

## Theodotus the Epic Poet's Reimagined Biblical World

Preserved in the ninth book of Eusebius' *Praeparatio Evangelica* are a series of quotations from works by Hellenistic era Greek-Jewish authors, in genres as varied as epic, tragedy, chronography, and historical novels. Among these fragmentary texts are 48 verses of dactylic hexameter ascribed to a certain Theodotus, who likely wrote in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE in the Hasmonean state. The verses consist of an adaptation of Genesis 34 and certain other passages from Genesis related to that narrative – Jacob's travels into Mesopotamia to find a wife and Abraham's travels out of it. They also constitute a fascinating piece of evidence for the Hellenism of Jews in the Hellenistic period and their literary experimentation.

Allow me to trace the contours of the Rape of Dinah narrative for a Classics audience unfamiliar with this somewhat obscure Old Testament story. The Rape of Dinah narrative is not a black-and-white morality tale, but rather an ambivalent account of actions of Simeon and Levi, two of the patriarch Jacob's eleven sons. While dwelling around the city of Shechem, the prince of that city, also named Shechem, abducts and rapes Jacob's daughter Dinah, only later attempting to right his wrong due to having fallen in love with Dinah. He is told by Jacob's sons that he will be allowed to marry Dinah, and their two peoples will become one, if his entire community undergoes circumcision. He convinces his countrymen to undergo the procedure and to make themselves one people with the wandering household of Jacob. Simon and Levi, however, attack the Shechemites while they're still recuperating from the procedure. After they kill all the men in the town, take their livestock and women, and rescue their sister, they are subsequently rebuked in explicit language by their father, Jacob, for having endangered the household's position in a foreign land. It appears as if the brothers have the last word when they

say to their father “should he deal with our sister as a harlot?” While they may have endangered their household, familial loyalties and the honour of their sister are worth the risk. In Genesis 49, however, as Jacob blesses and prophecies about his various children, Simon and Levi alone are cursed by him.

The content and *topoi* of the source material is apt for Greek epic: violations of hospitality, stolen wives, and revenge killings have been the stuff of epic since Homer. Theodotus’ style is also particularly Homeric: he writes in dactylic hexameter, his lexicon is strongly indebted to the blind poet of archaic Greece, and at one point he even claims that the villain of the story, prince Shechem, was a son of Hermes. While there are many interesting aspects of these 48 verses – Theodotus’ relationship to antecedent Semitic language sources, Homeric intertextual allusions, and/or playful deviations from source material – this paper focuses specifically on the imagined geography of the poem: where events are said to have taken place, what peoples are said to populate those environs, and what names are used for those places.

My paper argues that Theodotus reimagines the world of the Bible in terms starkly reminiscent of and indebted to both his contemporary world – the Hasmonean state of the late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE – and antecedent imagined Greek literary worlds. On the one hand, Theodotus recasts Jewish history through the lens of the contemporary Greek-speaking Hellenistic world. Thus, rather than using a Semitic language name, or even the Septuagint’s transliterated name, for the city of Shechem, he invents a new Greek one; rather than calling Laban’s homeland “Padam aram,” he calls it Syria, recalling the Seleucid heartland. The contemporary world is thus projected back onto the Jewish past, in a manner similar to Callimachus’ insertion of praise of Ptolemaic monarchs into his hymn to Delos. On the other hand, imagined Homeric geographies

bear an equally strong influence on Theodotus. The city of Shechem, - whose denizens in the Biblical source text had nothing to do with the struggle between prince Shechem and the sons of Jacob – is recast as entirely wicked city violating the laws of *xenia* and its inhabitants are, I argue, reimagined as Homeric cyclopes, thus softening some of the harsher edges of the Rape of Dinah story. Ultimately I argue that Theodotus' reimagined Biblical setting, into which the contemporary world bleeds in, offers a kind of historical justification for a Hasmonean status quo.