
Review of Matthew J. Marohl, *Joseph's Dilemma: 'Honor Killing' in the Birth Narrative of Matthew*. Eugene: Cascade, 2008.

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Consensus is rare in Biblical Studies. While the agreement over Joseph's options in Matt 1:19 long seemed certain, Matthew J. Marohl overturns this misplaced confidence with *Joseph's Dilemma*. Against the nearly universal interpretation that Joseph could have handled Mary's suspected adultery by divorcing her either publicly or privately, Marohl argues that Joseph's rejected "public" alternative was honour killing. The dearth of scholarship on honour killings – especially in the Bible – finds him treading new ground, primarily drawing upon cultural-anthropological methods. Though not without problems, Marohl presents a surprisingly strong case for the relevance of this rarely-considered phenomenon.

Both human rights and postcolonial discourses inform Marohl's efforts to avoid the convenient route of Othering his subjects. His interest in the former is evident throughout the volume, freely citing the findings of activist organisations (pp. 5–8, 14–16). Despite this leaning, he never succumbs to self-righteous crusading. His postcolonial approach is two-fold. First, he situates honour killings in the larger context of violence against women, in which Westerners are equally complicit. Second, his book centres on an effort "to include examples of resistance" to such executions (p. xvi). Though Marohl never makes the claim explicitly, he implies that the author of Matthew opposed honour killings.

Marohl divides the body of *Joseph's Dilemma* into four semi-independent chapters, the first of which contains his analysis of modern honour killings. The general lack of "government statistics, legal rulings, and scholarly journals" on the practice necessitates his recourse to primary sources, such as newspaper articles and ethnographies (pp. 1–2). He first argues that these executions only occur in patriarchal milieux in which a man can possess a woman's sexuality. A woman's father regulates her sexual activity until marriage, at which time he transfers ownership to her husband. Should evidence of her possible sexual experience surface – typically by a bloodless consummation – the husband could bring this grievance to her family, who might then kill her for the sake of familial honour. Whether the sex was consensual, rape, molestation or merely alleged is irrelevant. Within this framework, he defines honour killing as "the practice of killing girls and women who are thought to have endangered a family's honor by allegedly engaging in sexual activity before (or outside of) marriage" (p. 4).

In his second chapter, Marohl both laments the absence of scholarship connecting Joseph's dilemma to honour killings and rectifies it. Previous scholars devised three possibilities for Joseph's awareness of Mary's pregnancy: 1) he "suspected Mary of adultery"; 2) he "suspended all judgment"; 3) he "was filled with awe and feared to take Mary as his wife" (p. 23). He concludes with most Protestant scholars that the first of these is the most viable. Academics, however, suffer from a failure of imagination with respect to the implications of this interpretation. Exegetes usually limit Joseph's options in Matt 1:19 to public or private divorce of Mary; Joseph, a righteous man, chooses the option least likely to shame her. Few give consideration to honour killing and those that do dismiss it as an archaic ritual long out of practice, though Marohl demonstrates that this position misinterprets the findings of Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck at the beginning of the 20th Century (pp. 27–28). He also argues against existing social-scientific interpretations: Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, and John Pilch fail to appreciate the essentially collective aspects of honour in this

pericope, instead locating this value in Mary as an individual (pp. 34–37). As a result, they misapprehend the familial function of the phenomenon.

The third chapter, concerned with honour killing in the ancient world, bears the burden of Marohl's thesis. Evidence of the practice exists in a variety of Israelite and non-Israelite writings from the ancient world. Writings ranging from the Ezekiel to Suetonius' *Life of Augustus* attest the phenomenon. Marohl's analyses of early Matthean interpretations like the *Protevangelium of James* and patristic commentaries virtually confirm his thesis, but a few of his examples inspire less confidence. For example, "Josephus notes that when [Bathsheba] became pregnant there was a need to contrive some way to conceal her sin—for, according to the laws of the fathers, she was deserving of death as an adulteress", which Marohl implies would be an honour killing (p. 51). But when Josephus described such fatalities earlier in *Antiquities of the Jews*, he recounted a priestly ritual that resulted in bodily swelling and decomposition should the woman have committed adultery (3.270–273). The conspiracy to hide Bathsheba's pregnancy sought to avoid the ritual that would lead to *divine* punishment, not public execution. If anything, Josephus typifies resistance to honour killings, verified in his redaction of biblical tales that offer the practice tacit approval (e.g., the woman at Gibeah in *Ant.* 5.136–149). He concludes with a brief chapter on a previously-unnoticed Matthean theme: "from expected death comes unexpected new life" (p. 63). He detects this motif not only in the potential execution of Jesus' mother, but also in Herod the Great's attempted murder of his usurper, the apostolic healing ministry, and Jesus' resurrection. Marohl proffers no analysis of Matthean redaction of Q or Markan material that illuminates this idea, which otherwise might have made this chapter more persuasive.

A book centred on this topic could have been a lightning rod for criticisms regarding the uneasy relationship between the social sciences and neo-colonial subtexts. Marohl avoids elements of Orientalism that are sometimes associated with New Testament anthropologists when mounting his case. More extensive comparison with similar occurrences in Western culture (lynchings due to fears of inter-racial sex, domestic violence, etc.) might have nuanced his understanding of the purpose of honour killings, further distanced his study from undesirable ideologies, and increased the book's accessibility. On a more basic level, the book's organisation is sometimes difficult to discern, leading to a style that verges on repetitive. The discussion of ancient evidence of honour killing, for example, proceeds with almost no detectable arrangement. Finally, readers should be aware that this book requires a stomach for graphic narratives of sexual and physical violence. To be sure, these problems detract little from a study that is provocative on multiple levels. Its compilation of ancient writings attesting honour killing makes the book worth reading in itself, which is not to downplay the creative thesis connecting it to the rest of the volume. This book will likely play into future research on biblical honour and shame, the Matthean birth narrative, and the literary roles of women in the Gospels. Anyone with interests in these areas will benefit from *Joseph's Dilemma*.