PASSION OR JUSTICE? THE INTERPRETATION OF 
BYÔM NÂQÂM IN PROVERBS VI 34

Prov. vi 34 mentions the "day of vengeance" (yôm nāqām), on which a deceived husband will not spare the man who had committed adultery with his wife:

kür-qzn'd hōmat-gāber For jealousy is full of the rage of a man,
ur'lô²-yahrōl byôm nāqām therefore he will not spare [him] in the day of vengeance.

At first sight the contents of this text do not seem to raise any problems; the average reader of the Bible needs only a little imagination to visualize such a situation. He will immediately take the "day of vengeance" as a description of the day on which the furious spouse gets hold of his rival and avenges his violated honour by means of blood-revenge. The combination of jealousy (qzn'd), wrath (ḥēmād), mercilessnes (lô² hml) and vengeance (nāqām) seems to guarantee the precision of this explanation, which is current in theological literature as well.¹

The question is, however, whether this more or less intuitive exegesis really does justice to the text. The issue is the interpretation of the word nāqām. In modern usage the word "vengeance" has a strongly unfavourable connotation because of its association with arbitrary, illegitimate and even immoral behaviour.² The German proverb "Rache macht eine kleines Recht zu grossem Unrecht" is typical in this context. Contrary to the current view of the meaning of "vengeance" the word-group nqm in the Old Testa-

² ḫbl occurs especially in ritual contexts.
³ Possibly the mention of the foot is an example of synecdoche, as argued by A.R. Johnson, The Vitality of the Individual in the thought of Ancient Israel (Cardiff, 1949), pp. 67-9, but in any case we would have here an instance of what Johnson describes as a part of the person acquiring "a heightened significance" and so being used "picturesquely and graphically with reference to the individual as a whole" (p. 52).
⁴ This long-mooted proposal has now received support from some Ugaritic evidence, cf. F.M. Cross, "Ugaritic ḫb'at and Hebrew cognates", VT 2 (1952), pp. 162 ff.
⁵ p. 415.
ment is determined by the notion of a legitimate, righteous execution of punishment by a competent authority. It is significant that the subject of nqm is nearly always the legal authorities or the king. Only where the framework of legitimacy is missing does the root nqm have a pejorative connotation. Whereas the word-group nqm nowhere in the Old Testament indicates private blood-revenge, many texts can be found where the action of nqm is placed in the framework of justice and jurisdiction (see for instance Gen. iv 15; Exod. xxi 20, 21; Ps xciv 1; Jer. xi 20; 1 Sam. xxiv 13). The extra-biblical use of nqm confirms this notion.

Then what is the intention of nāqām in Prov. vi 34? Is the issue at stake in this text an uncompromising, passionate revenge, or has nāqām a legal connotation here as well? The context makes it clear that the latter is the case. Prov. vi 20-35, the third of the four passages in Prov. i-ix warning against the strange woman (further, ii 16-19, v 1-23, vii 1-27), especially focuses on the foolishness of adultery. Wisdom can save a man from such foolishness (cf. Prov. ii 16). In vss 30 ff. adultery is compared with theft. Breaking into someone else’s marriage is worse than breaking into someone else’s house. Theft does not always infect the culprit with indignity and disgrace, but adultery does. Someone’s house is ruined as a result of theft (byt, vs. 31b), whereas someone’s soul is ruined because of adultery (nps, vs. 32b).

The reason for this is given by vss 34-5 introduced by ki-causale: there is no escape for the adulterer. Whoever plays with fire will irrevocably be burnt in the process (vss 27-8). The deceived husband will not spare the culprit (hmt; cf. Dtn. xiii 9) “on the day of vengeance” (byom nāqām). Four reasons can be given why it is unlikely that a private action of revenge on the part of the jealous husband is here at stake:

(a) Comparing adultery to theft makes it likely that vs. 34, like vs. 31, relates to an official punishment. Furthermore, it is not impossible that the expression of lō? yinnāqeh (vs. 29) implies a legal treatment of the matter as well; cf. Exod. xx 7, xxi 19; Prov. xix 5, 9, etc.

(b) The rather formal expression “day of vengeance” is far better understood in a legal context rather than in a context of passionate revenge. The translation of the LXX points in that direction as well: ἐν ἡμέρᾳ χρίσεως (N.B. not ἐκδικήσεως).

(c) Because of a private act of revenge resulting in death (see vss