to conclude, on the grounds that it was *God* who punished the Levite's wife by means of the mob of Gibeahites, that those rapacious men were in any way excused.³⁴ The men at the door,

like those who assaulted Lot's guests in Genesis 19, were vilified by all commentators in terms as dire as imaginable: they were cruel, filthy, children of Belial, foul and monstrous, reprobate, brutal, wicked, "altogether hateful and detestable to God and men."³⁵ And if we read on to see what these writers said about the chaos that followed the rape of the Levite's wife, we would find that they continued to excoriate the men of Israel for avenging the Levite so savagely, by means of a serial brutality inflicted too often upon innocent women and children.

What about the actions of the Levite and his host in Gibeah, who imitated Lot in offering women to be raped, but who did not have the benefit of angels to defend them? The appeal to compensatory evil that Augustine described and rejected continued to interest writers in the sixteenth century. (Indeed, it continues to interest us today, because we too may face moral choices of which even the best seems ethically tainted.) Pellican, Brenz, and Bucer all make a case that the Levite may have acted to avoid a greater evil than the rape of his wife; Cajetan, their Catholic contemporary, did likewise. By and large, they agreed with Augustine that homosexual rape is a greater crime than heterosexual rape. But the consciences of these commentators are clearly uneasy: Pellican looks for another way out; Bucer equivocates, insisting one cannot judge these matters in advance. Vermigli, however, is unambiguous in condemning the Levite and his host: no sin should ever be committed under the pretense of avoiding a greater sin. More remarkable still is the conclusion reached by both Cajetan and Vermigli that, regardless of any claim to have avoided a greater crime, no wife or daughter is ever the "possession" of a husband or father in a way that gives him the right to endanger her. The old man in Gibeah therefore had

no right to prostitute his daughter or his guest's wife. For a father does not have his daughter so in his power that he may expose her to the lusts of others. Nor is the daughter herself obliged to obey in anything that is sin, even if her father . . . commands it.³⁶

Were we to compare the parallel story of Lot, similar results would be obtained: Luther, Calvin, Musculus, and Vermigli reject any appeal to compensatory evil. They find Lot's endangerment of his daughters disloyal and execrable, vicious and detestable, unlawful and unfaithful. Like Vermigli, Musculus insists that no father has the authority to make such an offer, and no daughter is bound to obey.³⁷

Postscript: Where Is the (Hebrew) Truth Today?

A sea change in the interpretation of the Levite's wife occurred when the Hebrew wording of Judges 19:2 — and the wife's alleged adultery — came to the attention of Christian commentators. At that point, opinion swung from empathy for her to suspicion and hostility. But when the Hebrew text says she "played the harlot," must we picture literal infidelity, or might this be a way of branding her for abandoning her husband on her own initiative?³⁸ Might the Greek Old Testament actually be not a distortion of the Hebrew, but a less charged way of saying the same thing? Today, most English Bibles follow the Hebrew text, but the RSV, NRSV, and New Jerusalem Bible give more credence to the Septuagint here: *she became angry*, these Bibles state, *and she left*. How might Lyla and later commentators have written about the Levite's wife if they had shared these critical textual judgments?

Did Bathsheba Set David Up for Seduction?

Bathsheba appears in two biblical scenes. In 1 Kings 1–2, she collaborated with the prophet Nathan to ensure that Solomon would succeed David as Israel's king; here in 2 Samuel 11, she plays a more passive role. Among the details of her encounter with David and his arrangement to do away with Uriah, his faithful subject and her faithful husband, three are of special interest. First, there is David's voyeurism in 2 Samuel 11:2. Was Bathsheba bathing immodestly, so as to contribute to the adultery? Second, commentators differ over v. 4. The NRSV reading, "she was purifying herself after her period," construes the text as proving that the pregnancy reported in v. 5 had to be by David, not Uriah. But the ancient versions — Hebrew, Greek, and Latin — are all less clear about the purpose of her purification and its timing. Third, when v. 26 says Bathsheba "made lamentation" for Uriah, some wonder if she was sincere, or if she was wrong to accede to David when "he brought her to his house" (v. 27). In the history of exegesis, however, these questions emerged rather gradually.

All about David

Given the historical, liturgical, and messianic shadows that David cast over the entire Bible, it is no surprise that Bathsheba and Uriah are commonly treated as props in a drama all about the king. Particularly in light of the traditional ascription of Psalm 51 to David, "after he had gone in to Bathsheba," commentators eagerly read 2 Samuel 11–12 as the tale of a mighty man who became a model penitent. The classic account may be Ambrose's *Apology for the Prophet David*, in which the enormity of David's crime corresponds to the depth of his repentance and God's forgiveness.³⁹ Bathsheba's only role is allegorical: she symbolizes the church of the gentiles, rescued by Christ (David) from the devil (Uriah). The basic features of Ambrose's allegory recurred constantly, extending from Augustine to Gregory the Great and Isidore, and on to Raban Maur and the *Ordinary Gloss*.⁴⁰ Edifying as the allegory may have been, there was no intention to excuse David, as Augustine explained:

The literal David, then, was guilty of a heinous crime, which God by the prophet condemned in the rebuke addressed to David, and which David atoned for by his repentance. On the other hand, He who is the desire of all nations loved the Church when washing herself on the roof, that is, when cleansing herself from the pollution of the world . . . ; and after commencing an acquaintance, He puts to death the devil, whom He first entirely removes from her, and joins her to Himself in perpetual union. While we hate the sin, we must not overlook the prophetic significance; and while we love . . . that David [= Christ] who in His mercy has freed us from the devil, we may also love the David who by the humility of his repentance healed the wound made by his transgression.⁴¹

The church fathers did not excuse or minimize David's crimes. Yet they were scarcely interested in the literal Bathsheba. And while the parable of "the poor man's lamb" with which Nathan confronted David (12:1–4) seems to foreground his abuse of power, the fathers saw David's adultery more as a private sin precipitated by his inability to resist Bathsheba's allure

Bathsheba's Secrets

David never leaves the stage, but various observations bearing on Bathsheba were raised from time to time. One of these goes all the way back to Josephus, who thought Bathsheba must have sent word to David as soon as she realized she was pregnant, "asking him to contrive some way to conceal her sin," lest she be stoned to death as an adulteress.⁴² Curiously, despite their use of Josephus, the fathers do not feature her as conspiring in this way. Later writers do note the vagueness of Bathsheba's "purification" in v. 4. Writing in 1179, Peter Comestor offered three explanations: it may mean merely that she bathed after intercourse; or that her menstrual flow ceased because she was now pregnant; or that it ceased "when she was touched by the king" (presumably one of the lesser-known powers of royalty).⁴³ Three centuries later, Denis the Carthusian added other possibilities, including the view of some that, since Bathsheba had borne no children, she may have been "purified" by being healed of sterility. Denis actually wondered how the Bible can say she was purified, since her adultery really left her more impure than before. Yet he saw nothing scandalous in her bathing (in v. 2): she may have been cooling off, or just attending to menstrual cleanliness. Denis is generally sympathetic to Bathsheba: although some think her lament for Uriah was feigned and that she really rejoiced because her husband's death allowed her to escape the punishment of stoning and marry the king, Denis was inclined to think that "her heart wept for the fallen husband whom she loved."⁴⁴

What complicated any assessment of the morality of both David and Bathsheba in the later Middle Ages was (as so often) the inside information that Lyra gleaned from the rabbis. In this instance, Lyra learned from Rashi that before a soldier in the Old Testament went to war, he would give his wife a provisional writ of divorce. If he fell in battle, his wife's divorce would be calculated from the time he gave her the writ.⁴⁵ Thus, even though David committed adultery while Uriah was alive, the writ of divorce Bathsheba allegedly received was effective as of Uriah's initial departure for battle. Technically, David did not commit adultery: he rather had sex with a widow, properly (if retroactively) divorced. This elaborate construct is perfectly tailored to exonerate David (and, incidentally, Bathsheba) from any crime — an odd agenda, given the evidence of Psalm 51 as David's confession of sin. Christian commentators generally dismissed this amazing bit of background information as a fable, not least be-

cause of its refutation later in the fourteenth century by Paul of Burgos — a Christian convert, former rabbi, and Lyra's self-appointed "corrector"

Bathsheba as Victim and Conspirator

Protestant exegesis rode the rising tide of humanist scholarship, with its intense interest in original sources and languages. But the Reformation was also an intensely moral movement, one that implemented widespread reforms against the prevailing laxity of Catholicism and society in general — reforms and concerns reflected also in exegesis. The Bible's silences were usually unpacked with worries about ethical behavior in mind, only to be reassembled with added lessons and exhortations. Many commentators simply assumed that biblical characters harbored the same vices they found or feared in their congregations.

The Reformers' skeptical portrait of Bathsheba may well be the product of such presuppositions, even if that portrait fails to satisfy in many respects. Bathsheba received only modest attention in the sixteenth century, but ample comments survive in lectures Vermigli gave in 1557 and in Calvin's strikingly similar sermons, delivered in 1562. Both indicted David unsparingly and at length. Calvin classed him as a "monster," devoid of scruple or remorse, who committed "whoredom" and treated his servants as pimps. David was just like all princes, who "do not worry much about the death of their subjects." His crime, moreover, was not only a private sin but a failure of office. "David the King is not the guardian of the law, but its violator," cried Vermigli, for "he does not uphold modesty but assaults it."⁴⁶

Clearly, Bathsheba was wronged by David, who used his servants to seduce her and "to draw her into such perdition that she would have been lost if God had not . . . had mercy on her."⁴⁷ But she was no model saint, much less a martyr. To be sure, Vermigli and Calvin did not condemn her for bathing, and Vermigli insisted that there is nothing wrong with a woman's beauty, which is a gift of the Creator and even part of God's image. But both felt she should have shown more discretion and modesty, and taken greater care not to be seen. Both also compared her to Susanna, a matron (in the apocryphal additions to Daniel) who was overtaken by two evil elders while bathing in a garden and who preferred death to defilement. Vermigli therefore wondered why Bathsheba offered no resistance. Maybe she was overwhelmed by the king's dignity. Maybe she was

ambitious and hoped to become queen. Or maybe she thought David could somehow decree her divorce — “Weak women often think such things.”⁴⁸

It is no surprise, then, that Vermigli and Calvin met Bathsheba’s purification with suspicion. Neither connected her act with menstrual impurity. Instead, Calvin was sure she was in the grip of guilt over her adultery: “there is no doubt” that her act was the ritual sprinkling performed “after someone had been soiled by some sin.” But Calvin was also sure she let herself off too easily:

In what sense was her purification real? It was nothing but a shadow, full of hypocrisy . . . That she felt she was guilty before God was in itself a good beginning. But she did not continue. . . . She thought that she had been properly absolved when she sprinkled herself as required by the Law, but she only considered the external appearance.

Vermigli said much the same. Bathsheba went back to life as usual: “she worshiped on the Sabbath, joined the sacred assembly, and purified herself as did others. . . . But it all came from hypocrisy.”⁴⁹

More distrust greeted Bathsheba when she lamented the death of Uriah (v. 26). Vermigli seems to agree with those who saw her grief as a cover for her greater desire to be freed from suspicion of adultery, which could never happen while her husband lived. Calvin branded her mourning as “fiction” and a “faice,” granting that “perhaps she was touched” by Uriah’s death but ultimately concluding that her grief was feigned. *How did Calvin know this?* Apparently he deduced this, and more, from Bathsheba’s return to David’s house (v. 27):

We also see how she personally profited from the situation. For she should have hidden herself, but instead, she went on to place herself in an eminent position so she could be seen from afar. And what could one have seen? Here was an adulteress, who was the cause of the death of her husband, going around brazen-faced, and giving herself a good time with her adulterous partner, with a murderous and disloyal individual. Well, when she consented and willingly agreed with such a villain, what could one judge but that both had conspired in the death of this poor man? . . . She readily went with

David to live in his house, forgot the death of her husband, and paid no attention to the villainous and detestable outrage which had been done to him. Without argument, she joined herself to him who put the sword in the hand of the enemies of God in order to put Uriah to death.⁵⁰

It’s entirely possible that Bathsheba possessed all these crass motives, just as Calvin claimed. But it remains to note that Calvin found her vices in a verse that merely says, “David sent and brought her to his house.” The actor in this scene was David. All the rest is silence.

Remarkably, neither Vermigli nor Calvin hesitated to endorse the happy ending the Bible provided for David and Bathsheba in the later birth of Solomon. According to Calvin, David exhorted Bathsheba to join him in repentance, and mutual accord and divine consolation followed. Vermigli mused seriously and with some feeling over Bathsheba’s trials: “She knew she had sinned, she saw God’s anger, she knew God had caused the death of her son. As the greatest good is to have pleased God, so the greatest evil is to know that God is hostile and angry with us.” Vermigli then tried to imagine David’s words at 2 Samuel 12:24, which reports that “David consoled his wife.” Vermigli constructs a tender speech for David. It culminates in an unexpected but traditional promise, that the Messiah would be born through the line of David and Bathsheba, two sinners now graciously restored.⁵¹ David seems to have heard this news from Nathan and passed it along to his wife — an inference Vermigli found in a rabbinic source, but which he surely used because it was already embedded in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel.

What Was Tamar Thinking?

The story of how Amnon entrapped and raped his half-sister Tamar is viewed by some commentators as an inversion of the story of Dinah: both women were violated in acts of passion, but whereas Shechem came to profess abiding affection for Dinah, Amnon’s love turned to passionate hatred. In both cases, brothers intervene on behalf of a wronged sister, with equally dismal results: an unmarried daughter is left in desolation. In considering Tamar, three exegetical elements are crucial. The story in 2 Samuel 13 is bracketed, first of all, by Amnon’s crime and its punishment — or lack

thereof. How do interpreters deal with his treachery and cruelty? More telling, perhaps, how do they deal with David's stunning passivity in v. 21, where his anger leads only to inaction?⁵² Next, Tamar's speech in vv. 12-13 comes under scrutiny for urging Amnon to ask for her in marriage rather than taking her by force. Yet she and Amnon had a common father in David. Was she proposing an incestuous marriage? Finally, Tamar's responses to the rape — a second speech in v. 16 and her lament in vv. 18-19 — are studied by those who want to know why she claimed that her ejection by Amnon was a worse deed than rape, and why she cried aloud after the rape but (apparently) not before. Our survey will move quickly through patristic and medieval writers in order to spend a bit more time with writers of the Reformation.

Lessons from Tamar: Watchfulness, Prudence, Tenacity

Patristic commentary on this text ran largely along familiar lines. Jerome offered a moral reading, warning nuns and monks to guard their virginity even in the presence of close relations.⁵³ Others allegorized the names of Amnon ("giving"), Tamar ("bitterness"), and Absalom ("father of peace"), but the moral was about the same: he who gives himself to desire will fall into the *bitterness* of sin and deliver himself to an enemy disguised as a *father of peace*.⁵⁴

Medieval writers, however, began to worry about the ethical implications of the text. Tamar's plea that Amnon seek permission from David to marry her is of constant interest. Peter Comestor subscribed to the old opinion of Josephus that Tamar's plea was not sincere but rather a subterfuge designed to buy time. Indeed, he added, marriage between siblings is unlawful — except there are "some" (not named by him) who say that this Old Testament law pertains only to those of the same race. Amnon's mother was an Israelite, but Tamar's mother was a gentile, taken by David in war, so perhaps such a union was licit after all. Lyra added another wrinkle to this line of exegesis. According to his rabbinic sources, not only did David take Tamar's mother as a spoil of war, she was at the time pregnant with Tamar by her previous husband. Tamar was thus *not* David's natural daughter, and she was but a *half*-sister to Absalom. Since she was unrelated to Amnon, she was free to marry him — and her suggestion to Amnon was therefore without fault.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, these little-known details were

nowhere to be found in the Bible. A century later, when Denis considered whether Tamar and Amnon were too distantly related for the laws of incest to apply, he ignored Lyra altogether and eventually dismissed even Peter Comestor's version of the argument. Instead, Denis sided with Josephus: Tamar's speech was a ruse.⁵⁶

Lyra also asked about David's response to Amnon's deed. The question was obvious. Rape is a capital crime. In some circumstances, both rapist and victim may be put to death. So why didn't David punish his son? Lyra frames the question without favor to David: "It seems that David sinned gravely" when he refused to chastise his son, much less consider executing him.⁵⁷ But Lyra gets David off on a series of technicalities. The law about the rape of a betrothed virgin in Deuteronomy 22:23 doesn't apply because Tamar was not engaged. And while the law in Deuteronomy 22:13-19 might be used against Amnon, he could not be convicted of an unwitnessed crime without a complaint from Tamar and some physical evidence — but 2 Samuel 13:20 says she kept silent on the advice of Absalom. Lyra goes on to speculate that David did punish Amnon, but not immediately, because Amnon was still weak and infirm. David's failure to punish Amnon would have fueled Tamar's hatred for Amnon, and her hatred would explain why David did not force Amnon to marry her (again citing Deuteronomy 22:19).

Lyra's defense of David's inaction is checked by Denis's skeptical rebuttal. As various Old Testament texts argue, if a father is called to correct an erring son, how much more is it the duty of a judge! And while it is proper to defer punishment if time and circumstance are inappropriate, Denis is not persuaded that Amnon was weak and infirm. If he had the strength to force himself on Tamar, he was well enough to bear punishment. Indeed, David should have realized that Amnon's show of illness was fakery. And when Scripture says Tamar kept silent, Denis thinks Absalom would have urged her to complain to David if he'd had any hope that Amnon would have been put to death. Denis thus sees nothing but culpable indulgence on David's part, and nothing like repentance or sorrow on the part of Amnon. David's love for Amnon was, in short, "carnal and corrupt."⁵⁸

Denis paired his case against Amnon with a modest defense of Tamar. In addition to vindicating her plea to Amnon in v. 13 as a ruse — indeed, an "official" lie and scarcely a sin — he also considered the question from Deuteronomy 22:24 that has perennially burdened victims of rape: Why

didn't she cry out? After all, she was in a palace — surely help was nearby! But Denis was still ready to excuse her. Perhaps she was actually trying to save her brother Amnon by this ruse, lest he receive a death sentence for his deed. In any case, Denis was sure she defended herself vigorously, even manfully (*viriliter*), and this may be why Amnon's desire turned to hatred: Tamar may have wounded him in the struggle, as "the Hebrews" suggest.⁵⁹

Good Girl / Bad Girl: Tamar in the Reformation

The contrast that emerged between Lyra and Denis finds a more detailed counterpart in the sixteenth century. However much Vermigli and Calvin agreed regarding Bathsheba, they were at odds in the case of Tamar.

Before looking at Tamar, however, it is important to see that they were by no means soft on Amnon or David. Calvin regarded Amnon as detestable, not least for having "nurtured this evil within himself." Amnon's act was "grossly immoral," "against nature," and disgraceful. He "wallowed in" his lust, and there is no sign "that he was displeased with himself over his evil, nor that he was fighting against it." Both Calvin and Vermigli offer a fine analysis of Amnon's craftiness, especially the way his references to Tamar change to serve his deception. To Jonadab, his co-conspirator, he refers to "my brother Absalom's sister," Calvin notes, "as though . . . not at all related to him!" But before David, he innocently calls her "my sister," as if "to cloak his fornication."⁶⁰ Another instance is cited by Vermigli at v. 17, where Amnon heartlessly tells his servant to "put this woman out." Amnon "does not call her by her own name, nor by 'sister.' You see three grave crimes: first is rape; another is incest; a third is hatred of his sister. He publicizes his wickedness as much as he can."⁶¹

David, too, comes under fire. While Calvin credits him for teaching his children right and wrong (unsuccessfully, in Amnon's case), it is David's failure that he "let his daughter be corrupted."⁶² Both Calvin and Vermigli dismiss those who would excuse David for not punishing Amnon. For Calvin, "David's sin" here was exceptionally scandalous because, as king, he "ought to have maintained equality in justice." Of course, this whole tragedy was the fallout of David's adultery with Bathsheba, and Calvin opines that he

ought to have foreseen the evil, and even if he had not condemned his son to death, still he ought at least to have subdued his body; he

ought to have held him in prison and in stocks — either for a time or for life. . . . It is certain that David was given a sentence of condemnation here for not having punished the misdeed of his son.⁶³

Vermigli is equally unpersuaded by the defenders of David's inaction. To counter Lyra's claim that Amnon could not be prosecuted without Tamar's testimony, Vermigli insists that David — like any good judge — should have undertaken an investigation even if no witnesses came forward. There was, after all, plenty of evidence to be seen, including Amnon's ejection of Tamar and her public lament; and there are precedents in the Bible and elsewhere for legal proceedings even where there is no direct complaint. To Lyra's suggestion that David punished Amnon later, in secret, Vermigli simply says, "That was not enough." David's inaction provoked Absalom's homicidal wrath, adding to David's disrepute and inciting blasphemy against God.⁶⁴

What about Tamar? Here is where Calvin parts company with Vermigli. Calvin's sharp indictment of Amnon and David leaves one unprepared for his coolness toward Tamar at two points. First, where many read Tamar's appeal to the king in v. 13 as a ploy, Calvin will have nothing to do with it. Not only does he rebuke the rabbis for speculating that Tamar and Amnon were more distantly related, he is angry with Tamar for a suggestion that would violate divine laws against incest. But wasn't it just a ruse? Wasn't she deferring judgment to her father, knowing he would overrule her unlawful plan? It might have been so, says Calvin, "but she was not well enough instructed to have been able to figure this out." Tamar was thus only partially prudent: she knew incest was wrong, but she embraced the plan anyway.⁶⁵ Tamar fares no better in her second speech, where she pleads with Amnon not to cast her out, bewailing that rejection as worse than being raped. Calvin is appalled:

In wanting to persist, she clearly showed that she was badly taught in the Law of God, and . . . that she was more concerned about her own reputation than . . . about what was legitimate for her.

. . . She was content with squatting in her filth and being the wife of her brother! In this way, she reversed the whole order of nature. She wanted to pervert the sanctity of marriage; she wanted to persist in this evil to the very end.⁶⁶

For Calvin, there is no way to redeem Tamar's plea to remain with Amnon, and he spends a third of one of his sermons railing against her for caring more to avoid public shame than to observe God's law. Somehow Calvin knows she is a hypocrite, "motivated only by superficial appearances." However, when Calvin's sermon goes on to find a moral or two for his congregation from Tamar, his lessons may have been more homegrown than usual. Early in 1557, the wife of Calvin's younger brother Antoine was banished for repeated improprieties with another man, conducted even in Calvin's own house. Could Calvin's reading of Tamar and Amnon — not to mention Bathsheba — have been unaffected by his own family's scandal, five years before?⁶⁷

Tamar and her speeches met with greater kindness from Vermigli, beginning with his long analysis of her attempt to dissuade her brother from violating her. Vermigli's sympathy is unmistakable

He has arranged that she be led into his chamber; he is ready to use force against her; she sees herself trapped, and he the stronger one. What should she have done? She resorts to the weapons she has, she fights back with arguments. "No, my brother," she says. She recalls this word to his mind: he's her *brother*. "You're not supposed to be my corrupter! You should rather have been the one to protect me if others had wished to violate me!"⁶⁸

Vermigli seems impressed with Tamar's quickness: she goes on to draw an argument from the law, then appeals to Amnon's self-respect, pleads on behalf of her own future hopes, and finally, "lest she lose all hope," desperately urges him to ask the king for her in marriage. It is no problem for Vermigli that Tamar has invoked this ploy, but (he suspects) Amnon never really wanted her for a wife.

Vermigli then returned to the old question of why Tamar did not cry for help. His first observation is that while the law in Deuteronomy 22:24 technically protects only betrothed virgins, we should extend it to cover also those not espoused, including Tamar. That she did not cry out, however, still does not prove she gave her consent to Amnon. As Denis had suggested, she may have been trying to protect Amnon; or she may have thought David did have the power to relax the prohibition against such a marriage.⁶⁹ (It is worth noting that while Calvin and Vermigli agreed that divine law cannot be relaxed, Luther had registered his dissent decades ear-

lier. For Luther, Tamar illustrates how such laws may be overruled by the dictates of faith and love. Luther also interpreted Deuteronomy 22:24 on behalf of Tamar, who would have cried for help "but did not dare, for fear of death. A fair reading of the law, however, will take the view that she did cry out," even though she was in the city, not out in the fields.⁷⁰)

Tamar's second speech to Amnon is also paraphrased by Vermigli: "If, having been violated, I'm now evicted, I'll be like an obscene woman, a prostitute. Evicted in this way, I'll be unfit for marriage when this crime is made known. No one will want me for a wife."⁷¹ Probably she wanted to form some plan with Amnon, now that he had brought her to ruin, but what she really needed (Vermigli suggests) was some *consolation*. Amnon gave her only hatred, as often happens after an affair like this. Vermigli then wondered, poignantly, if Tamar thought of Dinah, who was also raped by the son of a king but who was afterwards comforted by him. Amnon, alas, "did no such thing." So Tamar could only lament: whatever she might do, nothing would restore her.

Sex, Violence, and Blind Spots

In surveying the readings put forward by traditional commentators, we may rightly marvel at the diversity of views. We cannot help but notice that some readings satisfy our sensibilities, while others offend. Some address the nuances of the biblical text perceptively and with great insight, while others seem to dodge the problems or foist easy lessons onto hard texts. We have just reviewed how four of the Bible's most disturbing stories have been appropriated over the course of much of the church's history. Do any patterns emerge? Might the history of the interpretation of these texts help us perceive and interpret the bigger picture of which both the Bible and we, as part of the church of Christ, are a part? Several insights come to mind.

1. LESSONS OF FAITH AND MORALS MAY BE PRESENT EVEN WHERE THE BIBLE DOESN'T SPELL THEM OUT. *Traditional commentators believed the stories in the Bible were put there for a reason — for our sake, to instruct us in what we should believe and do. Even where the text seems devoid of morals, it is worth the effort to ask such questions.*

Dinah, the Levite's wife, Bathsheba, and Tamar were assaulted by men in ways that we would call wrong. Yet in these texts, as in so many others, the Bible is surprisingly dispassionate and reserved about exactly *who* is evil or wrong in these stories — and how, and why. All of these stories could be read only for the big historical events they report, bypassing questions of right and wrong that might pertain to so-called “minor” characters. Dinah would be just a footnote to the drama of Jacob and his sons; the Levite's wife precipitates a civil war and is forgotten; Bathsheba and Tamar fill cameo roles in support of King David, one of Israel's leading men and a big star.

Sometimes traditional interpreters did “read for the center” in this way and ignore the margins. But even where they gave these women short shrift, they almost always paused to wonder what *this* text might mean for Christians of their own day. In raising that question, they often read more slowly than we do, and they looked for morals and exemplars at every turn. Usually, we too find it impossible to read such tales of lust and violence without becoming emotionally and morally engaged. The best commentators of earlier days may well be the ones who were themselves similarly affected and engaged. At their best, they attempt to bring the whole counsel of Scripture to bear on the details of the text just as they would bring it to bear on the details of their own lives. Even if we take issue with their exegetical opinions, they urge us to think with care about what it means to live one's life before a God of goodness and justice.

2. WITHOUT A CLEAR WORD FROM SCRIPTURE, OUR MORAL JUDGMENTS MUST NOT BE TAKEN AS INFALLIBLE. *Interpreters often unlock passages in Scripture by deriving explanations from other biblical texts. We do this today, just as traditional commentators did. But the disagreements among our exegetical forebears should warn us against rushing to judgment or assuming too quickly that we have all the facts.*

Many commentators approached any biblical account of rape through the supposedly clarifying lens of Deuteronomy 22:23-29, asking essentially: *Did she cry out? Did she resist?* But over the course of the history of interpretation, this question (and the exegesis of the Old Testament in general) grew increasingly complicated — and did so for the better. Denis, Luther, and Vermigli thus agreed that Deuteronomy 22:24 should not be woodenly

applied to Tamar, even though 2 Samuel 13 reported no outcry. There are other circumstances, not addressed by Deuteronomy, that might explain and exonerate Tamar's silence — including a mortal fear of Amnon, or an undeserved loyalty to him. So, these three commentators mostly gave Tamar the benefit of the doubt, allowing the facts of the story to remain ambiguous.

We may learn from this precedent. Just as it seems a squandering of Scripture to read with no interest in its account of the people of God and their successes or failures of faith and practice, so too may we learn from traditional commentators — in their own successes and failures of exegetical practice — that the search for moral lessons can be taken too far. Vermigli and Calvin shared virtually the same ethical concerns and moral worries, yet their depictions of Tamar, the “desolate woman” in Absalom's house, were poles apart. Yet both cannot be correct: Tamar cannot be simultaneously good and bad, assuming we can resolve the question at all. Vermigli met Tamar with sympathy, charity, and an assumption of her innocence, however naive or uninstructed she may have been. His approach is surely preferable to Calvin's, not only because Calvin's case against Tamar lacks clear evidence, but also because we who are ourselves sinners would want the same consideration Vermigli extended to Tamar.

3. EXEGESIS CAN BE SKEWED BY STEREOTYPES AND PERSONAL PRESUPPOSITIONS. *When considering the complaint raised by feminist critics that the Bible and its interpreters are unfriendly to women and women's interests, it is a useful corrective to see firsthand just how prejudiced in favor of men these commentators were — or weren't.*

It is difficult to read the history of the interpretation of these four women's stories and come away satisfied that they have constantly been treated fairly or that justice was done. To be sure, it should not surprise us that if traditional commentators sometimes model values or behavior worth emulating, they can also harbor dispositions that should provoke our criticism and perhaps even our repentance on their behalf. It is unfair, of course, to judge a prior age by the standards of a later time. But it is fair to wonder why a prior age did not live up to its own standards, or why various blind spots developed as they did. Such is the case with respect to the recurring hostility of Christians toward Jews. In the context of this chapter,

such is often the case with respect to how traditional commentators approached the women of Scripture — often more with suspicion than sympathy.

Blaming the victim, denigrating women by treating them in terms of prevailing stereotypes — we have seen these traits often enough to justify the protests of feminists. Calvin is not alone, but in three of the passages we have examined, he models as clearly as anyone the sort of unfriendliness to women that raises a reciprocal suspicion on the part of many women readers. That said, one must complicate matters still further. Calvin does seem ready to doubt the integrity of biblical women, but he can also be hard on men.⁷² Moreover, one must mark with care just where and how the line of prejudice is crossed. For example, Calvin was not wrong to wonder if Bathsheba resisted David's imperiousness. It is a reasonable thing to ask, because the answer might go either way: she might have been a woman of virtue or vice. If Calvin is to be faulted, it would rather be for underestimating how the inevitable imbalance of power between men and women (as well as between kings and subjects) tilts the playing field in favor of men. That, of course, is a modern sort of observation. But it remains that Calvin's exegesis tends to tell us less about what kind of woman Bathsheba was than about what kind of pastor Calvin was. In a word, Calvin withheld sympathy for women in difficult circumstances unless they had clearly gone the extra mile in piety and defense of the faith.⁷³ It was not Calvin's agenda, indeed, to write about the women of Scripture; his agenda was to write about God and the church. Nonetheless, as one recent writer has observed, in the rape of Dinah and Tamar, "the crime is lost in the agenda."⁷⁴ And yet, by coming to understand Calvin's agenda, we may see the strengths and shortcomings of our own.

4. SEXUAL VIOLENCE SHOULD NOT BE COVERED UP. OLD COMMENTATORS MAY BE OUR ALLIES *The lectionary's omission of texts that speak of sexual violence reflects our own tendency to avoid speaking of sexual sins from the pulpit or lectern. But the effects of such sins are as common in our world as they were for our forebears, who were generally more willing to name the crime and address it*

Not every ancient commentary will provide a model for our own engagement with this topic and these texts. It is disappointing to see so many

commentators think they have said enough when they blame Dinah for curiosity and for "going out." Granted, they have at least said *something*: in an unsafe world, in places where men prey upon women, husbands and fathers and brothers will continue to say things like this in hopes of protecting their wives, daughters, and sisters. It would be foolish to think otherwise. We can and should credit these writers for recognizing right and wrong, even if their comments and lessons seem too easy and shallow. After all, no one in the history of interpretation sought to justify rape. It is as *commendable* that they admitted complicating factors, sometimes in the behavior of the women in these stories, as it is *regrettable* that they did not always transcend their stereotypes about women or delve more subtly into the ways of men and power.

But not all these commentaries are alike. Some of them model how to read with sympathy, attentive to the details of plot and character, treating the text and its characters with fairness. We can see such sympathy in those who insisted that Dinah did struggle against Shechem, or in Luther's sad expectation that tragedies like Dinah's will surely befall us, too. We find a commitment to justice in the insistence of many that the Levite had no right to treat his wife, faithful or not, as a possession to be cast aside. Even though writers such as Vermigli and Calvin were wary of Bathsheba, they still rejoiced that she returned with her husband David to God's promises and forgiveness. Indeed, it is of no small moment that Vermigli took the occasion of David's adultery to argue at great length against the prevailing double standard that favored men in marriage and divorce. Finally, there is a strong consensus to condemn the unjust actions of Amnon and the inaction of David in seeking justice for Tamar. Even puzzling aspects of Tamar's speeches are usually resolved in her favor (Calvin excepted), and there are signs, especially in Vermigli, that the devastation Tamar suffered was neither minimized nor forgotten.

In calling these sad stories to the attention of Christian readers and hearers, we can imagine that among our own readers and hearers there may be some who have harmed people in analogous ways (perhaps under the modern rubric of "sexual harassment"), even as there will surely be others who have suffered such wrongs. One part of that audience needs to know that God cares about the details of justice; the other wants to know that God cares about the details of their loss and offers healing and hope — *and* that God does not favor men over women. Our calling is to proclaim both sides of the gospel: justice *and* love. In bringing forth the gospel

from the pages of the Bible, we do not do well to avoid hard passages and hard questions. Despite their imperfections, our exegetical forebears remind us that we are not the first to know or care about women — of the Old Testament and of our own day — who have suffered unspeakable losses.

Conclusion

On Cultivating the Habit of History

Reading the Bible in the Presence of the Past

It's time for a true confession. When I was little, I never dreamed of growing up to be a historian, not even once. I did hope to walk on the moon. But I never thought about being a historian, and I'm sure I didn't even know what they did, except maybe to write boring books that we got tested on, and who would want to do that? Obviously, I had a change of heart some decades later, but I think the chances are pretty good that most churches are full of people who probably want to follow Jesus in *some* way, but who probably don't think they want to become historians in *any* way.

Shouldn't Christians think differently? Shouldn't an affection for the Bible and its message also lead to some appreciation for the *historical* character of the Bible — some sense of how the narratives and instructions of Scripture emerged from real persons and communities of faith, engaged in real discernment and real negotiations with God and with one another? And shouldn't Christians also have some sense for how the essentials of the gospel have come to us already much considered and much digested, through centuries of reflection and controversy within the Christian church and often even within the conscience of individual interpreters?

If we answer *no* to these questions, if we minimize the historical character of the Bible and the church by which the Bible has been preserved, interpreted, and argued over, we run several risks. Among other things, we risk thinking that we (or our pastor, or our church or denomination) have

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