



BREAKING THE SILENCE

THE LEGACY OF ACQUAINTANCE RAPE

The Emerging Discourse of Acquaintance Rape

Acquaintance rape is a form of sexual violence that Western countries have come to recognize only since the 1980s. Feminist scholars and activists have played a major role in this development. Among them is Susan Estrich, whose book *Real Rape* examines the legal status of acquaintance rape in the United States.¹ Estrich, a professor of law, begins the book with her own story. In 1974, she, a white woman, was raped by a black man. The police officers believed her immediately when she reported that she had not known her rapist. Many years later, Estrich realized that “her” rape fit a popular cliché: rapists are strangers, often black, who attack white women on the street. Estrich’s study shows that even today American laws favor situations of stranger or “real” rape in contrast to “simple” or acquaintance rape. The legal bias is similar to public opinion, she says. “Many women continue to believe that men can force you to have sex against your will and that it isn’t rape so long as they know you and don’t beat you nearly to death in the process. Many men continue to act as if they have that right.”² In other words, acquaintance rape is still an underrated problem. Books such as Estrich’s have brought attention to the prevalence of acquaintance rape in the Western world.

Another publication stresses that acquaintance rape is an actual *crime*. Robin Warshaw’s *I Never Called It Rape* describes women who were raped by male acquaintances, and she also refers to her own experience of rape. She reports that in the early 1970s, she was raped by a man whom she knew. The man had coerced her into sexual intercourse, and she had succumbed to his threats. He raped her although she “never called it rape.”³ For many years, Warshaw did not regard

the event as rape and named it so only much later when she realized that she was not the only woman who had undergone this experience. As the women in Warshaw's book demonstrate, many female survivors of sexual violence do not call it rape when a male acquaintance attacks them. One of the interviewed women is Paula. She remembers the evening when a male friend raped her:

I thought how nice it would be to spend a platonic evening with a sympathetic ear. The first couple of hours were just that—good conversation, a wonderful meal, and a bottle of wine. He lived in a nice apartment with expensive furniture. After we finished eating, I felt ready to go. He pleaded with me to stay a bit longer. . . . I remember saying, “No, no, no,” and crying profusely. I remember feeling like it was never going to stop. . . . I was in denial and disbelief up to that point, but when it was over with, I was very much in shock and really quite unable to maneuver around much. . . . I remember somehow getting in my car, somehow driving home.⁴

Paula liked the man who had invited her into his apartment, and the attack came unexpectedly. He forced her to have sex with him against her will, and she remembers the confusion when she finally left his apartment. Other women, too, remember such situations. Christine Kim recalls how she reacted when her boyfriend raped her:

I didn't tell anyone for two years that I was raped. I couldn't because not only did I not really know myself, but I felt ashamed and weak and stupid for what I felt was a foolish act on my part. I didn't want other people's pity or their disbelief. It was a secret that I kept inside me. I thought that it would go away if I forgot it, if I tried not to think about it. I didn't want anyone to know—not my family, not my friends, not anyone. If I told them, I would have to admit that it had actually happened.⁵

Christine was raped by her boyfriend but suppressed the memory. Like many women in her situation, she tried to forget what had

happened. It took feminist courage to name these situations as rape and to bring them into the open. When this was done, overwhelming data began to emerge. Sociologist James D. Brewer showed that seventy-six percent of victim-survivors know their attackers, leading him to say: “Wade out of the ankle-deep statistics and what you find is that we as a nation have a much bigger problem with acquaintance or nonstranger rape than we believed in the past.”⁶

Despite these numbers, prejudices about women who are raped by a male acquaintance still prevail. Many women continue to be silent about such an experience because acquaintance rape is often not recognized as a sexually violent act. Many people believe that acquaintance rape is not rape because rapist and victim-survivor know each other and the couple may have had sexual relations prior to or even after the rape. This murky situation makes people unable to differentiate between acquaintance rape and consensual sex. Acquaintance rape also challenges deeply ingrained notions about rapists. People often believe that rapists are crazy, wild maniacs who attack women on the streets in the middle of the night. It seems difficult to accept that most rapists are ordinary men. They are brothers, sons, husbands, boyfriends, cousins, or fathers known and liked by family, friends, and coworkers. It is thus easier for people to blame a woman for her so-called provocative behavior, her lack of resistance, or her seductive outfits than to face the hostile aggression of ordinary men toward women in their lives.

Many people also distrust women who have had an active sex life prior to the rape. These people are inclined to blame the victim if she agreed to sexual intimacy before the rape, and they wonder why she went with him voluntarily. It is still expected that a woman sets the limits during sexual courting, and that she, not her male sexual partner, is responsible for upholding restrictions at all times. Many people still believe that the woman should have resisted more and been clearer that she wanted to stop. To those who think this way, the presence of sexual intercourse proves that the woman was “willing” and, as a result, is “untrustworthy.”

Moreover, people do not recognize that violence is present when an acquaintance rapist relentlessly pressures a woman. Often he

merely uses threats and other forms of severe pressure; frequently he manipulates her into “consent” with alcohol or drugs, or tricks her into his apartment. People ignore the fact that the woman may have had little experience, does not dare to resist, or feels that he will not stop or listen to her. Unfortunately, many people do not see threats, alcohol, or psychological pressure as problems and instead blame the woman. They disregard that she acquiesces only temporarily, perhaps exhausted by the pressure.

Finally, people are often confused about acquaintance rape because the woman herself is often unclear about the nature of the sexual intercourse. She knows him; perhaps he is a friend of a friend, a date, or, even her boyfriend. Afraid of being disbelieved, she decides not to tell anybody and to forget the moment when she lost control. Usually she continues her life without proper support, and others will never know that she survived a rape by a man whom they all know. Acquaintance rape is thus a form of rape that is not easily recognized even by the participants themselves, much less by outsiders.

Acquaintance Rape in the Hebrew Bible

Biblical Hebrew does not have a term for “acquaintance rape.” After all, the term is fairly new even in English. Some scholars find it anachronistic to describe biblical texts with terminology of our time, especially when it involves such charged terms as “acquaintance rape.” While the application of modern terminology emerges from contemporary sensibilities, there is no other way of reading biblical rape texts. Though some interpreters say otherwise, we always read from a particular social location, with particular interpretive interests, and within a particular conceptual framework. The scholarly community acknowledges the contextual character of the meaning-making process. Yet when this notion is applied to specific texts and issues, many people—lay and scholarly—often become nervous, worrying that the biblical meaning is lost or skewed, or that “anything goes.” Far from it. A basic hermeneutical insight remains that a reader’s interpretive interests shape biblical meanings.

When the perspective turns to acquaintance rape, the Hebrew Bible becomes a resource—containing four stories of threatened and

completed acquaintance rape. They are the narratives about Dinah (Genesis 34) and Tamar (2 Samuel 13), a brief reference to Abishag the Shunammite (1 Kgs 1:1-4), and the story of Susanna (Daniel 13). The four stories illustrate important characteristics of this form of sexual violence: Dinah, Tamar, Abishag, and Susanna are attacked or threatened by men whom they know. Neither Shechem nor Tamar's half-brother Amnon, neither King David nor the two elders are strangers attacking random women. They live in the neighborhood or even in the same home. Moreover, two of the women do not speak a single word. Neither Dinah nor Abishag is reported to speak during the attack. They do not share their distress with others, nor do they explicitly consent. Dinah's silence has allowed interpreters to imagine that she consented. While the opposite is more likely, it is rarely mentioned in the commentary literature. Abishag is forced to be a servant of the king and has to acquiesce to her fate because he is the king. In contrast to Dinah and Abishag, Tamar and Susanna resist vehemently, both verbally and physically. Only the story of Tamar is widely known as a rape story, perhaps because this woman's articulate resistance demonstrates even to the most androcentric interpreters that she does not agree to intercourse with her brother. She even proposes marriage as a way out of the pressured situation. The same cannot be said about Susanna. Despite her outspoken resistance, many interpreters believe she was threatened with seduction, and they stress her piety and virtue. Focusing on the legal procedures and Daniel's accomplishment, they often mention the attack in a hushed voice.

These stories display prominent characteristics of acquaintance rape, but interpreters rarely name the issue at hand. Perhaps this neglect relates to the fact that none of the women is physically injured. Moreover, some of the women seemingly gain social status, such as Abishag, who lives with the king in the palace. If a woman is threatened with physical harm, she is still blamed for placing herself into a dangerous situation, as in the case of Susanna. Consciously or unconsciously, countless interpreters do not find the situations of these women precarious and overlook the rape. It remains buried, submerged, silenced.

Is it simply a dispute over terminology that defines stories on heterosexual intercourse as stories on acquaintance rape? Perhaps, but the issue is ultimately much more serious. When we begin to read the narratives with terminology meaningful to us today, they inform our understanding about a prevalent contemporary problem. The narratives can then turn into resources that help us develop a deepened understanding about rape and the sociopolitical, historical, and cultural responses to this problem. For centuries, biblical imagery has provided a basis to locate oneself in society. By defining these texts as stories of acquaintance rape, we are encouraged to develop this skill and to read these stories in relation to our world, pondering questions such as these: How do we define sexual consent? When do we identify a man as a rapist? What are our standards for “real” rape, and where do these standards come from? When we begin to interpret biblical texts with such questions in mind, the Hebrew Bible is no longer a dusty and ancient book of the past but a resource for understanding past and present culture.

Seduction, Love, and Marriage? The Rape of Dinah

When Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, goes out to visit women in her neighborhood, she is raped by Shechem, the prince of the land. Desiring her after the rape, Shechem abducts Dinah and asks his father, Hamor, to assist him with his plan to marry her. In the meantime, Dinah’s father, Jacob, and her brothers hear about the rape. The brothers react strongly. When Shechem and Hamor negotiate the marriage, the brothers request that all the Canaanite males in town be circumcised. While the men lie in pain after the circumcision, Dinah’s brothers attack the city and kill all the males, including Shechem and Hamor, and they abduct the women and children of the city. When Jacob hears about these actions, he condemns his sons. They ask in return if their sister should be treated like a prostitute, and with this question the story ends.

The story of Dinah (Genesis 34) is one of the most contested rape stories in the Hebrew Bible. During its extensive history of interpretation, Jewish and Christian interpreters mainly ignored Dinah. They

focused on the men, investigated the literary-historical composition or tribal connotations, searched for anthropological comparisons, and viewed the first verses—the report of the rape—as a description of Shechem’s seductive behavior.⁷ In many interpretations, the fraternal killing is the criminal moment, and in more recent years scholars have argued explicitly against the possibility that Shechem rapes Dinah. They maintain that Shechem’s love and marriage proposal do not match the “scientifically documented behavior of a rapist”⁸ and that therefore he should not be reduced to one. For instance, Tikva Frymer-Kensky claims, “Shechem never intended any harm”⁹ but simply ignored the custom of his day, which required him to get legal consent from Dinah’s parents before the intercourse. Frymer-Kensky explains that Dinah’s opinion would not have counted because in ancient Israel, unmarried women and girls did not have the right of consent. In her view, therefore, rape is not the point for the ancient storytellers, but “the question of honor and self-defense in high drama.”¹⁰

Another scholar, Lyn M. Bechtel, endorses this position with support from anthropological studies.¹¹ She reasons that individuals of ancient Israelite society lived and worked to serve the good of the larger group. In such a society, sexual intercourse perpetuated the values of the family or the clan and became shameful only when it lacked family or community approval. This is the problem in Genesis 34, because Dinah and Shechem have sexual intercourse as “two unbonded people.”¹² The issue is not whether rape occurred but whether this group-oriented society considered the sexual intercourse to be “shameful.” Since Shechem tried to repair the social bond, proposing marriage and offering many goods, his “overall action . . . is one of honor” and “there is no indication that Dinah is raped. The description of Shechem’s behavior and attitude does not fit that of a rapist.”¹³ Consequently, rape is not the issue in the narrative, Bechtel asserts, but whether or not outsiders are allowed to join the group. Many other scholarly interpretations have emerged, but none considers Genesis 34 as a story about acquaintance rape.¹⁴

There are, however, three rhetorical strategies that support reading Genesis 34 as a rape story. One strategy emphasizes two

literary features that center on Dinah. One such feature is the speech of Dinah's brothers that is located in the very middle of seven speeches:

1. Son Shechem's Speech (v. 4)
2. Father Hamor's Speech (vv. 8-10)
3. Son Shechem's Speech (vv. 11-12)
4. Sons of Jacob's Speech (vv. 14-17)
5. Son Shechem, father Hamor's Speech (vv. 21-23)
6. Father Jacob's Speech (v. 30)
7. Sons of Jacob's Speech (v. 31)

By form, the brothers' speech is the central oration of the seven. By content, this speech centers on Dinah because it begins and ends with references to her. In fact, Dinah's trouble is the reason for the fraternal discourse, so the central placement of the brothers' speech and their advocacy on behalf of their sister keep the woman central in the narrative. She and the rape are the reason for all the events of Genesis 34.

Another literary feature of the first rhetorical strategy underlines the centrality of Dinah. Although the woman never speaks, the narrative mentions her persistently. In vv. 1-3, every sentence refers to her, once as the subject (v. 1) and eight times as the object (v. 2a; vv. 2b-3). Thereafter, she appears numerous times: Shechem calls her "his young woman" (v. 4). She is Dinah, his "daughter" (v. 5) and the "daughter of Jacob" (vv. 7, 19; cf. v. 3). Hamor mentions her as "your [plural] daughter" and "her" (v. 8); Jacob is "her father" (v. 11). The brothers are "her" brothers (v. 11). She is a "young woman" (v. 12), "Dinah, their sister" (vv. 13, 27); "our sister" (vv. 14, 31) and "our daughter" (v. 17). Her brothers are "the brothers of Dinah" (v. 25), and she is simply "Dinah" (v. 26). Every character refers to Dinah in almost every verse, although only the narrator uses her name. In short, Dinah is the focus throughout the narrative although she never speaks. As part of the first rhetorical strategy, the two literary features make Dinah the center of the story. Her fate is crucial to this story of acquaintance rape.

A second strategy suggests that rape is at the heart of Genesis 34. The story begins with the rape scene in vv. 2b-3, in which Shechem is always the grammatical subject and Dinah the object. The whole unit stresses his position of power over Dinah. The first three verbs report the rape, the last three its immediate ramification, as the following analysis demonstrates.

The Rape (v. 2)

And he took her,
and he laid her,
and he raped her.

The Immediate Ramifications (v. 3)

And he stayed with/kept Dinah, the daughter of Jacob,
and he lusted after the young woman,
and he tried to quiet the young woman.

The three sentences of v. 2 express a single action, that of rape, and simultaneously the progressive severity of the violence. Whereas the first verb means “to take,” the second verb presents an interesting twist. In Hebrew, the verb “to sleep” is connected not with the expected preposition “with” but with an object marker, a characteristic feature of Biblical Hebrew that is untranslatable into English. The object marker underlines that Dinah is the *object* of the activity. In other words, Shechem does not lie “with” Dinah as if she willingly consented to the activity. Rather, he is the *subject* and she the *object* whose consent is irrelevant. Thus, the best translation of the verb is, “Shechem laid her.” The meaning of the third verb, “to rape,” is also contested, and so some scholars claim that the verb does not mean “to rape” but only “to have sex.”¹⁵ An examination of classical dictionaries confirms that such a translation misses the point and that the verb signifies an act of violence. The dictionaries present the verb’s meaning as “to humble, mishandle, afflict,” or even “to weaken a woman, through rape.”¹⁶ The verb describes a form of violent interaction including rape. “He raped her” is the appropriate translation.

Often scholarly interpretations avoid this translation of v. 2 because of the next verse. They claim that v. 3 describes Shechem's love for Dinah. It is important, however, to read slowly and carefully. Shechem rapes her first and then supposedly claims "love." But how is this possible? It seems highly unlikely that a man rapes a woman and then immediately loves her. But even if he makes such a claim, what kind of love follows after rape? Many readers are ready to imagine that Shechem's "passion" for Dinah takes over and leads, perhaps mistakenly, to too much force. This is a standard prejudice in acquaintance rape that disregards the severity of the violating act. An alternative translation interprets v. 3 in light of v. 2 and rejects the notion that v. 3 expresses Shechem's deeply felt care for Dinah.

So let us examine the meaning of v. 3. The first verb is often translated as "to love," but it might, in fact, be better interpreted as an expression of spatial closeness. For example, Ruth 1:14 states that Ruth and Naomi stayed together while the other daughter-in-law went to her home country. The translation of the RSV is: "But Ruth clung to her," and the *Jerusalem Bible* translates the verse even more clearly as a reference to spatial relation: "Ruth stayed with Naomi." The same verb appears also in Ruth 2:23, which, according to the RSV, means: "So she kept close to the young women of Boaz." In Ps 101:3, the verb describes the spatial distance between the lover and the hater of God. According to A. A. Anderson, the verb denotes "to keep close to someone,"¹⁷ and consequently Anderson translates Ps 101:3: "It shall not cleave to me" or "he shall not remain close to me."¹⁸ Lastly, the verb appears in Num 36:7, 9. The NRSV translates Num 36:7 as, "For all Israelites shall retain the inheritance of their ancestral tribes," and Num 36:9 as, "For each of the tribes of the Israelites shall retain its own inheritance." Even Wilhelm Gesenius, the renowned grammarian of biblical Hebrew, translates this verb as "to keep something (possession)."¹⁹ In other words, the verb signifies physical and spatial but not emotional closeness, sometimes in the sense of possessing a thing. Consequently, the translation of the verb as "to love" is entirely inadequate. A better translation emphasizes spatial closeness: "Shechem stayed with Dinah" or "Shechem kept Dinah," in the sense of not allowing her to leave.

In the context of rape, the meaning of the second verb has also nothing to do with love. This verb is better understood as a reference to Shechem's desire to treat Dinah as he pleases. Two observations support such a translation: First, as G. Wallis explains: "The terminological context for to love/love is very wide in the language of the Old Testament." Since "love and action are two sides of the same coin," Wallis emphasizes that concrete action fills the meaning of "love."²⁰ When this insight is applied to Gen. 34:3, it becomes clear that Shechem wants to have sex with Dinah, even against her will, and so the rape is the concrete action that gives meaning to v. 3. Accordingly, love is *not* the meaning, but rather control, force, and violation. Second, according to Phyllis Trible's interpretation of 2 Samuel 13, where the same verb appears, love does not describe Amnon's feelings for Tamar, but rather the "ambiguous word 'to desire', to let the plot disclose the precise meaning."²¹ This insight works for the verb in Gen 34:3. In v. 2, the plot discloses what Shechem actually *does* to Dinah. Consequently, the meaning of the verb in v. 3 refers not to mutual intimacy or loving tenderness but to violent "desire" that makes Dinah the object of Shechem's action. As Amnon lusts after Tamar before he rapes her, so Shechem rapes Dinah before he is lusting for more. The second verb of v. 3 does not describe romantic love; rather, it is an expression for Shechem's unrelenting objectification of Dinah. He continues to exert his will for sex over Dinah, and so this part of v. 3 is better read: "And he lusted after the young woman."

The third verb in v. 3 has also contributed to wide confusion about Shechem's feelings for Dinah. The verb appears in a phrase that literally means "to speak to someone's heart." Many interpreters translate the phrase as "he spoke tenderly to her" (NRSV). Yet Georg Fischer notes that the phrase always appears²² when "the situation is wrong, difficult, or danger is in the air."²³ He argues that the verb has to be translated in the sense of "to try to talk against a negative opinion" or "to change a person's mind."²⁴ Someone speaks to the "heart" of a fearful person in the effort to resolve a frightening situation in a larger context of fear, anxiety, sin, or offense; someone tries to "talk against a prevailing (negative) opinion." When this meaning is applied to v. 3, the phrase depicts Shechem's attempt to change

Dinah's negative opinion about him and to calm her after the rape. The appropriate translation is: "He tried to quiet down the young woman." In short, vv. 2-3 describe Shechem's disregard for Dinah. Shechem dominates Dinah and turns her from subject to object. Not speaking, Dinah is present only in silence and submission. Verse 3 depicts the continuation of Shechem's domination as he attempts to hide his violent deed.

Related to these textual observations is a third rhetorical strategy that turns Genesis 34 into a story about acquaintance rape. Feminist scholars have shown that acquaintance rapists often try to appear "normal" after the rape and pretend that nothing bad really happened. Although they might threaten and overpower the woman, they are less likely to resort to murder or physical beating than stranger rapists. The problem of acquaintance rapists is that they view women as objects with whom they can do as they please. Such a rapist knows that he has taken advantage of a woman and might attempt to contact her again after the rape, pretending to be friends.²⁵ Shechem can be viewed as such a "sexual gratification rapist," who considers Dinah an "opportunity" when he sees her walking by. Perhaps he met Dinah earlier when her family moved to the new area and Shechem's father, Hamor, allowed the strangers to live there. Read accordingly, Genesis 34 describes a classic situation of acquaintance rape, but one with rare consequences. After all, Dinah's brothers kill the rapist and all the town's male inhabitants. Some interpreters stress that the brothers violate the Shechemite women when they force them out of their city, and so the brothers participate in male aggression and the oppression of women. Genesis 34 is indeed a complicated story, but it centers on Dinah and the acquaintance rape.

Stupid or Cupid? The Incestuous Rape of Tamar

In 2 Samuel 13, another narrative of acquaintance rape—this one incestuous—Amnon, the firstborn son of King David, lusts after Tamar. He is the son of David and she is David's daughter, but they have different mothers. One day, Amnon's friend Jonadab notices a change in Amnon, who, upon Jonadab's perceptive inquiry, explains

that he “loves” Tamar. The two men devise a plot to trick Tamar into visiting Amnon. He pretends to be ill and asks his father to call Tamar to bring food. David complies. When Tamar arrives, Amnon sends everybody away so that the sister finds herself suddenly alone with her older half-brother. When he tries to pull her to his bed, she resists and tells him to wait and marry her first. Amnon, however, does not listen and proceeds to rape her. Afterwards, he begins to hate her and sends her away despite her intense plea. Tamar runs to her full brother, Absalom, who tells her to stay silent. Tamar, however, tears her clothing and wails loudly. When Tamar’s father hears about the rape, he is angry but does not punish his son “because he loved him, for he was his firstborn” (13:21). After two years, Absalom takes revenge. Absalom tricks his half-brother into visiting far away from the palace, and then he kills Amnon. Tamar, so the story goes, never marries and for the rest of her life remains “a desolate woman in her brother Absalom’s house” (13:20).

If there is a quintessential rape story in the Hebrew Bible, it is the story of Tamar. Scholars regularly recognize the sexual violence perpetrated by Amnon on his half-sister and call 2 Samuel 13 one of the “most-shocking” and “most sordid” biblical stories.²⁶ Many interpreters make a point of rejecting the brutality with which Amnon subdues his sister. For instance, Bruce C. Birch states, “The story reports in graphic detail Amnon’s plot to get Tamar alone, his violent rape of her, and his callous discarding of her afterward.”²⁷ Others signal that Amnon’s love was “hardly more than lust” because they recognize the incompatibility of love and rape.²⁸ Fokkeliën van Dijk-Hemmes, a noted feminist interpreter, affirms: “The rapist is guilty. In the reception of the text, so far as I can ascertain, this has never been disputed.”²⁹

Yet Pamela Tamarkin Reis does exactly that. In her view, Amnon is not guilty of rape because it is really Tamar who initiates and invites the “sexual intimacy . . . by her easy virtue, persistent ambition, and implacable stupidity.”³⁰ Indeed, for Reis, Tamar is a willing partner in an incestuous relationship with her half-brother. Accordingly, the story does not depict incestuous acquaintance rape but consensual incest, if, according to Reis’s stipulation, one emphasizes three features. First,

one has to recognize Amnon's ambivalent feelings toward Tamar in the early part of the story. For example, his slip of tongue in v. 2 indicates that Amnon seeks both permission and prohibition to meet his half-sister. Amnon is not certain whether he should see her, but David, his father, ignores the hint and orders Tamar to bake a cake and bring it to her brother. In contrast, Tamar is immediately willing to do so. She prepares the cake in the shape of hearts which, to Reis, demonstrates her interest in Amnon.

Second, Reis underscores that Tamar does not leave the room with everybody else although she could have left (v. 9). In fact, Tamar not only remains alone with Amnon but, upon his invitation, volunteers to come close to his bed. This gesture makes Tamar complicit "in the coming denouement," Reis believes. When Amnon says, "Come," he gives Tamar an opportunity to respond negatively because the command implies mutuality. Yet Tamar accepts Amnon's invitation, approaches his bed, and is glad "to flirt, to arouse Amnon's desire with libidinous confections, and to be alone with him after the servants depart." This proves to Reis that Tamar consents to sexual relations and is to blame for the rape.

Third, Reis posits that Tamar resists only when she realizes how far Amnon wants to go. Initially, Tamar does not reject Amnon's offer but urges him to marry her first. When Tamar's suggestion falls on deaf ears, she "surrenders to him." It changes his love to hate. Amnon hates Tamar because she is not as "pure" as he thought, which Reis affirms. Tamar flirts with her half-brother and "submits to intercourse without attempting to call out." For Reis, this view explains "why a savaged woman is so determined to remain in the presence of her attacker." Tamar could have left but chooses to stay because she is interested in Amnon. In general, then, Reis rejects the "rape verdict" because of "the tell-tale verdict, Tamar's willingness to be alone with a man, and her failure to call out." Moreover, Tamar's acquiescence to Amnon's "immoral entreaty" reflects David's "own prohibited carnality." In this reading, Tamar, not Amnon, is held responsible, as her behavior mirrors her father's misconduct. Like him, Tamar is an active and willing participant in immoral behavior, Reis contends.

Reis's interpretation deserves this lengthy summary for one reason. Her claim that Tamar is a willing participant in the sexual encounter reinforces standard prejudices about acquaintance rape, and so her reading unintentionally confirms that 2 Samuel 13 is a story about acquaintance rape. For Reis, Tamar and Amnon know and like each other, which makes Tamar responsible for the sexual intercourse. Reis emphasizes that Tamar consents to prepare food and to visit her brother; her willingness indicates her consent. Typical for many situations of acquaintance rape, Tamar agrees to some form of intimacy, but her agreement does not include sexual intercourse. Hence, Tamar should not be held responsible for the sexual encounter, and Reis's blaming of Tamar reinforces androcentric stereotypes. It diminishes Tamar's right to say no at any moment in the sexual encounter regardless of her closeness to Amnon. Reis also ignores that Amnon needs to respect Tamar's vocal opposition and to let her go at any point.

Reis thus reinforces the classic androcentric pattern that blames a woman for the rape. This interpretation is particularly pernicious because it seems to support Tamar's agency. Reis characterizes Tamar as consenting to sexual relations with her half-brother and as in charge of her desire when she allegedly invites incestuous sex. Here is a woman, Reis explains, who, as popular parlance would term it, "wants it." As a result, Reis holds Tamar responsible when the situation becomes difficult for her. An obvious rape story turns into a story of consensual sex, and the woman's agency is turned against her as she is accused of misleading the man. In short, Reis uses the very concept of "woman's agency," a feminist idea, to hold Tamar accountable for the rape. As the agent of her desire, Tamar is charged with having invited the rape.

Despite this androcentric argumentation, Reis makes an important observation about the nature of this acquaintance rape. She highlights its incestuous nature, stressing that Tamar and Amnon knew each other as half-siblings. This observation helps in making the case for acquaintance rape in 2 Samuel 13. Tamar does not expect Amnon's advances to turn into rape because she has known him for years and trusts him. Even Tamar's initial affection for Amnon makes sense in the context of

acquaintance rape. She likes Amnon and can even imagine marrying him. She is not worried about staying alone with him and is neither stupid nor “cupid,” but trusting and unsuspecting of her half-brother. In contrast, Amnon exploits the situation and is the guilty party.

While Reis’s interpretation, if read against the grain, illustrates that 2 Samuel 13 is a story about acquaintance rape, the narrative does not portray Amnon as a typical acquaintance rapist. In this reading, Amnon does not try to make up but reportedly hates Tamar after the rape. His change of mind from so-called love to hate catches the attention of many commentators. For example, Walter Brueggeman believes that Amnon’s hate indicates awareness of his deed.³¹ Other interpreters argue that his hate shows that “[h]e was through with her.”³² To many, Amnon’s hate proves that his so-called love is only “lust.” Amnon gets rid of Tamar because she reminds him of his lack of control. One of the few interpreters who sympathizes with Amnon is Reis. She suggests that his hate is rooted in “a sort of heightened post-coital *tristesse* or prejudice” after he recognizes “their mutual guilt in the crime of incest.” Reis understands that Amnon feels resentful for “Tamar’s apparent insensibility to the transgression.”

Yet could it be that the reference to Amnon’s hate illustrates a negative attitude toward women in general and the raped woman in particular?³³ For acquaintance rapists, women are objects to be used according to their needs and desires. Love is not the issue because well-being and care for the beloved person do not inform the action. Viewed in this way, Amnon is selfish and deceiving, trying to get what he wants. In this sense, the description of Amnon’s feelings of hate reflect an internal attitude of men who rape women they know. Thus, Tamar should not be blamed for Amnon’s hate. It is Amnon *alone* who is responsible for raping a woman who trusts and likes him while he objectifies and violates her. Amnon is the culprit of the rape, and the story imagines sadly that Tamar never recovered from the assault.

Vital Warmth? The Failed Rape of Abishag the Shunammite
 Yet another fragmentary story fits the category of acquaintance rape, although issues of power and class contribute to the sexual exploitation

it portrays. The story of the young woman Abishag the Shunammite is only four verses long (1 Kgs 1:1-4). In this brief account, King David is old and bedridden when court personnel search for a young woman to warm him and to sleep at his “bosom.” The personnel choose beautiful Abishag the Shunammite, who is eventually brought to the king. “The young woman was very beautiful. She became the king’s *sōkenet* (סכנת) and she served him. Yet the king did not know her” (v. 4). It is obvious that this short story does not portray acquaintance rape as classically defined by contemporary feminist research. David does not meet Abishag on a date and subsequently take her to his palace. Instead, he is old and bedridden, and his court personnel bring her to him. He is the king and she his servant, and as such they meet. She is made to lie in his bed, but he does not have sex with her. He is old or sick but still Abishag has to sleep in the king’s bed. Arguably, he is not a stranger but a powerful man whom she knows as his subject. Possibly, therefore, the story depicts a failed rape of a man who cannot take advantage of his position of power over a woman who is expected to “warm” him back to life.

The question, of course, is why Abishag moves into the king’s palace since it is hard to believe that she goes voluntarily or happily. Does her family or her parents sell her to the royal personnel who search all of Israel for a young woman? Does she accept money for her services in order to support her perhaps impoverished family? Does she hope to live in luxury at the palace and to leave poverty behind? The gap between v. 3 and v. 4 leaves considerable room for interpretative conjecture. What seems certain is that Abishag winds up in the palace serving the ailing king. Whether her family’s economic status or royal authority make her consent, Abishag has little choice. Circumstances force her to acquiesce, and that is, after all, a typical characteristic of acquaintance rape.

It is not surprising that this brief story has received only modest treatment in the exegetical literature. Even commentators who discuss every verse and chapter consider the circumstances in vv. 1-4 to be “trivial” and undeserving of detailed explanation.³⁴ To many, Abishag is only an “agent,” less than a minor character, a prop lacking interpretative significance.³⁵ Some commentators express puzzlement about

Abishag's role as the king's servant. She is characterized as *sōkenet* (סכנת) of the king, a term of unclear meaning that appears only once in the entire biblical canon. In 1914, A. B. Ehrlich wrote that the meaning of this feminine participle is unknown, but this has not stopped commentators from speculating. Suggested renderings range from "nurse" or "attendant" to "a high position at court." The latter translation is based on ancient Near Eastern texts that contain the male noun of *sōkenet* (Hebrew *sōkēn* (סכן); Ugaritic *sakkinu*; Akkadian *šakēnu*) with the meaning of "governor" or "high official." To some interpreters, therefore, the noun *sōkenet* (סכנת) describes Abishag's superior position at the royal court, and indicates that she supersedes Queen Bathsheba in all royal rights and duties.³⁶ Others reject this possibility because "her duties were confined to nursing the failing king."³⁷ In the end, the term *sōkenet* (סכנת) remains ambiguous, especially in light of phrases such as "to keep him warm," "to lie in his bosom," and "to know her." Even if Abishag's status increases as David's *sōkenet* (סכנת), her job forces her to be "his bedfellow;"³⁸ but "the decrepit state of David's age"³⁹ removes the potential for acquaintance rape.

Rapish Desire? The Resisted Rape of Susanna

Finally, the story of Susanna, as told in the book of Daniel the Septuagint, reports an attempted acquaintance rape. This chapter is part of the Catholic canon but is not included in the Protestant and Jewish canons. Nevertheless, the story has enjoyed a rich history of transmission and interpretation. The version of Theodotion, a Jewish translator of the second century C.E., has become the standard basis for vernacular translations of the story on Susanna. The following summary relies on it.

Susanna, who is the daughter of pious parents and the wife of a wealthy man named Joakim, decides to take a bath as refreshment on a hot summer day. She does not know that two men who serve as judges and frequently visit her powerful husband have begun to be sexually interested in her. Initially unbeknownst to each other, the two men "divert their eyes from heaven" and instead watch the woman whenever they visit the house of Susanna and Joakim. During one

of their many attempts to spy on her, they discover each other. They confess their interest in Susanna and plot to attack her the next time she is alone.

Since Susanna is a wealthy woman, she has two female servants who prepare the bath in the garden. When the bath is ready, the women leave. The two judges are hiding all the while and, once Susanna is alone, they jump in front of her. They demand to have sex with her, otherwise threatening to announce that she has committed adultery with a young man. She, however, responds: "I am hemmed in on all sides. For if I do this thing, it is my death, and if I do not do it, I will not escape your hands. I must choose not to do it and fall into your hands rather than sin before God" (13:22-23). Then she cries out. When the people arrive, the judges accuse her of adultery and Susanna is sentenced to death. Sending only a prayer to God for help, she does not defend herself nor is she invited to do so. Yet God hears her prayer and sends Daniel, a young man, to question the procedure of the trial. He interrogates the judges separately and manages to uncover discrepancies in their reports. Exposed as false witnesses, the men are condemned to death. Susanna is released and praised for her virtue and innocence.

Besides the version of Theodotion recounted above, there are a number of other extant versions of the story. Another Greek version, called the "Old Greek," probably predates Theodotion.⁴⁰ There is also a Samaritan parallel in Arabic entitled "The Story of the Daughter of Amram."⁴¹ The story appears in the Babylonian Talmud, and another Jewish version is contained in the fifteenth-century book called *Sefer Yuhassin*, written by Abraham ben Samuel Zacuto. A variation called "The Pious Israelite Woman and the Two Evil Elders" is part of the famous collection of Arabic stories in "The Thousand and One Nights."⁴² Other, less well-known translations are in Syriac, and Origen's "Letter to Africanus" refers to the Susanna story.⁴³ All of these texts offer fascinating renditions of the basic story line, but the Samaritan version in Arabic exhibits the most dramatic modifications.

In the Samaritan version, Susanna has no name and is mentioned only as the "daughter of Amram," a high priest. Amram's daughter (in other versions called Susanna) is beautiful and "a mistress of wisdom

and knowledge, walking in the way of righteousness and all the manner of her deeds were good.”⁴⁴ Unlike the woman in the Greek versions, who is portrayed as the wife of a wealthy man, she is a single woman with a most remarkable interest; she wants to study Bible. The story reports: “That young woman from her early infancy wished to study the Torah and to keep the Law, and to read in it. And she wrote one with her own hand. And there was no one in her time who could be compared unto her.” A Bible expert, Amram’s daughter is the only woman mentioned in apocryphal literature who is acknowledged and respected for such expertise, and there is no negative or judgmental comment about her status as a Bible student and teacher. The Samaritan version presents this woman as equal to men, which is indeed a remarkable characteristic. After the extraordinary revelation about the young woman’s work, the Samaritan version reports that Amram’s daughter wants to become a hermit (nazirite) on the mountain. Her father gives permission for one year and builds her a house in the area where two other hermits live. When the two men hear that the daughter of Amram has joined them on the mountain, they ask her to teach them Torah. “So she came out and went up to her roof and she took with her the Scroll of the Law written by her own hand.” At the teaching session, the two hermits “become wanton” for her, forgetting God and their monastic vows. They disclose to each other “the secret of their thought as to her beautiful looks, and they agreed that they would ask her to show them the Scroll of the Law so as to look into it.” When Amram’s daughter arrives with her Torah scroll the next time, they tell her “the secret thing.” And the story continues:

And the young woman started reproving them with strong reproof, and reminded them of all what God commanded, but they did not hearken unto her. And when she saw their violence she said unto them, “Ye wish to do this evil deed.” And they said, “Yes we wish to do it and if it will not be with thy good will, it will be against thy will.” And she said, “I listen and I will do, but leave me until I will get into my house, and I will change my garments and anoint myself and put on other garments better than these, and then you may do with me as is pleasing in your sight.” And

she revealed unto them that it was her desire more than theirs to do this thing. And it came to pass when they saw it was her will to do this thing, then their joy grew great, and they said unto her, “Pass on and change thy garments and anoint thyself and come unto us.” And then she passed on to her house, and she locked the door, and she set herself down behind it and she opened the Scroll of the Law, and she disheveled her head. And she lifted up her hands to heaven and she said, “O God, thou who hast forbidden the committing of any evil deed, of all abominations, and of all wickedness. And I am of the seed of Pinehas, the man of zeal, and I have no redeemer who is to redeem me of these two men, and no saviour who is to save me from the evil deed of these two men, who desire to do the evil deed before thee, O God. My hope is in thee, and I have no one besides thee, O God. And for thy help I hope that thou wilt save me from the hand of thy enemies and thou wilt not grant them power over me and remove their wickedness from me. . . .” And the young woman fell upon her face and prayed and cried all through the length of the night.

The two men pretend to want to learn from Amram’s daughter and then try to attack her sexually. She, however, tricks them into believing she will comply and requests to go home and prepare herself. She escapes to her home, where she locks the door and starts praying to God, asking for help. Amram’s daughter does not want to consent to the two men who want her; it entails rape (“against your will”). When she does not return as promised the men decide to go to her house. Fortunately, according to the narrative, God hears the daughter’s prayers and prevents the men from finding her house. They become blinded like the people of Sodom (Gen 19:11) and stumble around. Finally, they realize that they have been tricked and decide “to blame her before she could blame them.” They go to the village and report that Amram’s daughter has been lying with “a stranger.” The people believe them with great dismay and decide to kill the young woman—an appropriate punishment for her alleged transgression. Luckily, the angels step forward in the form of Samaritan children,

who question the legal procedure and expose the lie of the two nazirites. At this point, Amram's daughter comes down from the mountain. When her father asks her, "she told him the whole truth of the thing." The two men confess their guilt and receive the death penalty.

What a different account of Susanna's tale! Amram's daughter is not taking a bath, as in Theodotion's version, but is a Bible teacher and a nazirite. Her fate is both similar and dissimilar to Susanna's. Like Susanna, she is threatened by two men, resists them, is sentenced to die for her supposed transgression, and is rescued by divine intervention. Yet, unlike Susanna, Amram's daughter is attacked by two fellow nazirites and manages to make them believe that she will comply with their demands. This is a story of acquaintance rape in which a woman pursues her professional interests but runs into difficulties with her colleagues. In the narrative God protects her twice. The first time God confuses the lecherous men in a manner similar to the men of Sodom and Gomorrah who threaten Lot. The second time God sends children to come to her aid. Yet, like Theodotion and several other versions, the Samaritan story too reports only a verbal threat of rape. Neither the two elders nor the two hermits take action.⁴⁵

The omission of an explicit rape attack characterizes numerous artistic adaptations of the story, which made Susanna an enormously popular figure in Western culture. For centuries, painters captured the moment of Susanna entering the bath.⁴⁶ Focused on the naked woman, their works gained fame and added to the story's widespread popularity. Some artists produced several paintings of the same scene, such as seventeenth-century painter Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669). His paintings *Susanna at the Bath* (1634) and *Susanna Surprised by the Elders* (1645) are among his most revered creations.⁴⁷ Musicians, too, were inspired by the story and composed musical plays, oratorios, and even operas. One of them is Carlisle Floyd's opera *Susannah*, which premiered at Florida State University in 1955. A year later it was performed at the City Opera, and more than forty years later at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City (April 1999). Cast as a southern American version of the biblical tale, the opera turns Susanna into a young woman living in Tennessee, where she experiences provincialism, small-mindedness, and the ill effects of gossip.⁴⁸

In most, if not in all, of these and other art productions, the attempted rape scene disappears, and voluptuous flesh and the virtue of the heroine are central. In the case of Floyd's opera, the male elders of the biblical story turn into women and men of a small southern town. While the people harass Susanna, the town's preacher becomes interested in her, spends a night with her, and thereupon defends her against prejudicial charges. Neither this nor other artistic interpretations explore the dynamics of a rape attack. Floyd's opera changes the attack into a one-night stand, while many paintings focus on the bathing scene. The image of a bathing young woman has left many readers sympathetic to the elders, as two scholarly remarks demonstrate: "Perhaps he [the reader!] has also felt something of the elders' desire in the detailed description of their voyeurism," or "The bathing scene not only excites the elders, thereby enabling them to attempt their dastardly deed, but it can also fire the imagination of some readers. Of such considerations are good stories made!"⁴⁹

In contrast to these Western cultural approaches, the Old Greek version of the Susanna narrative is surprisingly blunt about the attempted rape. In this version, the rape appears to be carried out when the story states: "And they [the two men] said to each other, 'Let us go to her.' They made an agreement, went to her, and tried to coerce her" (v. 19). The Greek verb that is translated as "to coerce" expresses violence and force, which the two men applied to Susanna to force her to submit.⁵⁰ Interestingly, commentators such as John J. Collins dismiss this description in favor of Theodotion's version because "the OG [Old Greek] account of the attempted seduction [*sic*] (they 'tried to coerce her') is extremely terse and reads like an abbreviation. Theodotion has the elders make the situation explicit and threaten Susanna with reprisal."⁵¹ Collins prefers Theodotion because it is more "explicit" than the Old Greek text. In the Theodotion version, the elders talk about their desire to "seduce" Susanna, but the Old Greek version describes a much more severe attack. In the Old Greek version, the elders are not only talkers but attackers; they try to rape Susanna. Collins does not recognize this difference and characterizes the rape attack in the Old Greek version as "the attempted seduction."

Collins's description of the rape attack in the Old Greek version as an attempted seduction is problematic. He also does not recognize that the expanded text of Theodotion obfuscates the rape scene with a plethora of words placed in the mouths of the elders, but even this version alludes to the possibility of rape (vv. 19-21): "When the maids went out, the two elders arose and rushed upon her and said, 'Look, the gates of the garden are shut and no one can see us. We desire you, so consent to us and be with us. But if not, we will testify against you that there was a young man with you, and on this account you sent away the maids.'" In Theodotion's version, the men threaten Susanna verbally with rape, whereas in the Old Greek version they attack her directly and then threaten her when they fail to slip away in secret. Thus, the Old Greek version should be considered the *lectio difficilior*, for it includes the actual rape attack. The other versions build upon it and try to modify the rape, reducing it to a verbal threat only.⁵²

Even with this hypothesis, all versions leave little doubt that "rapish desire"⁵³ is unacceptable. Whatever the request of the elders actually is—whether they attack Susanna, threaten her verbally, or ask her to marry one of them—the elders are punished with death for their attempts to give false witness. The turn of events has inspired scholars to examine the legal procedures described in the story,⁵⁴ but they often fail to recognize the centrality of the rape. When they erase the rape from the story line, the narrative turns into a moralizing tale that domesticates women into the presumed safety of married life. Only when readers recognize that Susanna is raped or threatened with rape does her effort to avoid the attack make sense. Susanna's story then has a liberating effect: encouraging women to fiercely, forcefully, and uncompromisingly resist violent advances from men in their communities and lives. Then the story becomes a resistance tale that reminds readers, female and male, of the prevalence of acquaintance rapes even in biblical literature.

On Speaking and Resisting: Concluding Comments

Despite a number of interpretative contestations, the identified narratives about Dinah, Tamar, Abishag, and Susanna confirm the persistent

silence concerning acquaintance rape. Was it love? Did she not volunteer? Was it seduction or a harmless opportunity for old men? The commentary literature indicates the ongoing confusion about sexual violence when the attacker and the one attacked know each other, when a woman is not *physically* harmed during or after the act of sexual violation, or when a rapist enjoys communal recognition. The interpretations also illustrate the ongoing confusion about sexual consent, what makes a man a rapist, and what the standards for “real” rape actually are. When we read the biblical passages with contemporary terminology in mind, we read them with the eyes of our world, with our sensibilities and concerns. No longer are biblical texts confined to the dusty past; they become contested territory, a resource for understanding past and present society and religion. Read accordingly, the stories of Dinah, Tamar, Abishag, and Susanna turn into testimonies reminding us of the seriousness and prevalence of acquaintance rape both then and now.

