

## Teaching about Sexual Violence in the Hebrew Bible

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I love teaching the Bible. I do not, however, love teaching about [sexual violence](#). Like many biblical scholars, I used to take a certain glee in revealing to students the nastiness of the Bible, its many narratives of horror, revulsion, or simple ickiness. But given the prevalence of sexual violence, including rape, on college campuses, I no longer draw any pleasure from bringing this particular strain of biblical nastiness to light. Instead, I am increasingly concerned with the problem of teaching these texts to students who have experienced sexual violence firsthand.

[Sexual violence](#) is a major problem on college campuses. Approximately 20% of women and 6% of men experience sexual assault while in college. In the United States, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights issued a "[Dear Colleague](#)" letter ([summary](#)), warning schools that failure to address sexual assault and sexual harassment on campus was a violation of [Title IX](#). High-profile cases have also come to public attention. While administrators have struggled to address these issues through policy changes and campus programming, professors and others have grappled with the best teaching practices when sexual violence is prevalent in both texts and contexts. In the biblical studies classroom, we face a special series of challenges.

The Bible contains sexual violence, including rape. At the same time, biblical texts, and theological traditions that draw from them, continue to influence personal, societal, and even political conversations about sexuality, sexual cultures, and sexual violence.

This essay considers the challenges of teaching texts involving sexual violence, with particular attention to the undergraduate classroom and to the problem of sexual violence on college campuses. It is not a call to stop teaching or reading sexually violent biblical texts. Instead, I am interested in how to teach these texts responsibly, given our social and institutional contexts. Given the extent of campus sexual violence, I am not sure there are best practices for teaching these texts and issues; there are, however, certainly better ones. This essay is an exploration of some of these better practices, as well as an invitation to ongoing conversation. However we decide to approach these issues, we must recognize that there are both survivors and perpetrators of sexual assault in our classrooms (as well as in our dining halls and faculty meetings and administrative offices). Perhaps we as individuals can choose to ignore sexual violence; our students, however, cannot.

### Preliminary Concerns in Teaching Texts Involving Sexual Violence

Both academic and popular discussions of sexual violence in texts have largely revolved around the topic of "trigger warnings." Trigger warnings are used to flag potentially triggering or otherwise disturbing material (such as that involving rape or suicide) in advance. The language of "triggering" draws on research on trauma, especially PTSD. Previously a feature of internet forums and Tumblr, trigger warnings have made the leap to mainstream spaces, including classrooms. The trigger warning debate is complex and often inflammatory; there are persuasive arguments to be made on both sides. My own suspicion is that there is no single answer to the question of trigger warnings; I am concerned, however,

that the debate over trigger warnings, however deleterious or desirable, threatens to overshadow other steps that faculty can and should take in the classroom to address sexual violence.

Sexual violence is not an abstract hypothetical to our students; our teaching must reflect this reality, without, however, singling out or making assumptions about the experiences of particular students. Any given class likely contains both survivors and offenders. There are often other students who may inadvertently make insensitive comments, or who simply don't realize the scale of the problem. And then there are students who, motivated by discomfort or other reasons, make light of sexual violence. All this, of course, is on top of the ordinary issues in teaching, and in the teaching of biblical texts. Still, recognizing this broad range of experiences, knowledges, and past traumas (of many kinds) is a crucial first step of empathy. These issues in the classroom offer the opportunity, and perhaps the obligation, to engage the situation on campus more directly.

### **Rape and Rape Culture**

From the outset, there are difficulties in discussing rape in the Hebrew Bible. Biblical Hebrew does not have a single word that unambiguously means "rape." A related difficulty is that biblical law seems to limit women's control of their own sexuality, which makes it difficult to apply the modern notion of consent. This is especially at issue, for example, in Genesis [34](#), the narrative of the rape of [Dinah](#), discussed further below.

Another key concept in talking about rape is rape culture. As the phrase suggests, rape culture refers not to specific actions, but larger cultural attitudes toward gender and sexual violence. Rape culture describes the normalization of sexual violence and its links to broad patterns of misogyny and sexism. Purity culture is another component of rape culture—the idea that women should remain pure and that sexual activity renders a woman "used" or "dirty." The term rape culture originated with [feminist activists and scholars](#) in the 1970s but has achieved a broad degree of recognition more recently. The phrase is especially common in internet feminist spaces; it is also increasingly used in campus programming related to preventing sexual violence. [Women](#) are not the only victims of sexual violence; neither is sexual violence exclusively heterosexual. [Transgender](#) and [queer](#) people are especially vulnerable to sexual violence. The White House-sponsored "[It's On Us](#)" campaign, for example, emphasizes rape culture instead of individual acts of sexual violence.

As with "rape," the absence of a term for "rape culture" in biblical Hebrew does not mark its absence. Instead, many of the features that contemporary commentators identify as central to rape culture appear in the Hebrew Bible. Acts of sexual violence in the text are clearly connected to larger attitudes of misogyny. The text frequently engages in victim blaming, as when Yahweh describes [Israel](#) (represented as a woman) as promiscuous before promising to sexually humiliate her (Hos. [2](#); Ezek. [16](#); [23](#)). Female sexuality in general is an object of both fascination and disgust; this interest is paired with the high value placed on female virginity (male virginity receives no such special attention). Further reflecting the intersections of gender and power in the ancient world, biblical law does not distinguish between rape and adultery. Deuteronomy [22:22](#) reads, "If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge

the evil from Israel." The law provides no exception to this punishment if the woman was raped, since she did not cry for help (Deut. [22:24](#)). If, however, the woman was raped in the fields, where no one could hear her cries for help, she will not be killed (Deut. [22:25](#)). Deuteronomy [21:10–14](#) says that a man who captures a woman as bounty in wartime cannot marry her or engage in sexual activity with her for one month; after this time, such actions are presumed acceptable.

What does it mean to employ the analytical category of "rape culture" in approaching the Hebrew Bible? This mode of reading draws upon the insights of traditional forms of biblical criticism, such as the historical-critical method, to understand gender and violence in ancient Israel. However, a rape culture reading is not strictly limited to reconstructing the past. Instead, it intentionally juxtaposes the ancient and contemporary in order to better understand and respond to sexual violence. This mode of reading is less concerned with historical or comparative legal questions. It is, instead, centrally concerned with what Paul Ricoeur called the "world in front of the text" and with the students sitting in front of us in class. In this way, reading for rape culture resembles feminist, queer, and postcolonial readings that bridge ancient texts and modern concerns.

Reading for rape culture is not the only way to approach the biblical text; indeed, I would suggest that reading only with an eye to sexual violence and misogyny forecloses other horizons of interpretive possibility, including many feminist ones. But for the purposes of teaching, especially to students living in rape culture, it is important to pause and take seriously the intersections between biblical texts and rape cultures. One place to begin this examination is with the Bible's own most notorious rape stories.

### **The Rape of Dinah (Gen. 34)**

Dinah, [Jacob's](#) only daughter, is headed out into the fields to visit the "women of the region" (Gen. [34:1](#)) when she is overpowered by Shechem. After raping her, he wishes to marry her. Her brothers, [Simeon](#) and [Levi](#), demand that he and his men be circumcised before the marriage occurs; while they are recovering, all of [Shechem's](#) men are killed by Dinah's brothers. When Jacob challenges them, they reply, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" There is some uncertainty over the nature of Shechem's actions toward Dinah; they have been interpreted as rape but also as consensual premarital sex. This latter approach is advocated for, for example in Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* (now a [Lifetime miniseries](#) as well), which treats Dinah's experience as a doomed love story. A third possibility is acquaintance rape—Shechem was known to Dinah, perhaps even well, but the sexual encounter was nonconsensual. Part of the difficulty is the absence of Dinah's perspective on the event, as well as the lack of language and even concepts of "consensual" and "consent."

In many ways, the narrative of Dinah is valuable as a way of thinking through the larger issues surrounding rape, female sexuality, and the status of women in the biblical text. Dinah's sexuality is presented as something to be negotiated and exchanged among men. (If her brothers Simeon and Levi are acting on her instructions or in accordance with her wishes, the text does not share this detail). It is at this point that a traditional anthropological or historical reading and a radical feminist reading agree—an uncommon point of rapport and one perhaps worth exploring. Feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin has traced "the traffic in women"; the rape of Dinah is also a clear example of such a theme. It can

also be valuable to reflect on the process of interpreting the text. The idea that "she wanted it" or "she was asking for it" (by going to visit "the women of the region," by attending a fraternity party, or whatever else) is a persistent feature of rape culture; to insist that a narrative of rape is really a love story is to repeat this trope and even to perpetuate further violence against Dinah. But what if Dinah did desire Shechem, and consented to the encounter? Is not also anti-feminist to foreclose the possibility of female desire and even sexual agency in the text? While these questions have no simple answers, asking them is one of way entering into the complexities of the issue.

### **The Rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13)**

The rape of [Tamar](#) repeats many of the themes of the rape of Dinah. David's son, Amnon, is seized by desire for Tamar, his half-sister. Counseled by his friends, he pretends to be ill; when Tamar brings him food, he rapes her in spite of her protests. He is then "seized with a very great loathing" (2 Sam. [13:15](#)) and casts her out. Tamar's full brother Absalom subsequently kills Amnon and David's family begins to unravel; of Tamar, however, no more is heard. As in the case of Dinah, the narrative of Tamar represents the sexual use of women as a means of establishing power relations between men. Tamar is not given agency in the story; her voice is not heard except in protest. Absalom seeks to defend his sister, and yet a few chapters later in the text, he has sex with his father's concubines as a means of asserting his claim to the throne (2 Sam. [16:21–22](#)).

In the context of recent conversations about sexual assault and sexual violence on college campuses, the story of Tamar displays several disturbing parallels. Jonadab encourages Amnon to trick Tamar into being alone with him; this sort of male conspiracy to isolate women and subject them to sexual violence has parallels in modern rape cultures, including those in many college fraternities. Amnon likewise plays on Tamar's instincts to compassion and hospitality, an exploitation of gendered kindness.

As with Dinah, the very act of reading the narrative of Tamar offers a window into larger issues of gender, power, and rape culture. Some scholars have suggested, for example, that Tamar sought to entrap Amnon in marriage when she visited him, and that the "rape" was the after-the-fact invention of a jilted would-be wife. The parallels between this reading and modern tropes of rape culture hardly need to be stated, beginning with the assumption that rape claims are simply stories women tell after deciding they made a mistake.

### **The Levite's Concubine (Judg. 19) and Lot's Daughters (Gen. 19)**

Perhaps the most notorious rape narrative in the Hebrew Bible is the story of the Levite's concubine in Judges [19](#). A Levite and his concubine are traveling through the land of Benjamin and must spend the night in Gibeah. A man gives them shelter for the night, but the men of the city surround the house and demand the opportunity to rape the Levite. In a move reminiscent of Genesis [19](#), the host offers instead the concubine and his own virgin daughter; the men refuse, but the Levite pushes out his concubine. She is raped all night and discovered in the morning. The Levite cuts her body into twelve pieces and sends one to each tribe of Israel, summoning them to war against Benjamin. (Whether the woman is dead before she is cut up remains unaddressed by the text).

This narrative has been identified as a "text of terror" by many biblical scholars, and rightly so. The sexual violence is appalling. While it is the men of Gibeah, described by the text as a "perverse lot" (Judg. [19:22](#), NRSV), who are initially responsible, the Levite and his host are also implicated in the text's violence. The apparent interchangeability of potential rape victims (the Levite, the daughter, the concubine) points to a larger ideology of rape culture. There is also the emphasis placed on the daughter's virginity, as well as the detail that she is ultimately spared, unlike the previously sexually experienced concubine. Here, as with the concubines in 2 Samuel 16, status is mapped onto sexuality: free (and virginal) versus slave (and sexually possessed by all).

This points to the value placed on virginity, itself linked to modern purity cultures and the so-called "virgin/whore dichotomy."<sup>1</sup> Purity culture is itself a form of rape culture, as many scholars and commentators have noted. Furthermore, none of the women in either Judges 19 or Genesis [19](#) are given names. Many feminist interpreters have discussed the significance of this lack of names; I want only to add here that it furthers the effect of representing women as interchangeable sexual commodities. It is not neutral that this rape victim is known in the literature only as the Levite's concubine. (See, e.g., the "[Index of Women](#)" on the OBSO site).

Considering Judges [19](#) intertextually with Genesis [19](#), the destruction of [Sodom and Gomorrah](#), further draws out the text's complicity in sexual violence. In the Genesis story, Lot offers his daughters, who "have not known a man" (Gen. [19:8](#)), to the crowd of men who desire to rape his male guests (themselves divine messengers). The emphasis on the daughters' virginity parallels the emphasis on the host's daughter's virginity in Judges [19](#), just as the fact that Lot's daughters are spared also plays into binary logic of virgin-whore dichotomy. The attempt of the men of Sodom to rape the guests, as well as Lot's attempt to provide alternate targets (his own daughters) point to the larger economy of sexual violence, including the interchangeability of victims, that underlies both texts. In the aftermath of Sodom's destruction, Lot himself is raped by his daughters, who believe there is no other man left alive to father children (Gen. [19:32–38](#)). Some readers, such as Ilona Rashkow, have suggested that Lot in fact rapes his daughters, and the text as written reflects either bad conscience or an intentional cover-up. An alternate perspective, one that accepts the daughters as initiators, raises the question of rape of males, as well as the silence that surrounds it. Is it impossible that the daughters initiate the rape because such violence against a male body is unthinkable, or because rape, including family rape, is such a pervasive part of the female experience?

Returning to Judges [19](#), a critique of rape culture must take seriously the larger contexts of the rape of the Levite's concubine. Within the narrative arc of [Judges](#), the rape and murder of the concubine lead to a war against [Benjamin](#), causing the other tribes to refuse intermarriage with Benjamin. The Benjaminites' response is to kidnap a host of virgins from Jabesh-gilead and from Shiloh. As in Genesis [19](#), the response to sexual violence is more sexual violence. These events, moreover, come as the culmination of the repeated gender violence that constitutes the overall structuring logic of the book of Judges. The intertextual connections with Gen. [19](#), meanwhile, indicate that rape culture is not limited to Judges or to "those days [when] there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. [21:25](#)). Instead, it is pervasive across biblical texts, times, and authors.

## Other Instances of Rape Culture

Rape culture also plays out in the use of sexual violence as a means of punishment, either in personal relationships or as an act of war. In multiple texts, Yahweh punishes Israel (represented as a woman) with sexual humiliation. Yahweh threatens to strip naked women who are sexually promiscuous or dressed in jewelry or other finery; it is worth noting that dress is taken as an indicator of sexuality, a common assumption in rape culture as well. The trope of the punishment of the promiscuous woman is especially pronounced in the marriage metaphor texts, such as Hosea [2](#) and Ezekiel [16](#) and [23](#), where this woman is Israel.

Exposure and sexual humiliation are also directed at men. The stripping of male prisoners of war is a means of punishment documented in many ancient Near Eastern texts.<sup>2</sup> The rape of women also sometimes figures in the text, including the sexual use of women captured in warfare. This reflects the understanding of female sexuality as an extension of masculine economies of power and control. There are also narrative examples. Judges [19–21](#) offers one extended narrative on the intersections of rape and warfare. In addition, biblical rape culture is inseparable from the larger issue of the representation of foreigners. Deviant sexuality is frequently associated with foreign peoples, with the tropes of the sexually promiscuous woman and the sexually deviant homosexual man given particular prominence. Foreign peoples prove both sexually compelling and deeply dangerous to the ancient Israelites. Numbers [25](#) offers a sharp example. The high priest Phinehas encounters the Israelite man Zimri and the Moabite woman Cozbi in flagrante and stabs them both with a single thrust—an image of violence with visual parallels to rape. His actions are commended by the text's authors. Sexualized violence is a divinely ordered punishment.

It is not only the explicit narratives of rape that represent rape culture in the biblical text. Instead, rape culture as a category forces us to look beyond single events to larger conditions of culture. It also requires us to reexamine our assumptions about seemingly familiar texts. Consider, for example, the theme of the "barren matriarchs" in Genesis. The use of slave women ([Hagar](#), Zilpah, Bilhah) for the matriarchs is often discussed as a kind of surrogacy. And yet it is equally possible to read these narratives as stories about the sexual exploitation of slaves. This is a point that recent feminist, womanist, and postcolonialist critiques of Genesis (and, indeed, of biblical scholarship) have drawn out; it is also given vivid literary form in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The narrative of [David](#) and [Bathsheba](#), often represented in artistic representations as a great love story, is another story that raises troubling issues of consent. While David's desires are clear in the text, Bathsheba's remain unstated; she never gives consent. Interpreters sometimes take her action of bathing on the roof as an invitation to sexual activity; this evokes the common rape culture narrative of "asking for it." The David and Bathsheba story also raises the issue of power: David as king has significant power over Bathsheba (and, indeed, everyone else); this constrains Bathsheba's possible responses to the king's sexual propositions. This is especially worth attending to in an academic context, with its own issues of power relations (both as a topic of study and as a lived experience in the classroom).

The intersections of sex and deceit in Genesis, such as Lot's sexual relations with his daughters or Tamar's with [Judah](#) (Gen. [38](#)), represent another thread of rape culture in the text. The narrative of Lot's

daughters, like that of Dinah, also raises questions of agency: do the daughters in fact initiate sexual activity, or does the text reflect an attempt to repress and renovate the parental rape of a child? (This is the argument of Ilona Rashkow, here and in her reading of [Noah](#) and [Ham](#); Rashkow argues that Noah rapes his son Ham and the text constructs a cover-up.<sup>3</sup>) Given the prevalence of alcohol in sexual assaults on college campuses, the drunkenness of Noah and Lot is also pertinent.

The narrative of Lot and especially of Noah and Ham also raises the question of sexual violence against men. Discussions of rape culture often emphasize the ways in which norms of masculinity constitute men as sexual agents and women as passive prizes and/or victims. This representation has many negative consequences for women, including the representation of survivors of sexual violence as "damaged" (as in Judg. 19). However, it is also negative for men. A significant number of men are victims of sexual violence, and yet this experience remains undiscussed and even unthinkable under the parameters of rape culture. In the Hebrew Bible, there are a few scattered references to sexual violence against men (e.g., Jer. [20:7](#), as well as the narratives of Noah and Lot). Sexual violence against male bodies is typically represented as an assault on masculinity more broadly.

### **Additional Reflections on Teaching**

As a way of entering more deeply into the topic, I want to consider in greater detail a particular pedagogical example: Genesis [34](#). In teaching this text, I have multiple goals for my students. First, as with other texts, I want them to see that the narrative sustains multiple ways of reading (in terms of approaches—historical, literary, and so forth—and interpretations of what happens to Dinah). Second, I want them to link the reading of this text to other larger concerns, such as the status of women in ancient Israel and the control of female sexuality by men. In addition, I use this lesson to introduce students to the idea of rape culture (as a concept, as well as a way of approaching or interpreting texts). And finally, I want to make students aware of the existence of campus resources and policies.

This is a significant amount of material to cover in a class session, and of course there are almost always complications. (Is there an exam to prepare for? A paper to explain? Another text to discuss? Is the campus in the thrall of preparing for Homecoming or Parents' Weekend?) Still, I make a dedicated effort to carve out a significant portion of the class to reading and discussing Dinah, without making the students feel rushed. This allocation of time is itself a way of signaling the importance of the topic. I also begin with a brief statement about taking the text seriously and treating it with respect. I also explain, briefly, the concept of rape culture, which I use as a framing device for this lesson; this fits into a larger class theme about exploring the various methods that biblical scholars use.

I combine several classroom strategies to achieve the lesson's objectives. The status of women in ancient Israel is a topic that I introduce with a brief lecture or perhaps a reading assigned prior to class. For the initial analysis of the text, on the other hand, I have students begin by discussing with a partner, which creates less vulnerability than a large class discussion. It also allows me to listen in and be attuned to possible issues to address—or head off—in the group discussion that follows. Similarly, while I often cold-call on students to increase participation, I generally avoid doing this in the context of a topic such as sexual violence. At the same time, I am careful to maintain academic rigor in both lecture and

discussion, to avoid suggesting that sexual violence is unrelated to "real" academic concerns. I include a brief mention of campus resources into the class discussion, and follow up with an email link to the relevant campus web resources.

These strategies, of course, reveal something about my own institutional contexts—teaching a small, discussion-based class of primarily first-year students. However, the general principles are adaptable to a range of contexts, including large lectures and online classes. A well-planned and well-executed class on sexual violence in the biblical texts can make a powerful if implicit statement about the importance of taking sexual violence seriously as a problem. Equally important is the attitude that the professor models. With difficult texts and situations in particular, our students look to us for how to respond; teaching these texts with sensitivity is an important pedagogical gesture. As a reader, I am not especially concerned about the problem of doing violence to a text, or to a text's characters. I am, however, concerned by the risks of teaching texts in ways that do harm to students.

There are other teaching strategies to mention. One is to attend to time. The highest risk period of time for young women, for example, is often identified as that falling between the beginning of the fall semester and the Thanksgiving break of the first year, a time referred to as the "red zone."<sup>4</sup> Other studies have pointed to fraternity and sorority rush as times of increased risk.<sup>5</sup> Time comes into play in questions of pedagogy as well. It is helpful to think intentionally about when in the semester these conversations should occur. How comfortable are students with each other, and with difficult conversations? Are these conversations better carried out in a large group, guided by the instructor, or in small groups, where students may feel less vulnerable? Perhaps most importantly, is there a dynamic of respect and trust?

Whatever choices we as instructors make, we should make them with reflection and compassion. Teaching texts of sexual violence in the Hebrew Bible is both difficult and important. Above all, it is a task we owe it to our students to do well.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jessica Valenti. *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2009), 13–14.

<sup>2</sup>On the feminizing of male captives, see Cynthia R. Chapman. *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 62 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>Ilona N. Rashkow. *Taboo or Not Taboo: Sexuality and Family in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 96–104.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Kimble PhD et al. "Risk of Unwanted Sex for College Women: Evidence for a Red Zone," *Journal of American College Health* 57, no. 3 (November 1, 2008): 331–38; Stephen Cranney, "The Relationship Between Sexual Victimization and Year in School in U.S. Colleges Investigating the Parameters of the 'Red Zone,'" *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30, no. 17 (October 1, 2015): 3133–45.

<sup>5</sup>William F. Flack et al. "'The Red Zone' Temporal Risk for Unwanted Sex Among College Students," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 23, no. 9 (September 1, 2008): 1177–96.

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