

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sir,

"Rashi's View of Genesis," by Joel Litke (XXXIII:3, July 2005, p. 187) seems like a self-serving apologia for biblical heroes without focusing at length on Rashi. He begins with Rashi but soon abandons him to excoriate the immorality of the Canaanites while showing how moral and righteous were the Hebrews. On p. 188, Litke notes that Ham's "leering at the nakedness of Noah . . . reveals a characteristic vulgarity that infected his descendants and became their distinctive national trait."

But in this apologia Litke neglects to mention Abraham's and Isaac's cavalier attitude toward their wives in the encounters with Abimelech in order to protect their own lives; Judah's consorting with a prostitute who turns out to be his daughter-in-law. And ordering her to be burned when he learns she is pregnant; Reuben's taking his father's wife. Further on, beyond Genesis, is David's taking the married Bathsheba and sending her husband to the front to be killed; his fathering a child in an adulterous union who will found the messianic line; and Amnon lusting for and taking his half-sister.

Before one accents "the immoral character of the Canaanite people," one must look into one's own house, the House of Israel, and objectively see and admit the moral lapses of our own heroes and not draw blinds over those lapses as if they did not exist.

To the Canaanites "low standards of culture and morals" in Litke's words, let us look at the brutal murder of all the men in one town, the booty taken, the wives and children captured, in revenge for the rape of Dinah. Is this high culture and high morality? Are these, in Litke's words, "norms that are decent and virtuous"? In contrast to the modesty of other Genesis heroines, Dinah "goes out". For all we know, by going out unaccompanied, as did Tamar at the crossroads, she may even have been fair game for Shechem's forceful advances.

Litke avers that "holiness . . . in biblical terms means restraint in sexual matters." The above illustrations show that our people were no better than the Canaanites. In fact, the Bible offers more examples of the Hebrews' lack of sexual restraint than that of the Canaanites.

Curt Leviant
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AUTHOR'S REPLY

Dr. Leviant seems to have missed the intent of Rashi's comment. According to my exposition, Rashi is saying that the purpose of the Creation account is not so much to inform us primarily of the creation process, as to afford us an understanding and justification for God's assigning the land to Israel, and the disqualification of the Canaanites to possess it.

For this, the episodes, as they are related in Genesis, of their various instances of immorality and corruption serve as an adequate warrant.

As to the problematic behavior of the Hebrew heroes, the commentators should be consulted, but they have no bearing on Rashi's comment.

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