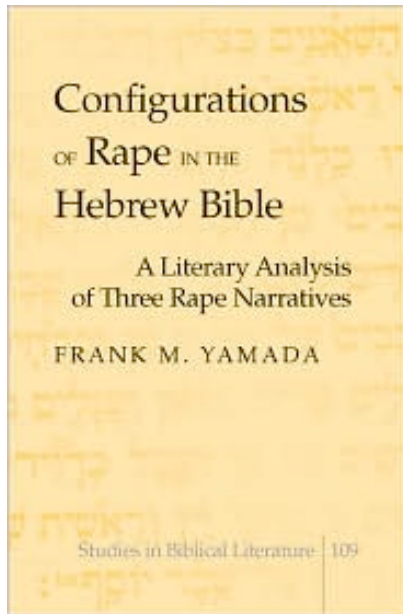


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Yamada, Frank M.

Configurations of Rape in the Hebrew Bible: A Literary Analysis of Three Rape Narratives

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This book is a revised dissertation, mentored by Jacqueline Lapsley at Princeton Theological Seminary, in which Frank M. Yamada examines three rape narratives (Gen 34; Judg 19; 2 Sam 13) with literary methodology. Yamada shows that the stories share a “family resemblance” (e.g., 5) and display “similar thematic elements, progression and outcome” (25). He suggests that each narrative should be viewed as belonging to a similar category of texts in which the plot moves from “a progression of rape to excessively violent male responses to social fragmentation” (e.g., 2). The increasing violence begins with the rape of a woman by one man or several men and thereafter escalates into male-on-male violence and major sociopolitical upheavals. Yamada acknowledges that each story describes the escalating violence in different ways. For instance, each story contains a different form of rape, the violent male responses are different, and also the social fragmentation looks different in each story. Nevertheless, a clear pattern of escalating violence joins the stories into a category of texts that, as Yamada argues, has not previously been studied as such.

Yamada begins the analysis with a brief secondary literature review in the introductory chapter. It includes feminist (10–14) and cultural (14–19) interpretations as well as studies that make “reading connections between the rape texts” (19–21) and refer to

“legal material on rape” (21–25). Yamada explains that his analysis focuses on the text itself and so avoids “at least three trends” (25) that he finds in previous scholarship on biblical rape narratives: (1) it examines the three narratives in isolation from each other; (2) it presupposes “a modern definition of rape,” which “has led to interpretative confusion;” and (3) it brings “admittedly external” assumptions “to the text” (25). The book continues with three chapters, one entitled “Genesis 34: The Rape of Dinah, the Disputes of Men and the Division of a Family,” another entitled “Judges 19: The Rape of the Nameless Concubine, Hospitality Gone Awry and the Decline of a Nation,” and yet another chapter on “2 Samuel 13:1–22: The Rape of Tamar and the Fragmentation of a Kingdom.” Each chapter follows the same structure, beginning with “The Context of Rape,” which in the case of Gen 34 refers to the insider-outsider “relational possibilities between Jacob’s family and the inhabitants of Shechem” (29), in the case of Judg 19 to the larger literary context of Judg 17–21, and in the case of 2 Sam 13 to the “forces of prophetic judgment and royal succession” (103). Then the chapter presents “The Rape Text Progression” of each narrative organized in three parts, beginning with the actual rape depiction, proceeding with the violent male responses, and ending in social fragmentation. A concluding chapter closes the book, followed by a bibliography and indexes.

The argument is well-structured and reasoned, though not entirely innovative. It assumes a strictly formalistic understanding of literary criticism that centers on the narrator. Throughout the book Yamada maintains that “the narrator” tells the story “in such a way that emphasizes the female victim’s situation or plight,” either aligning “the reader with the raped woman” or distancing “the reader from the male characters” (24). For instance, it is “the narrator” who “describes Dinah’s action in such a way that emphasizes that she is interacting with others” (32); it is “the narrator” who “uses the language of holy war ... so that the reader is aware of the irony of this battle” in Judg 19:11; and it is “the narrator” whose “characterization at the beginning of 2 Sam 13 set the stage for the conflict” (107). Accordingly, Yamada assumes that whenever “the reader” reacts to one or the other story, “the narrator” staged the reading experience for the reader. Only a couple of times Yamada sees the “reaction from the reader” as “help[ing] to establish the perspective of the narrator” (95) or literary textual features as placing “the reader in an ethical dilemma” (42) apparently independent of the presumed narrator. Especially in his discussion on Gen 34, Yamada accentuates the narrator’s role in the meaning-making process and invalidates the reader’s hermeneutical responsibility. He states that “the present analysis also suggests that a modern definition of rape, which emphasizes a woman’s consent, tends to complicate the understanding of ענה within Gen 34, since the reader never has access to the volition or interior process of Dinah” (39), and he exclaims that “the reader has no way of knowing Dinah’s response” (40). But neither do we have access to the

authorial intention of the narrator, although this is exactly what Yamada asserts as the meaning of the text. Yamada also does not clarify who “the narrator” is: Is she or he always the same in the three narratives? What about the readers? Who are they? All of them remain anonymous as if it mattered little whether they hold feminist or androcentric convictions, are positioned here and not there, come from postcolonial or postmodern points of views, or belong to minoritized or majoritized discourses.

Hermeneutically, then, Yamada’s study does not contribute to a paradigm that many feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern interpreters have promoted during the past few years, if not decades. Written from “nowhere,” the analysis has a static feel, and in the end it makes a rather small point despite the many good and solid literary observations. The argument is that the three rape stories are “framed within a certain characteristic structure” that centers on “male issues and responses” (138) typical of other biblical androcentric texts. This structure moves from “the initial rape in ways that are excessively violent” (133) unlike biblical laws that offer less violent alternatives, and it connects rape with social disintegration unlike other biblical texts. This interesting point would have been worthwhile to engage further. It raises, for instance, the question why the narrator made this point. Does the connection between rape and social fragmentation highlight or deter from the rape? How about the connection between rape and the ensuing male violence? Yamada does not address such issues because his work engages in a literary analysis that aims to stay within the text itself.

Perhaps such questions would also have gone beyond the scholarly framework of Yamada’s work. After all, this is a dissertation that required official approval and perhaps the search for “evidence” “within the text itself” (37) was more easily defended than the notion that readers create biblical meaning. But was it really necessary for Yamada to state that the application of modern definitions of rape “tend to complicate understandings” of the verb ענה (39)? Do the so-called complications not stem from the fact that different readers operate with different epistemological assumptions about rape and the interpretative task in general? Yet epistemological, hermeneutical, and ethical considerations are absent from this examination of three horrific rape narratives that certainly deserve detailed literary treatment, as performed in this book, but whose literary meaning could have been deepened by attending to the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of all interpretative work, including when it concerns biblical narratives on rape.