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Luther and Calvin on Rape: Is the Crime Lost in the Agenda?

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Introduction

In an incisive essay, Marie Fortune questions why it so often appears that a woman's sexuality is offensive, though her victimization is not.[1] She asks, more specifically, 'Why is the church so quick to name sexuality a sin and so hesitant to name the sin of violence against women?' It is clear from the context that Fortune is primarily concerned with contemporary American society and, as she understands it, the failure of 'two conveyors of powerful social norms' – that is, the legal system and the church.[2] Apparently, their failure lies in condoning the situation through neglecting to address the problem head-on. However, despite the article's contemporary address and application there is a clear implication that the writer believes that things have always been that way. That is, the complaint strikes at the present situation, but it does so together with a somewhat contemptuous glance at the moral culpability of the past, 'This is not the only time that the Jewish and Christian faiths have had difficulty naming the sin of violence against women.'[3] Others conspicuously add to the argument.[4]

Within this contemporary context, it is the serious and penetrating

1 M. M. Fortune, 'Violence against Women: The Way Things Are Is Not the Way They Have To Be', in J. B. Nelson and S. P. Longfellow (eds), *Sexuality and the Sacred* (London, Mowbray, 1994), 326-34; first published in *The Drew Gateway* 58, 1988, 38-50).

2 *Ibid.* 329, 327, respectively.

3 *Ibid.* 329.

4 See, for example, J. C. Brown, 'Because of the Angels: Sexual Violence and Abuse', *Concilium* 4, 1994, 4; M. A. Hildebrand, 'Domestic Violence: A Challenge to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology', *Conrad Grebel Review* 10/1, 1992, 73-80.

question of why Christianity has 'difficulty in naming the sin of violence against women', taken together with the accusation of a historically culpable church that, in a way, provides the stimulus for the present study. Naturally, to explore the question as it stands is simply too large an undertaking for one brief essay.[5] But what we discover is that the question may be allowed to set the framework for an examination of the thinking of Luther and Calvin as they expound particular rape stories of the Old Testament. It is soon discovered that the reformers are certainly hesitant in their understanding of the victim's situation and somewhat deflective in their application at this crucial point. The question of why this is the case is not without significance.

Of course, we need to recognize at the outset that the question of what constitutes rape has developed through history. Today rape is thought of as forcible sex with an unwilling partner. In contrast, in the Old Testament, with its patriarchal society, rape appears to have been considered to be forcible sex between a man and 'the female ward of non-consenting male guardians', who were generally the father and/or her brothers.[6] Nevertheless, there is clearly a biblical recognition of the trauma experienced during and as a consequence of the violation on the part of the victim.[7] That is, Old Testament narratives evaluate the crime as well as relate the occurrence. They signal that rape has the potential to irrevocably ruin lives. The accounts show that rape is destructive, threatening self-respect and trust. They indicate that rape raises feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, humiliation, worthlessness and self-blame, among other things.[8]

The rape stories of the Old Testament elicit questions that demand satisfactory and sensitive responses from *every* age. How is the crime

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5 A great deal of work has been produced in both the biblical and the contemporary areas of this particular subject. In terms of the former, Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984) remains a seminal study. But notice also, A. L. Laffey, *Wives, Harlots and Concubines* (London, SPCK, 1988); S. P. Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1990); P. Noble, 'A 'Balanced' Reading of the Rape of Dinah: Some Exegetical and Methodological Observations', *BibInt* 4/2, 1996, 173-204; A. Bach, 'Rereading the Body Politic: Women and Violence in Judges 21', *BibInt* 6/1, 1998, 1-19, S. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen* (New York, Doubleday, 1998) and most recently, S. Scholz, *Rape Plots* (New York, Lang, 2000). Other significant works include S. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1976) and L. McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place* (Cambridge, Polity, 1999).

6 See W. H. Propp, 'Kinship in 2 Samuel 13', CBQ 55/1, 1993, 41. See particularly Dt. 22:28-29. Even if C. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody: Mass, Hendrikson, 1996), 245, is correct in saying that this paradigmatic law modifies earlier legislation in the interests of the weaker party, it seems that the inclusion of the dowry (*mōhar*) indicates the crucial position of the father in the matter.

7 See, for example, 2 Sa. 13:12-13, 19.

8 Brown, *op. cit.*, 8. '. . . they are stories of terror and torture.' (5)

'measured' – against what yardstick? Who is the victim? Who is the offended party? What is the relationship between victim and rapist? Where does guilt lie? Where is innocence? What is the network of obligation? And also, in some ways more religiously pointed, there are questions of faith, of course. Why does this happen to seemingly good people? Where is God when it happens? Whose side is God on? These are perennial concerns. Phyllis Trible suggests that 'Ancient tales of terror speak all too frighteningly of *the present.*'[9] By the nature of both the stories and of society, itself, this has always been the case – they have always spoken of the present. During the sixteenth century the rape accounts spoke into a society permeated by violence, both civil and familial, political and domestic. Luther and Calvin were well aware of this as frequent reference and their respective application show. Not only this, but also sexual behaviour was prominent among the moral and disciplinary issues that concerned them. Then, why do they appear to be so reticent to name the sin against women?

In the light of the foregoing introductory comments, the following essay seeks some understanding from their exposition of the stories of the rapes of Dinah and of Tamar.[10] The idea is not to criticize their exegesis of the passages *per se*, nor to examine it in the context of 'standard' interpretations. The idea is simply to ask what the reformers make of the situation with which they are confronted in rape narrative. Do the reformers face the questions that are naturally raised? Is their expository agenda getting in the way, as it were? Most importantly, do they lose sight of the horror and of the crime, itself?

The rape of Dinah (Gn. 34)

There are nearly twenty years between Luther's mature commentary on Genesis (1535) and Calvin's (1554).[11] The former is massive, whereas Calvin's exposition is reasonably succinct and to the point. The following is governed by this fact, of course.

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9 Trible, *op. cit*, xiii – emphasis added.

10 There are other texts in which women are abused that could be taken into account – for example, the story of Hagar (Gn. 16:3-13). However, this has been examined recently by John L. Thompson, 'Hagar, Victim or Villain? Three Sixteenth-Century Views', *CBQ* 59/2, 1997, 213-33. See also, P. Shelly, '"Hagar and the God-Who-Sees": Reflections on Genesis 16:3-13', *The Conrad Grebel Review* 11/3, 1993, 265-8; W. A. Bailey, 'Hagar: A Model for an Anabaptist Feminist?', *MQR* 68/2, 1994, 219-28; I. Fischer, ' "Go and Suffer Oppression!" said God's Messenger to Hagar', *Concilium* 1, 1994, 75-82.

11 Calvin's sermons on Genesis were preached in 1559.

1. Jacob and God.

Both reformers locate Jacob as the central character of the story, not Dinah. This is unsurprising, in one sense, after all the biblical narrative centres in the chapters surrounding this incident on the patriarch, not his daughter. In the line of election and salvation it is Jacob who is significant. But what *is* surprising is that in seeking to expound the aggressive, sexual violation of Dinah *within* the context of the Jacob narrative, both reformers see the offence as against the father (and his house) as much as, and probably more than, against the literal victim, herself. That is, both presume that the primary victim is Jacob. Luther suggests that the whole occurrence is a trial for Jacob. He then expands that thought, 'Not for him only was this sorrowful burden, but it was a terrible disgrace also for his whole household and his sons.' Calvin's perspective is noticeably similar. He speaks of the chapter recording a severe contest 'with which God exercised his servant' – and by this he means Jacob, the patriarch, of course.[12]

That is not to suggest that the reformers do not recognize the crime perpetrated against Dinah. They do. But it is Jacob who is most prominent in their thinking, despite the fact that he figures in the story largely as a familial designation, locating the victim in a particular family – that of 'the house of Jacob'. In fact, on the evidence, Jacob might be described as somewhat passive, perhaps even indifferent to his daughter's fate, negotiating in a calm and objective manner his daughter's marriage with her assailant, Shechem, and his father, Hamor (Gn. 34:5f). However, because the reformers focus on the patriarch their teaching draws its lessons from Jacob, not from the trauma that Dinah experiences. This is significant in answering our original question because Luther and Calvin over-emphasize Jacob as pivotal to their understanding of what has happened, at the expense of his daughter *to whom it happened.* In this manner, the agenda seems to get in the way.

Calvin's brief comment simply underlines the idea that because

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12 *Comm. Gn.* 34:1, LW 6.187 [WA 44.139], *Comm. Gn.* 34:1-2, LW 6.190 [WA 44.141], and *CO* 23.456 [CTS 2.218], respectively. Luther's comment further on says that 'this story contains a very sad calamity that befell the patriarch Jacob.' Luther's work is cited from the Weimar edition [WA], the Latin text of *In Primum Librum Mose Enarrationes.* English translation is from the American edition [LW], J. Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works, Lectures on Genesis,* vols 1-8 (St. Louis, Concordia, 1958-66). Regarding Calvin, the Latin text is found in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia [CO]* (Corpus Reformatorum 51; Brunswick, 1882). English translation is from *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis,* 2 vols (Edinburgh, Calvin Translation Society, 1847-50) – translated by John King – henceforth, CTS. English translations of New Testament commentaries is from the edition by D. and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1957-70).

Dinah was precious to Jacob, the disgrace inflicted 'the deepest wound of grief upon his mind.'[13] However, Luther's earlier exposition says a great deal more. He seems to measure the crime not so much against the self-worth of the victim (that is, the one raped), but against the status of the victim's father. First, the crime is deemed to be despicable from the perspective of Jacob's public status. Notice how Luther puts this:

> Accordingly as they talked and engaged in proud discussion about the violation and pollution of their sister, *the daughter of such a great man,* who in lineage, beauty, and piety excelled all the maidens of the locality. For in this way they intensified this injury, *which in kind and individuality is in many ways different from the common variety of deed.* For she was not the daughter of a burgher or peasant but of the highest prophet in this land, nor was it only a private person that was violated, *but the public ministry was despised.* Moreover, if anyone dares to take a daughter from such a great patriarch and ravish her by force and keep *her* against *his* will, what will he not dare against others?[14]

The rape of Dinah is singled out as significant, not so much because a woman was treated utterly shamefully, but rather because her father was important. Significantly, he is elsewhere described as a priest, a king, 'a very holy prophet' and 'a holy patriarch' – and his ministry is noticeably that of preaching.[15] Second, the crime is also measured by Jacob's status as a neighbour or a guest in a foreign country – a place where the rules of hospitality might have demanded that he and his household should have been safe. Luther describes it as 'a most atrocious and intolerable trial that his only daughter . . . should be violently defiled. . . . [C]ontrary to all expectation, he is compelled to endure such an outstanding disgrace.'[16] It is noticeable that at the point of Luther most clearly recognizing the wrong done to Dinah he underlines the patriarch's difficulty, not hers. With the biblical words, 'He seized her' (Gn. 34:2) comes the comment, 'That this man should have such a disgraceful wrong inflicted on him is certainly something unworthy.'[17]

This perspective then drives the reformer's application away from the incident of the rape itself and what could have been specific social teaching to consider the sufferings of the godly. In this case, of course, Jacob, not Dinah, remains the focus! It is at this point that Luther introduces the mysterious ways of God.

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13 *Comm. Gn.* 34:1, *CO* 23.456 [CTS 2.218].
14 *Comm. Gn.* 34:13-17, LW 6.203 [WA 44.150-51] – emphasis added.
15 *Ibid.* LW 6.202 [WA 44.150], *Comm. Gn.* 34:1-2, LW 6.192 [WA 44.142], respectively.
16 *Comm. Gn.* 1-2, LW 6.191 [WA 44.142] – emphasis added.
17 *Comm. Gn.* 1-2, LW 6.193 [WA 44.144].

> It is assuredly unworthy and wretched that such a great patriarch should experience such disgrace when he was protected by so many promises that he would be under God's keeping and the protection and custody of the angels.[18]

In a passionate way Luther asks poignant and searching questions of God's dealing with Jacob. Why has the God with whom Jacob triumphed not kept watch?

> God ignores the matter and acts just as if He did not know or see the daughter being dragged away to be defiled. For He permits this to be done while the angels rest and do nothing.[19]

Questions of self-guilt undoubtedly troubled Jacob – was it because of his own sin or that found in his household that this has befallen him? The whole situation drives the patriarch to the Lord for mercy. But was that why God allowed the rape? In an extraordinary comment Luther declares that, 'It was done for *our* sake, that *we* may learn patience and consolation in adversity.'[20]

Clearly, God is intimately, but indirectly, involved with the appalling situation. But he is never deemed culpable. It seems good to God to allow 'those unaccustomed and unheard-of monstrous calamities'.[21] He permits the sin, but is not the author of it. However, God punishes the Shechemites with 'a horrible penalty' through the action of Jacob's sons.[22] The obvious and typically reformational counsel is then given: negatively, we must not provoke God's wrath by license; positively, we must gratefully hear and embrace God's Word.

2. Dinah, the rape victim, and God.

The emphases and logic of the argument and its application leave the reader wondering where Dinah is in all this theology and general application. What do the reformers make of the rape-victim, for that is what she is?

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18 *Comm. Gn.* 34:1-2, LW 6.191 [WA 44.142]

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Comm. Gn.* 34:1-2, LW 6.192 [WA 44.142] – emphasis added. (Earlier, he makes the following comment, '. . . to our reason it seems that the kingdom of God is administered in such a way that the grief of the godly and ungodly is equal, indeed, that the happiness of the latter is by far greater than that of the godly' – Comm. Gn. 34:1-2, LW 6.191-2 [WA 44.142].) See also LW 6.187 [WA 44.139], LW 6.217-19 [WA 44.160-63].

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Comm. Gn.* 34:3, LW 6.194 [WA 44.144]. Luther later spells this out: although Jacob's sons act unjustly, 'God is not unjust when He punishes the Shechemites' – *Comm. Gn.* 34:27-29, LW 6.214 [WA 44.159]. Calvin's comment on this is similar: 'The sons of Jacob acted wickedly; but we must observe that fornication was, in this manner, divinely condemned' – *Comm. Gn.* 34:25, *CO* 23.461 [CTS 2.227].

Certainly, they do not entirely lose sight of Dinah, nor of the awfulness of her situation and predicament. Luther pictures the young woman distracted by grief and sorrow; but then adds that everyone else – down to the servants, the maids and the shepherds of the household – would have felt that grief, too! She is not permitted her individual pain in this. Calvin seeks to give a sense of the violence of the act by adding to what the text itself says. He does this by picturing Dinah 'dragged forth from the house of Jacob.'[23] The biblical passage is clear that it is Dinah who voluntarily leaves the house. Presumably, Calvin wishes to draw the contrast between the home ('a sanctuary') and the potential evil around that secure place. But, even though the Scripture passage lends no credence to the notion, both reformers wish to accuse Dinah (the victim) of sin.

Luther takes time to argue that Dinah is merely a child – probably about twelve years of age. His references to her then take this as fact: she is 'a girl who is almost still an infant – she was not yet marriageable', 'she is still a child', and so on.[24] This allows Luther to spell out what he sees as her sin in more childlike terms. Picturing games, dances and weddings in the area to which Dinah visited, the reformer writes:

> Dinah wanted to see the daughters of the region, how they were decked out and adorned and how beautiful they were. The text seems to indicate the same, namely, that she was curious, since, indeed, she went out without the permission of her father and mother, on her own without a companion. She is too secure and confident, for she was still a child and did not fear any danger to her modesty. It seems, then, that she sinned out of curiosity, because she went out to the daughters of the land and their associates without consulting her parents.[25]

Even the extremity of what Luther is implying is not enough to make him reflect further. He says, bluntly, 'But the disobedience and curiosity of the girl is punished quite severely, for she is overwhelmed and defiled by violence.'[26] So, for the 'sin' of childish curiosity and of going out without consulting those responsible for her (namely, her parents), she is punished by being raped. Who is the one who punishes? Luther does not say this categorically, but of course, according to the theological parallels throughout this commentary, it must be God who does the punishing with such severity!

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23 *Comm. Gn.* 34:4-5, LW 6.195 [WA 44.145], *Comm. Gn.* 34:6, *CO* 23.457 [CTS 2.219], respectively.

24 See his lengthy reasoning: LW 6.187-90 [WA 44.139-41] and his further references, *Comm Gen.* 34:1-2, LW 6.190 [WA 44.141], LW 6.192 [WA 44.143].

25 *Comm. Gn.* 34: 1-2, LW 6.192 [WA 44.143].

26 *Comm. Gn.* 34: 3, LW 6.194 [WA 44.144].

Dinah becomes an example to girls contemporary with the reformer.

> They should not form the habit of strolling about and looking out of the window and lounging around the door, but should learn to stay at home and never to go anywhere without the permission of their parents or without companions.[27]

Calvin is just as harsh in his judgement. He claims that Moses partly blames Dinah – this is apparently implied by Moses' comment that Dinah 'went out to visit'. Then he seeks to apply the situation to his own readers:

> Dinah is ravished, *because*, having left her father's house, she wandered about more freely than was proper. *She ought to have remained quietly at home.* . . . For if a vain curiosity was so heavily punished in the daughter of holy Jacob, not less danger 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.[28]

He later says that 'she ought to have remained under her mother's eyes in the tent' and that both the Apostle Paul teaches this and nature itself dictates (*et natura ipsa dictat*) that girls (and women) should stay at home as *oikouroi*; (*vel domus custodes* – keepers of the house).[29]

So, Calvin concurs with Luther's view that curiosity is the immediate reason for Dinah's punishment. But we notice, too, that in his application he hints that women who are curious and who leave their homes (improperly) '*excite* the passions of youth towards themselves.' There seems no question, then. For Calvin, the rape-victim (at least in this specific case – and, certainly, others are implied) in some way asks for the crime against herself. This cannot be said in the same way about Luther's handling of the text as Dinah is simply a child. Obviously, other important questions are raised by Luther's extraordinary analysis, but not this particular one. However, Calvin seems to wish to draw the conclusion that women who wander from their rightful place at home somehow incite the crime. This may perhaps reflect Calvin's clearer-cut, defined relationship between suffering in this way and the cause. Certainly, this will become more transparent in the examination of his handling of the narrative of Tamar's rape, below.

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27 *Comm. Gn.* 34:1-2, LW 6.193 [WA 44.143].

28 *Comm. Gn.* 34:1, *CO* 23.456 [CTS 2.218] – emphasis added.

29 *Ibid.* Linda McDowell, *op. cit.*, 150, says, 'Interestingly, in these cases of rape and murder women also appear as transgressors who through their actions should also be excluded from the public sphere.' This markedly parallels the reformers' thinking on Dinah.

3. Shechem and others.

The crime, itself, is described briefly and in similar and conventional ways. Luther says that Shechem 'indulges his lust and passion', 'he seizes her by violence'. Calvin states that Dinah is ravished, forcibly abused and violated and treated with contempt. They both realize the potential of a very different outcome: Shechem *could* have married Dinah, had he sought permission and controlled his lust.[30]

It is here that the reformers might be expected to labour the point of responsibility and sin, after all Shechem *is* the rapist. Though they certainly recognise this, both are rather deflective in their comments. Accordingly, both indicate that Shechem was brought up with too much freedom, without proper discipline, without correction. In this respect the rapist becomes a timely reminder to parents that it is the Lord's will for moderation, order and control to dominate the familial sphere. Luther says, 'God wants the youths to be controlled and restrained by discipline . . . they cannot control themselves nor see what is good for them.'[31] This pessimistic thesis of the nature of young men certainly appears to take some responsibility from Shechem (and other rapists) – by implication, it casts it on to the irrepressible sinful (sexual) urge of youth and on to the lack of proper control of parents.

Luther underlines repeatedly that there is no confession or mention of sin, either on Shechem's part, or on the part of Hamor.[32] What apparently troubles him is that had these repented they would have been pardoned. This is quite consistent with the evangelical impulse of much of the reformer's writing through Genesis. Speaking of the son, he states:

> Nevertheless, he does not repent yet but still increases his sin, which otherwise vanishes and is blotted out through repentance. For repentance removes sin; impenitence, on the other hand, magnifies, enlarges, and aggravates sin.[33]

Luther's understanding is that Shechem worsened the situation by refusing to acknowledge his fault in the crime. His punishment

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30 *Comm. Gn.* 34:1-2, LW 6.193 [WA 44.143-4], *CO* 23.456 [CTS 2.218], respectively.

31 *Comm. Gn.* 34:3, LW 6.194 [WA 44.144]. Elsewhere he speaks of 'flesh so overwhelmed by the leprosy of lust (*carnis lepram*) – *Comm. Gn.* 1:28, LW 1.71 [WA 42.53]. See also, *Comm. Rom.* 6:13, LW 25.320 [WA 56.332]; *Comm. 1 Cor.* 7:6-7, LW 28.11 [WA 12.99]; *Comm. Gal.* 5:19 (1535), LW 27.80 [WA 402.100].

32 See, for example, *Comm Gn.* 34:11-12, LW 6.199 [WA 44.148]. Regarding Hamor, Luther says, 'He acknowledges no guilt; he does not confess the sin, and much less does he plead an excuse' – *Comm. Gn.* 34:8-10, LW 6.198 [WA 44.147].

33 *Comm. Gn.* 34:4-5, LW 6.195 [WA 44.145]. Generally, Calvin is less inclined to inject the New Testament Gospel into Old Testament commentaries – see T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Edinburgh, T&T. Clark, 1992), 91-2.

therefore is just, though the means is not.

Calvin's exposition has two surprises at this point. First, he suggests that Shechem initially made a courteous advance towards Dinah and that only after she had refused his approach of love did his lust get the better of him. In fact, the biblical text (34:3) speaks of his love *only after* the violation. The reformer clearly finds it difficult to account for the assailant's post-rape affection, without introducing it into the original equation. This has the unfortunate result of implying that Dinah is somehow to blame (or is responsible) for Shechem's lack of self-control.[34] Why did she not simply concede at the verbal stage of the encounter? It seems to underline what Calvin has said concerning Dinah somehow inciting sin by wandering. Second, in contradiction to Luther's earlier view, Calvin suggests that Shechem should have been leniently treated after the rape. There are two reasons for this. First, Jacob's sons should have 'granted forgiveness to his fervent love' – a love that Calvin expounds as authentic throughout the narrative, both before and after the rape. Second, Shechem should have been accepted because Hamor, his father, together with the 'equitable conditions he offers', should have had a far better reception.[35]

The rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)

In examining the reformers' views on the rape of Tamar we are restricted to a few random comments from Luther's *corpus* and two sermons by John Calvin preached in Geneva, in 1562.

1. David and God

Calvin assumes that David is the chief character of the chapter. This is certainly not surprising. The first verse, in which the phrase *ben-Dawid* occurs twice in a semi-redundant position, carries his presence through into this chapter.[37] But, in fact, he remains largely out of focus. Nevertheless, just as Jacob is the key to the chapters surrounding the narrative of Dinah's rape, so David is central in the succession narrative of 2 Samuel. However, it is the prominence to which Calvin raises David, *in relation to the rape story*, that is, perhaps, somewhat disconcerting.

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34 *Comm. Gn.* 34:3, *CO* 23.456-7 [CTS 2.218-19].

35 *Comm. Gn.* 34:8, *CO* 23.458 [CTS 2.222].

36 Calvin's two sermons on 2 Samuel 13:1-25 are found in D. Kelly (tr.), *Sermons on 2 Samuel* (Edinburgh, 1992), 613-628, 629-643 – henceforth *Sermons*.

37 He briefly assumes a dominant role in verse 7. See J. Smith, 'The Discourse Structure of the Rape of Tamar', *Vox Evangelica* 20, 1990, 21-42.

As Jacob is previously seen as the primary victim so too is David. We pointed out that Luther, in his longer exposition, is drawn to question the possible reasons for the patriarch's trial. He fails to provide totally satisfactory answers – the bottom line is that it provides us with an example of patience. Yet the whole question remains something of a mystery to him. Not so, here, in Calvin's 'clear' thinking. God tests his servant 'to the limit', Tamar's rape is primarily punishment *for David.*[38]

According to Calvin's preaching, there seem to be two sins that God punishes David for simultaneously. First (chronologically, but not in terms of the sermon order), David is still being punished for taking too many wives – in this he had given himself too much liberty. 'Thus, the appropriate salary and dividend was returned to him, God punished him' – and, noticeably, with this comment, Calvin concludes his first sermon rather abruptly.[39] Second, Calvin suggests that David is guilty of domestic negligence. There is a suspicion that he is guilty of changing a disciplined routine, of neglecting 'a good set of rules'.[40] Notice, in this context, the logic and the application triggered by the biblical words describing Tamar, 'she was a virgin' (13:2).

> 'she had been raised in such a way that there had been no occasion for her to be raped, . . . those who would have wanted to corrupt her did not have access to her. It showed virtue on David's part for having been diligent, like this, in keeping his daughter chaste, but we can see, on the other hand, how subtle the devil is, for in the end *David let his daughter be corrupted* . . . Hence, let us be so diligent that whenever any opportunity to break our rules comes up, we think carefully two or three times lest we ever turn our back from *the disciplined way of life* which we have decided to pursue.[41]

David is somehow responsible for the violence done to Tamar – he 'let his daughter be corrupted'. Earlier, the reformer underlines this by inferring that up until that juncture David had been an excellent father: he 'had guarded his house prudently as a good father. But, even so, notice how he was suddenly surprised. Although he had worked so faithfully in looking after his family, his poor daughter experienced disaster, and he *even gave her over with his own hands*, with-

38 *Sermons*, 653, 614, respectively. Calvin says, that it is 'a tragic heart-break for a king to see his daughter raped' (613).

39 *Sermons*, 627.

40 *Sermons*, 618.

41 *Sermons*, 617-18 – emphasis added. Calvin writes by way of application: 'Those who wish to safeguard the honour of their house will sometimes ruin it, even though they are quite vigilant in doing good, for it only takes a day, or even a minute, to reverse what they have faithfully carried out for one or two, or even ten years (625).

out realizing it'.[42] We have previously noted that God is said to be punishing David in the rape of his daughter. Calvin explicitly states, "here was already part of *his* 'salary', that his daughter should thus have lost *her* honour.'[43]

There appears to be a great deal of inconsistency in Calvin's handling of the concept of punishment at this point. In the introduction to his sermon on 2 Samuel 13:1-14, the reformer clearly wishes to suggest that even though God is not now a Judge to believers, nevertheless, he chastises his people severely – after all, part of David's chastisement is Tamar's rape. There are surely inherent problems with the following short comment.

> [W]e see that such an excellent man as David was not spared, but that God used great severity with him, even though he did grant him mercy, we must also recognize ourselves that although God does not want to treat us with extreme severity as our Judge, he must nevertheless take his rod in hand in order to chastise us.[44]

He seems to be attempting to balance two widely separate poles of thought – God *must* punish sin, God forgives those who repent. They seem incongruous when brought together, especially in the light of the suffering of Tamar. This lack of congruence surfaces again where Calvin suggests, dogmatically, that 'the sin of David was already buried; God put it away'. Nevertheless, according to Calvin, the Lord punishes David in order to subdue him and for him to feel the gravity of his offence.[45] Undoubtedly, there is something positive here. The reformer is asserting the concept that God is no longer a Judge to his people, his relationship has now changed to that of Father. But the difficulty appears at the point of the severity that God employs to chastise his children: Tamar is raped to punish David for sins that have been buried and, by implication, forgotten! We need to keep hold of this profound problem until we have presented something of the reformer's perspective on Tamar, herself.

2. Tamar, the rape victim, and God.

When interpreting 2 Samuel 13, Calvin certainly draws no direct correlation between the victim's sin and the rape as there is in his exegesis of the case of Dinah. There, we saw that curiosity and going out without companions were said to be punished by her violation. Here, there is really no such possibility – there is nothing concrete that the

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42 *Sermons*, 624.

43 *Sermons*, 629 – emphasis added. Of course, it is David's 'salary' because it brings great disgrace on the house of David.

44 *Sermons*, 614.

45 *Ibid.*

reformer can legitimately lay against Tamar. However, there *are* inferences that appear just as disturbing in the reformer's exposition of Tamar's rape, inferences that present themselves in the reformer's application. For instance, Calvin suggests that people threw dust (or ashes) on their heads, as Tamar does (13:19), to show their 'repentance and humility, especially when some calamity occurred, and *they felt the wrath of God*'.[46] Of course, the anger of God is associated with the transgression of a sinner. By implication, then, Calvin suggests that in covering her head with ashes, Tamar indicates that she is conscious that she had sinned. That is, Calvin treats Tamar's response as a matter of *guilt*, not *shame*. Clearly, calamity befalls Tamar because of her faults. She is punished because of sin – and that punishment is her rape. Again, God is intimately involved, but not culpable, of course.[47]

Later, in seeking to make more contemporarily germane the situation that Absalom faced, the reformer makes the following general application:

> Therefore, when someone has injured us in some way, . . . let us note in the first place, that God is our Judge in this matter, and that we never receive any injury from the hand of man, without it proceeding ultimately from him *as a just chastisement*. . . . When someone has done us some wrong . . . we consider carefully that God has moved his hand, *wanting to chastise us for our faults*'. But there is another point also: that is, that God wants to show that he is master and has total superiority over us.'[48]

So, generally, injuries toward us happen either because God wishes to afflict us for our faults, or 'when he simply wants to take control of us'.[49] Of course, this application can be related manifestly to the violation of Tamar. Therefore, we seem to be able to assert, more specifically, that in Calvin's scheme of things is the idea that Tamar was raped either as punishment for her sin, or because God wanted to show her who was really in control! Either way, the reformer presents us with tremendous difficulties both in our understanding of the occurrence of the rape and (of course) in our understanding of a

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46 *Sermons*, 632. It is not necessary for Calvin to interpret the ashes in this way, of course. Even the reformer indicates a different meaning in his comments on Job 30:19, for example. See *Serm. Job* 30:11-21, *CO* 36.613-14, where he speaks of Job showing that he felt utterly overthrown with 'not a spark of life left in him . . . utterly consumed, in whom there reigns nothing but death'. These words would apply equally to Tamar at this point in the narrative.

47 See *CO* 6.258, 264 – English translation, G. I. Davies (tr.), *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* (Carlisle/Grand Rapids, Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1996), 39-40, 48, respectively. See also *Inst.* I.xv.1.

48 *Sermons*, 636.

49 *Ibid.*

God who might behave in this way.

As with Luther, Calvin appears to need a clear-cut, defining connection between something like rape and the sin (or the supposed fault) of the victim. They work rather like a moral 'cause and effect' in his thinking and exposition. In the case of Dinah, it was relatively easy for him to suggest the specific causes for the woman's violation and Luther had done so before him. In the instance of Tamar's rape, however, Calvin is left with inference alone. Perhaps that is why he finds it necessary to focus so much of his sermonic application on what he supposes to be Tamar's continuing sin, post-rape. In a significant turn of attention Calvin is able to show Tamar in a very bad light indeed and, perhaps, somehow to justify his overall judgement – at least, that is what he appears to be doing.

Having been violated by force, Tamar suggests that her brother Amnon (her rapist) marries her (13:13). In fact, she is willing to marry even before the rape – for Tamar, half-sibling marriage is evidently conscionable.[50] Interestingly, Luther is able to accept this within the specific situation and he seems to do so with some compassion. In fact, his thinking seems to have developed within a couple of years. In *The Estate of Marriage* (1522) Luther comments that restrictions about marrying stepsisters were not very strict – and he cites Tamar's suggestion as an example. Later, in his *Preface to the Old Testament* (1523), he is more positive (again, citing Tamar), 'one sees plainly that the kings, priests and heads of the people often transgressed the laws boldly, at the demand of faith and love.'[51] In other words, Luther believes that faith and love were to take precedence over law; they rule, law does not. In this manner, he is thus able to allow Tamar freedom to marry her brother (and assailant), Amnon. But more than that, she is able to improve her lot in an otherwise shameful situation and to find future security within the society in which she lived.

Calvin, however, is markedly different. The possibility and therefore the alternative that Luther is able to pursue is simply not open to Calvin, the marriage is unthinkable to him. Once he comments on

50 See Propp, *art. cit.*, 42. Propp is convinced that marriage between the two (after the rape) 'is the obvious choice'. It is possible that Tamar appeals to custom, not law – see Trible, *op. cit.*, 45.

51 LW 45.23; LW 35.240, respectively. For him the law of nature (*lex natura*) was inviolable, common sense tells us that – *Comm. Gn.* 1:28, CO 23.29 [CTS 1.98]. On the whole, Luther appears more compassionate to the victim – see *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, LW 9.224 [WA 14.704].

the illegality of incest,[52] the reformer refuses to let go until he has made his point and shown Tamar to be thoroughly at fault. In the first sermon[53] Calvin simply indicates that Tamar knew that incest was forbidden. In the next[54] he spells out her culpability in no uncertain terms. The essence of her wrong is simple. According to Calvin,

> It was as if she were saying that it was a greater sin for him not to persist in his evil than it was when he gave himself over to offending God by that raging lust which had set him on fire.[55]

For Calvin, then, it was far worse to continue in the sin of incest (as he defines that) than to commit rape. That could be said to imply a fault in Tamar (the rape victim) that, in a sense, is graver than that so far discovered in her assailant. After all, it is Tamar who wishes to marry and it is Amnon who (on that suggestion) drives her out of his room and locks the door (13:17-18)! Certainly, by implication, the roles seem to be reversed in the reformer's thinking.

So, what of Tamar's motives? Calvin is adamant that her primary motive is a sinful over-concern about her own reputation. Nothing is said about her personal, future security, given the social norms prevalent in Israel. His conclusion is almost incredible, given the circumstances of her demise. Nevertheless, Calvin persists:

> Tamar, who was horrified at having been raped by her brother, . . . tried to use marriage as a false cover-up, thus making the offence which had been committed twice as bad.[56]

He says, further, that Tamar was prepared to let the whole matter drop '*as long as she would not be blamed in public.*'[57] Notice how he develops this to Tamar's detriment:

> Tamar did it all backwards, for she kept on wanting both the mighty and the insignificant to know that her brother had raped her, and that she had not consented. Yet where was God and his justice? These were, so to speak,

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52 Calvin says, elsewhere, that incest is a 'crime . . . so abhorrent to nature, that not even among the Gentiles, has it ever been tolerable' – *Comm. Gn.* 35:22, *CO* 23.473 [CTS 2.246]. See also, *Comm. Lev.* 18:6, *CO* 24.661 [CTS 3.98]; *Comm. 1 Cor.* 5:1, *CO* 49.377 [Torrance, 105]. This is part of what W. J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford, 1988), 63, describes as 'Calvin's dark vision of the contemporary world'.

53 That is, Calvin's sermon on 2 Samuel 13:1-14 (Aug. 29, 1562), *Sermons*, 613-28.

54 On 2 Samuel 13:15-25 (Sept. 7, 1562), *Sermons*, 629-43.

55 *Sermons*, 632. Calvin had already underlined this: 'Now if you compare one to the other, it is obvious that evil which continues unchecked is always greater and more excessive. If a man commits fornication but then recognizes his offence, and so abstains from that evil, it is not as wicked as if he persists, and goes from bad to worse' (631).

56 *Sermons*, 631.

57 *Ibid.* – emphasis added.

> asleep, for 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.[58]

Calvin's point seems to be that Tamar ought to have allowed God to have delivered her from shame – that it was unnecessary for *her* to take the initiative in this manner. Calvin shows no awareness of the psychological response of rape victims and particularly their feelings of powerlessness and shame. This seems so much in contradiction to what is internally happening in the biblical passage. In fact, the language of the chapter in 2 Samuel implies not only a negative evaluation of Amnon, but it also increasingly produces a conscious pity for Tamar. This is highlighted at the point when Amnon orders her out, in Hertzberg's phrase, 'like an irksome prostitute'.[59] He appears at odds with the message.

3. Amnon[60] and the devil.

Calvin characteristically employs animal imagery to describe Amnon indulging his sin of lust. He says, 'this passion was like a vicious animal, which has to be tied up in chains, and kept behind bars' and, in applying the idea, 'our lusts and passions are terrible beasts and very difficult to keep under control.'[61] The imagery points to the remedy, lust is to be broken, not nurtured. Self-control, within the clear parameters of the law, is to dominate and to determine the lives of those who would do good.

As the reformer considers Amnon's sin it is clear to him that there is something more than the fleshly lusts of youth at work in the crime of rape – at least, in this particular instance. Calvin takes the opportunity to draw his congregation into considering the schemes and work of Satan:

> Not only were his eyes blinded by that wicked passion which had seized him, but the devil was possessing him in such a way that he was totally out of his senses. . . . The devil had such control of him that he did not know

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58 *Sermons*, 633.

59 H. W. Hertzberg, *1 and 2 Samuel* (London, 1964), 324 – quoted by Smith, *art. cit.*, 38. It is not without significance that this throwing out occurs just after the two assume equal precedence as they finally confront each other (13:11-14) – see Smith, art. cit., 34.

60 The secondary characters are clearly culpable in the situation as well. Calvin accuses Jonadab of being a pimp (*Sermons*, 620) and Absalom of hypocrisy and vengeance (*Sermons*, 636).

61 *Sermons*, 617, 616, respectively. See *Inst.* II.ii.24; II.iv.1, II.vii.10. Also, P. A. Huff, 'Calvin and the Beasts: Animals in John Calvin's Theological Discourse', JETS 42/1 (1999), 67-75.

any more about kinship than a dumb animal.[62]

It almost appears that the devil is at fault in a way that seems largely to sever Amnon from his own responsibility for the crime – but not so. Calvin is adamant that it is Amnon, not the devil, who initiates the sin. Satan merely takes the opportunity given and thereby takes control. However, the reformer's language is, perhaps, excessive. For example he says that 'the devil enters in and *takes possession of us*'. By this he presumably means no more than that the devil takes command – he uses the telling phrase, 'we are conquered' – words which follow his statement that, 'all our senses are bewitched; godly sentiments no longer control us'.[63]

If we consider this aspect of the reformer's teaching we see that it is significant in the context of the shameful violation of Tamar. It is certainly worth noting that when Calvin applies the passage – particularly the reaction of Absalom to his sister's rape – he seems to do so with an extraordinary off-setting of responsibility. Calvin quotes the apostle Paul, 'our battles are not against flesh and blood' but against spiritual enemies (Eph. 6:12). He then admonishes his listeners to keep in mind their ultimate enemies. It is worth quoting the next few sentences at length:

> When men do us an injury, they are motivated by Satan; he is their guide and master. . . . Suppose that a man comes up to kill me, and strikes me. When I become aware of the evil, after I have been wounded, I will not be angry with the sword so much as with my enemy who used it. For the sword did not have any evil desire to wound me; so therefore, I have to turn to the enemy. Here let us learn not to be like dogs, tormented by someone throwing stones at them! They pay no attention to the hand throwing the stones, but tear at the stone! Let us learn from St. Paul that our fight is *not with mortal creatures.*[64]

Calvin employs images of a sword wielded and a stone hurled at someone to elucidate his thought. But, the two images are noticeably weak. Not only do they employ inanimate objects to convey something about aggressive and violent assailants – and so they simply *do not work.* By them Calvin seeks to go beyond and behind the obvious to the one who 'really' inflicts the pain, that is the devil. In so doing he surely does a huge disservice to the victims of rape and brutality. On one hand and at a particular level, what he says does some justice to the overall situation. In the biblical, macro-perspective on life in its entirety the enemies that Paul has in mind are the enemies of salvation, truth, social justice, order, personal safety and so on – and they

62 *Sermons*, 622, 624, respectively.
63 *Sermons*, 646.
64 *Sermons*, 637 – emphasis added.

are spiritual enemies. On the other hand and at a more concrete (earthly?) level, from the viewpoint of those caught up in the crime of rape, those who have been violated and shamefully abused, for example (as Tamar is here), 'our fight *is* (manifestly) with mortal creatures'. In *that* sense, and at *that* level, perhaps that is the one positive thing that can be said of Absalom after the rape. Although his vengeance wrongly takes the law into his own hands, at least he punishes the wrongdoer, a thing that no-one else appears prepared to do![65]

Reflections

We began our investigation with the question put by Marie Fortune concerning the difficulty that the church (for example) has always appeared to have in 'naming the sin against women'. The present short study has not set out to clarify the answer in any definitive way, of course. The question as it stands is simply too broad. However, employing the question as a framework we have been able to examine the reformers, Luther and Calvin, as they respond to two rape narratives from the Old Testament. It was suggested that we might be able to discern, not only if these influential theologians have that difficulty, but also whether there are hints as to why they might have it. In this we recognize the limitations of the study and, consequently, offer reflections (not conclusions, as such) that may further some understanding in this problematic area.

There is an observable pattern that both reformers adopt. The core component of the pattern is that of responsibility within the situation. The pattern is perhaps best considered as concentric. If we picture the rape, itself, as the centre, every character in both of the incidents is involved, every person is responsible (or culpable) in some way. This structure simplifies in order to clarify, of course. Yet, this is not a construct imposed without due regard to what is actually happening in the reformers' exegesis. It is significant that though the biblical circumstances are entirely different and the major primary source and contribution for each is different – that is, Luther for Gn. 34, Calvin for 2 Sam. 13 – the results are almost identical.

Both reformers, for whatever reason, seem to need to find every-

65 Calvin complains at David's weakness at this point. Although he acknowledges that David neither applauded nor approved of the crime, according to the reformer, he should have held him in prison 'for a time or for life'. Characteristically, this then becomes a lesson in discipline for both fathers and magistrates (*Sermons*, 641). See also, Laffey, *op. cit.*, 124.

one at least responsible for the crime.[66] They both have a tendency to blame. Obviously, Shechem and Amnon *are* guilty – they are the rapists, and both Luther and Calvin recognize their culpability. They read Dinah and Tamar as in some way responsible and insist on it though the scriptural passages suggest no such thing. Indeed, part of the inherent problem is that the reformers work within legal categories; the biblical narratives within the ideas of honour and shame.[67] Jacob and David are key figures, of course, and somewhat less directly bear responsibility for their daughters' violation. Certainly, in the case of Calvin's handling of Tamar's rape, the devil is accused also. And, then, God, himself, is responsible – either for testing Jacob or for punishing Dinah, David and Tamar for their sins. Ultimately, according to the reformers, it is God who is in control even when rape occurs.

Part of the answer of why the reformers find it difficult to 'name the sin against women' is to be found here in the structure as well as the agenda of their thinking. The apparent concentricism acts with centrifugal force. It throws the focus of exegesis and application *away from* the crime out towards God's involvement. In similar ways both reformers use the text to work out a theology to cope with the fact of divine sovereignty within the context of a fearful and violent crime. For Luther, although part of the answer lies in the concept of chastisement, there appears to remain a question. The whole thing is a mystery – but he applies it anyway! For Calvin, on the other hand, calamity equates with punishment of sin (or, worse, simply control) and God is thereby justified.[68]

Another part of the answer lies in the reformers' perspective of who the victim is. According to them both, Jacob and David are the primary victims of the crime. This does two things. First, it obscures what is actually happening. Dinah and Tamar are violently abused and sexually raped. The biblical passages seem to suggest that we measure the crime by the physical victim *to whom the rape happened* and that we evaluate the other characters by their response to it. They are then not found to be culpable or responsible for the rape (except

66 Interestingly, the word 'responsible' does not occur in Calvin's *corpus*. There was no corresponding Latin or French word. However, Calvin had equivalent language, particularly that of accountability and culpability. See H. Rolston, 'Responsible Man in Reformed Theology', *SJT* 13/2 (1970), 129-156.

67 See V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, 18-50* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995), 356.

68 E. Fuchs, *La Morale selon Calvin* (Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 1986), 114, suggests that Calvin's ethics is a demonstration of the justification and work of God. It certainly appears to be the case at this point.

Shechem and Amnon, of course), but they *are* shown to be seriously lacking in compassion and legitimate purpose at that point.[69]

Second, having claimed the fathers as primary victims, the reformers are unable to individualize the daughters for any positive societal application. Phyllis Trible says that by enabling insight, the stories may inspire repentance: 'In other words, sad stories may yield new beginnings.'[70] Luther and Calvin do not allow for that. They miss the opportunity to 'name the sin against women' and to bring new insight and 'new beginnings' to their congregations because their agenda is skewed from the main occurrence – that is, the actual rape. In this there is clearly a patriarchal perspective, though there is no overt misogyny evident in the expositions.[71] Dinah and Tamar are significant because of their fathers. Their individualism is most apparent as the reformers discuss their faults and sin – not their suffering.

Employing Fortune's question as a kind of template to examine Luther and Calvin on the Old Testament rape narratives has suggested to us that they do find it difficult to name 'the sin against women'. By missing the point, they lost the opportunity. Fortune's article implies that the church still misses that chance. In a way, and it is never too late, we might learn to seize that opportunity. Perhaps, we begin by understanding the mistakes of the past.[72]

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to examine comments by Luther and Calvin on the rape narratives of the Old Testament against recent criticism that the Church has never really taken the crimes of abuse and rape seriously enough. Marie Fortune, whose criticism it is, questions the reason for the church's apparent reticence in being *clearly* and *unreservedly* against these crimes. It is hoped that even limited reflection may suggest at least some understanding. It is found that for various reasons the logic of the reformers' exposition actually directs them *away* from the crucial event of abuse. That logic, itself, is examined and questioned, suggesting its weakness – both exegetically and socially. It portrays a marred paradigm that the church today needs to reject.

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69 See J. Nunnally-Cox, *Foremothers* (New York, Seabury, 1981), 79, who suggests that the question remains: Who is there to care for the victim?

70 Trible, *op. cit.*, 2.

71 See my forthcoming book, *Reformation Marriage*, to be published by Rutherford House, Edinburgh. This focuses on the husband and wife relationship in Luther and Calvin against the general misogynist tendency of the time.

72 I am grateful to Dr. John Olley who read the essay and made some invaluable comments.