The story of Reuben and Bilhah, which appears in an abbreviated fashion in Gen 35:22, was expanded to an entire chapter in *Jubilees*. While Jacob is away, Reuben, his first-born son, sleeps with Jacob’s concubine Bilhah. The Bible records no consequences of this act, but simply notes, "and Jacob heard." However, one finds negative evaluations of Reuben’s action elsewhere, particularly at Gen 49:4, in Jacob’s blessings for his sons: "Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer; for when you mounted your father’s bed, you brought disgrace—my couch he mounted." According to 1 Chr 5:1, Reuben’s act resulted in the revocation of his birthright and its transfer to Joseph. Despite the negative assessment found in these two passages, neither of them prescribes a punishment against Reuben himself; rather, they describe the penalty incurred by the tribe of Reuben as a whole for the actions of their forefather.

This punishment differs from that generally meted out in the Pentateuch for this type of behavior, and from that prescribed by the specific law prohibiting intercourse with a father’s wife. According to Lev 20:11, in the case where a man sleeps with his father’s wife, both of the participants, the son and the wife, are to be put to death. One finds a similar prohibition, but without stipulation of the punishment, at Lev 18:8; Deut 23:1; 27:20.

The Rewritten Narrative (33:1–9a)

The short description in Genesis does not express any appraisal of Bilhah’s role in this story. She is not a developed character there, and possibly plays the part of a prop in Reuben’s premature attempt to...
inherit Jacob’s position.² Sleeping with one’s father’s wife is proposed as this kind of political tactic in 2 Sam 16:21–22 and 2 Sam 3:7, as well as in ancient Near Eastern sources. In the narrative section of its retelling (vv. 1–9a), Jubilees attempts to defend Bilhah by presenting her as the victim of rape, adding or changing the following details:³

1) Reuben saw Bilhah bathing, and thus desired her. This theme appears to be taken from the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11.⁴ But, in contrast to the biblical story, in which Bathsheba washed herself on the roof, a semi-public area, Jub. 33:2 emphasizes that Bilhah bathed in “a private place” (ba-ḥābu’). Bilhah cannot be accused of attempting to seduce Reuben.⁵

2) Bilhah was asleep during the act of intercourse. Jub. 33:4 says she only awoke after Reuben had lain with her, a sure sign of her lack of participation.⁶

3) As soon as she realized that she had been raped, Bilhah grabbed Reuben and screamed out. In the laws concerning the rape of the betrothed virgin in Deut 22:23–27, the shouts of the woman are evidence of the fact that she protests the actions of the man, and thus she is not culpable.⁷ After she released him, Reuben immediately ran

² See for example Sarna 1989: 244–245.
⁴ Heinemann 1954: 24; Anderson 1994: 21. Kugel (1995: 528–531; 1997: 272–273) has suggested that the motif of seeing Bilhah bathing derived from exegesis of Jacob’s blessing to Reuben in Gen 49:4, “וַיָּלָהּ מֵאָבָדָךְ...יֵאָשֶׁר...וַיָּלָהּ—"you (sing.) went up to your father’s bed...he went up to my couch." If Reuben alone went up to Jacob’s bed, then Bilhah must have been there already, and was thus presumably asleep when Reuben entered the bed. This motif, however, should be viewed in light of the general tendency of the rewritten narrative, present in almost all of its new elements, to absolve Bilhah of any guilt in the story. As a general methodological principle, Kugel has suggested that, “Ancient biblical interpretation is an interpretation of verses, not stories” (1997: 28), a statement which he has amply demonstrated in his many studies. At the same time, his focus on individual exegetical motifs can obscure the general interpretive tendencies present in complete narratives.
⁵ Halpern-Amaru 1999: 111.