The literary analysis and interpretation of a difficult biblical passage is offered.

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The literary analysis and the interpretation of Gen. 34 has long puzzled scholars. In this essay an attempt is made to unravel some of its problems, particularly that of interpretation. For literary analysis should be subservient to exegesis but, as, e.g., the commentary on Genesis by C. A. Simpson in The Interpreter's Bible shows, literary criticism does not always aid exegesis. The Church, recognizing the Bible as the "Word of God," must always ask for the meaning of a given unit of biblical literature; i.e., it must concern itself above all with exegesis, preceded and undergirded by literary analysis.

Genesis 34, considered as Hebrew narrative, is a "short story" fitted into the framework of the Jacob-cycle by means of an historical prologue, Gen. 33: 18ff., which also serves as a "tranquil prelude" (note the word salēm, "safely", in 33:18) to the tragic story which follows. In this prologue Jacob is represented as a bona fide settler who has just purchased a tract of land in Shechem, where he has chosen to live after his abrupt departure from Haran and his reconciliation with Esau.1 Thus Genesis 34 deals with the fortunes of Israel's co-existence with the Canaanites.2 With the opening of Gen. 34 we see Dinah stepping outside of her conventional circle to meet some of the local girls, an illustration of the attraction of Canaanite civilization to Israel. Shechem, a local prince (nā'î) took a liking to her and raped her, an action which enraged Jacob's sons sufficiently to kill not only the offender but the entire male citizenry of the town.

Our interpretation of this pericope depends to a large extent on our judgment of its literary structure. Following the canons of classical literary criticism, we arrive at the conclusion that Gen. 34 is a fusion of two traditions.3 It cannot be denied that difficulties do exist which,
viewed externally at least, seem to militate against the unity of the story. However, a careful analysis of the inner structure of the pericope in terms of Hebrew narrative technique will not corroborate the necessity of postulating two sources in this story. Actually, the narrator's problem was that he had to deal with a relatively large number of persons. This problem he solved by grouping them into two camps: Israel and Canaan.

Dinah, who has suffered injury, actually plays no further part in the story but emerges quite a colorless figure, the pawn of the story's actors. Neither is Jacob's role decisive; the narrator purposely allows him to be eclipsed by his impetuous sons; in this respect his role is comparable to that in the Joseph story. He does not condemn the rash acts of his sons per se, but only rebukes Simeon and Levi for causing political difficulties, v. 30. The result is that neither Dinah nor Jacob emerge as major figures in the story. Possibly the narrator intentionally safeguarded Jacob's innocence in the ensuing atrocity, to leave him flawless in his patriarchal status, so that he may rebuke his sons for their misdeed, as tradition represents Jacob as having done, Gen. 49:5f. The conclusion of our story seems to suggest, however, that Jacob's complaint is not a decisive ingredient of the narrative, but that it rather serves to emphasize his sons' retort, v. 31 (which stands at the end for emphasis). Thus, in spite of Jacob's somewhat ambiguous role, his family acts as a unit.

The other party consists primarily of Shechem and his father Hamor, and secondarily of all the citizens of the town. But first we need to consider a major stumbling-block to the literary critic, viz., the rapid succession of persons in the pericope. Gen. 34:1ff. speak of Dinah, raped by Shechem; in v. 2 the "problem" of the story is stated. Shechem's attempted solution is to try to acquire Dinah as his bride by asking his

5The chief problem adduced is the fact that the narrative switches rapidly from one person to another: Shechem, v. 4, Jacob, v. 5, Hamor, v. 6, Jacob's sons, v. 7, Hamor, vv. 8-10, Shechem, vv. 11ff; this is claimed to prove lack of continuity. Cf. H. Gunkel, Genesis, 6. Auflage, Goettingen, 1964, p. 369; J. Skinner, International Critical Commentary on Genesis, 2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1956, p. 418; O. Eissfeldt, "Stammsage und Novelle in den Geschichten von Jakob", Kleine Schriften, I, Tübingen, 1962, pp. 95ff. von Rad specifically mentions two difficulties, viz., that according to one representation Hamor undertakes the suit of Dinah, while according to another, Shechem himself deals with the sons of Jacob; in addition, in one tradition Simeon and Levi lead the attack on the city, in the other, all of Jacob's sons intervene (op. cit., p. 325).

6The Hebrew narrator prefers to deal with only two persons; when the story has more than two, he generally arranges them in pairs, which is the case here.

7M. Noth has even suggested that the name Dinah may have developed as a misunderstanding from v. 26: lq̄q̄āb din(āb) min (he took Dinah from), analogous to lq̄q̄āb nigmāb min (to take revenge on), Jer. 20:10. (Überlieferungs geschichte des Pentateuchs, Stuttgart, 1948, p. 94).
father to take the necessary steps, v. 4. Here the narrator abruptly changes to the other “party” concerning whom the reader is briefly “filled in,” v. 5. This notice is not only needed to appreciate v. 6; it also serves to characterize Jacob’s stance throughout this pericope. In v. 7 Jacob’s sons’ initial reaction is sketched: it is one of grave indignation, which is expressed in traditional language; first the phrase asah nebalah (wrought folly) is used, which often refers to sexual offenses. The angry speech is significantly concluded with the words ken lo’ ye ‘aseh (such a thing ought not to be done), v. 7.

Now the Canaanites take the center of the stage with Hamor formally asking for his son to marry Dinah. Realizing that the proposed marriage would set a precedent, he proceeds to describe the advantages of a connubium between their respective families. Here we arrive at the heart of the matter. The narrator paints the prospect of the proposed connubium in the brightest colors to make it appear most attractive for Jacob, who had never before enjoyed a permanent settlement in Palestine: he is offered the opportunity to live where he pleases, he may trade and acquire property, and would not need to limit himself to the plot of ground which he had acquired at the price of one hundred qesitah, 33:19.

Hamor’s shrewdly conceived and eloquently expressed plea is followed by Shechem’s speech, which is often ascribed to another source. But this seems unnecessary. Possibly Shechem acted contrary to custom; on the other hand, we can understand his eagerness to get back to the subject at hand after his father had broadened his original request by proposing a connubium, particularly in view of the lack of enthusiasm which Jacob’s sons must have hardly attempted to conceal. Also, Shechem’s interruption is one of the narrator’s devices to stress the young man’s love for Dinah, his goodwill, and his apparent sincere efforts to undo the evil effects of his misdeed.

The above remarks on the literary structure of the story may serve to indicate the need to take this pericope as a unit

8Nebalah carries both a religious and moral connotation; in Josh. 7:15 ‘asah nebalah (wrought folly) refers to Achan’s impious act in taking plunder for himself at the capture of Jericho.

9This phrase also occurs in the story of Amnon’s rape of Tamar. II Sam. 13:13. It might be taken as meaning: contrary to tradition (and therefore wrong); see E. Jacob, Theology of the Old Testament, New York, 1958, p. 200.

10See Judg. 14, where Samson makes a similar request of his father and where also a non-Israelite is involved.

11In a law much later than patriarchal times, rape of an unbetrothed girl (both parties being Israelite), is punishable by a fine of fifty shekels, and the man must marry the girl. The fine thus assumes the form of a generous mohar (bridel price) and serves to regularize the situation (Deut. 22:28f.). In our pericope the circumstances are essentially different in that an offense has been committed by a Canaanite against an Israelite: the offense is not against a fellow-citizen, but against an entire people: Israel, which was dishonored by this act.
in order to arrive at an interpretation consonant with the writer’s intention.

The question of interpretation is admittedly difficult. Several aspects must be considered and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.12

Von Rad rightly rejects the etiological nature of this story,13 giving prominence to the political aspect, viz., that it attempts to explain how Israel “was pushed out of the territory around Shechem.”14 On the other hand, it has been interpreted as a reference to the Israelite conquest of the city.15

From a religious standpoint a case could be made to interpret the story as a warning against sexual offenses in general. The root *tmr* (to defile) is used three times in reference to Dinah (vv. 5, 13, 27); Shechem has treated her as a *zonah* (harlot), v. 31.

We need to be more specific, however. The significance of this chapter is that Israel is seen as taking its first step toward becoming sedentary in Canaan. Israel (whether represented by Jacob, by Simeon and Levi, or by all of Jacob’s sons) faces Canaan (as represented by Shechem, with or without his father, and the population of the city). In response to Hamor’s proposal to enter into connubium with the Shechemites, Jacob’s sons point to circumcision as the paramount condition for this arrangement. Judging from the fact that the Shechemites accepted the stated condition, the brothers’ argument seemed reasonable enough. However, the narrator warns us explicitly of their insincerity before giving us the substance of the brothers’ reply: “(they) answered . . . deceitfully (*bemirmah*),” v. 13.16 In this way, the "solution", which seemed in sight when the Shechemites agreed to remove the only impediment to intermarriage, remains suspended, though the tension is partially and temporarily relieved. The tragic climax is reached on the third day after the men of Shechem have received circumcision.

What does the narrator have in mind? In other words, what was the "moral" of his tale — assuming that this story, too, was written as "a parable for its own time?"17

17Even "pure history" is always theologically motivated in the Bible, i.e., it has a message for Israel (and the Church).

Cf. the statement by S. Feldman: "Much of Biblical history was composed in a double sense, as recollection of past events and as parables for its own time." (Biblical Motives and Sources", Journal of Near Eastern Studies, 22, p. 73).

18I.e., dealing with origins, in this case the demand for circumcision before marriage.


21This is noteworthy for the Hebrew narrator seldom divulges a person’s state of mind by verbal description.
In this story we see Israel vis-à-vis Canaan, facing the problem of intermarriage (which the narrator strongly opposes). Not even the Canaanites' circumcision altered Israel's attitude, which, here at least, was caused by the irresponsible sexual behavior of Shechem, the Canaanite. The narrator does not condemn intermarriage explicitly, but he does sound a serious warning; it is as if he says: See how immoral the Canaanites are! Remember the shame they inflicted upon us at Shechem! The hearer is left to draw his own conclusions in the matter, but the story has already predisposed him against intermarriage.

How does this relate to the attitude toward the Canaanites we find elsewhere in Genesis? Generally speaking, the Genesis-narratives are much more favorably disposed to the Canaanites than some other Israelite traditions.  

Especially because this pericope deals with the overthrow of a city, we might be tempted to relate it to conquest-ideology, as, e.g., expressed in the concept of the herem (the curse executed on the conquered enemy and his goods, by destruction, as with the capture of Jericho, related in Josh. 6). The fact that only the men of Shechem were put to death would not be a decisive argument against this possibility, for though in theory the herem refers to total destruction (Josh. 6), there were also exceptions made, as in Numb. 31:17f., where virgins were kept alive. Taking these facts and the specific circumstances of our story into consideration, the Israelites' revenge can hardly be seen as a herem.  

Possibly we may interpret the Israelites' action as a proto-type of the holy war. At any rate, in our story we have the first clear case of Israelites meeting Canaanites as (to all intents and purposes) neighbors in an area where Israel planned to settle permanently. The narrator tried to leave the impression that assimilation of the two peoples was impossible (or at least undesirable, in view of the Canaanites' untraditional and immoral behavior) already in patriarchal times.  

We have remarked before that the book of Genesis generally takes a relatively favorable view of the Canaanites, as compared, e.g., to the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua. Yet, Abraham prefers that his son not marry a Canaanite, but a girl of his own clan (Gen. 24:3f.). Esau's marriage to two Hittite girls displeased his parents (26:34f.). It has been claimed, perhaps justly, that we may

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20 Due appreciation of the narrator's literary technique bears this out: the problem created by Shechem's wrongful act (v. 2) is not completely solved. Rather, enmity has been established, which must continue (Jacob leaves for Bethel, 35:1ff.). The condition of salom (peace and prosperity) which prevailed at the beginning of the story (33:18) has been disturbed at the first serious encounter of Israel and Canaan.
have here an example of the positive motive that a man should preferably marry within his own kindred, rather than an expression of abhorrence for the Canaanites.\(^{21}\)

A possible clue as to what is involved here is found in Abraham’s stated reason why he had Sarah say that she was his sister: “I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God (\textit{yir’at ‘elohim}) at all in this place” (20:11). It is clearly implied that the “fear of God” has a moral significance in that it keeps (even the pagan) from murder (20:11) and adultery (39:9). Thus, it cannot be fairly said that Genesis’ attitude toward the Canaanites is undividedly favorable. In fact, the narrator seems to justify, albeit tacitly, the Israelites’ fierce revenge; as far as he was concerned, Shechem’s evident subsequent generosity cannot undo his untraditional, immoral act of violating an Israelite girl. Israel, having intended to become permanent settlers, was alarmed at this first encounter with the Canaanites as (intended) permanent neighbors. The alarm had been sounded, and, though intermarriage was not always condemned \textit{per se}, a foundation was laid for subsequent polemic against it.

\(^{21}\)Van Seims, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 203.