

Genesis 34—Bethel or Shechem ?

In Genesis 33, we read of the historic restoration of Jacob and his brother Esau. Twenty years before Jacob had deceived and cheated his brother, and Esau had vowed to kill him for it. Jacob had fled from Esau's wrath for refuge with Uncle Laban about 500 miles away. During the twenty years there, Jacob had married twice, and taken two concubines as well. Jacob had wanted a big family, but now he had four wives with children from each. How do you think that will work out with all of them living together? Jacob was returning after twenty years to attempt a reconciliation with Esau, when his scouts came in and reported that Esau was coming to meet them with 400 fighting men. Jacob greatly feared the outcome of their meeting, but through many gifts and the newfound humility of Jacob, Esau's heart softened and he embraced Jacob. Now the door was open for Jacob to obey God's command to return home to Bethel. God had clearly called Jacob to Bethel, but he tarried in Succoth, and then settled down in Shechem amongst the pagan Canaanites. Perhaps Jacob had lost control of his family, and his oldest sons from Leah were calling the shots. What is the result of a polygamous household when the sons, all with different mothers, develop into adults who are rivals? I imagine that his six sons from Leah were all of the age that the bright lights of the city had more appeal than the rough rural hill country of Bethel. What happens when God commands you to go to Bethel, but you go to Shechem? After about ten years in those corrupt pagan areas, the events of Genesis 34 are the consequences.

In Genesis 33:18, Jacob bought a piece of land in Shechem from the king of that Canaanite city who was called Hamor, and his son was Shechem. We don't know if the city was named after the son or vice versa, but Jacob paid a high price for the king's land and Jacob pitched his tents there. This goes to prove that the saying is true that "A fool and his money are welcome everywhere". Jacob had one daughter from his first wife Leah named Dinah. In Genesis 34:1 Dinah left her family to roam around in the city and meet new people. In those days in that culture, young girls did not go out without a chaperone, especially into an evil corrupt pagan city like Shechem. This may tell us that since Jacob did not love her mother Leah, he did not care about Leah's children, and later we can judge from the different reactions of Jacob as opposed to Dinah's brothers when she was raped. Jacob did not make much of a protest while the brothers were outraged. I'm guessing that Jacob spent most of his time with his favorite wife Rachel whom he loved, and the children of Leah had a major problem with that. We can tell from this story as well as the subsequent stories that they had

a major “chip on their shoulder”, that would climax with the selling of Jacob’s favorite son Joseph into slavery in Genesis 37.

Prince Shechem and the Rape of Dinah, Genesis 34

As Dinah was roaming around in the city, the Prince “saw her and took her and lay with her by force”. I think the Prince was used to getting his way and just taking whatever he wanted. In those days people were often named for their characteristics, so I think Shechem means “if it feels good do it”. Israel was supposed to be in Bethel, which means “House of God”, but instead lived in “If it feels good, do it”. Amazingly, the prince was so attracted to Dinah that he wanted her as a wife, so he said to his father, “Get her for me”. Instead of feeling bad for his crime or asking how she felt, he just wanted to buy her. In verses 5-7 we are shocked at Jacob’s response to the situation, or let’s say it was a non-response. Jacob gave no outrage, nor did he ask any questions, but just left the matter up to Dinah’s brothers. This tells me that there was a schism in the family, and the sons of Leah had taken control of their side of the family, which included mother Leah, six sons, and Dinah. When the brothers came home and found out about the rape they were enraged and took it very personally. Nothing but maximum revenge would sooth their anger, but they were shrewd enough to hide it enough until they could carry out their deceitful plan of vengeance.

Hamor and Shechem’s Generous Offer

Even though they offered no apology or remorse, Hamor and Shechem wanted to do the right thing from their point of view which was to basically buy Dinah, and thus affect a joining of the two peoples of Jacob and Hamor. Their sales pitch was that if they intermarried they could live in peace and prosperity and own all the property they wanted. In addition, Shechem offered to pay them any price they asked for Dinah in the form of a bridal payment. You could say that they were offering Jacob’s family everything that God had promised to give them—this would be a short cut to the promised land. Jacob’s sons then answered the right way for the wrong reasons. In Genesis 34:13, the author warns us that the brothers’ real intention was deceit. They intended to trick the men of Shechem into undergoing circumcision so that Simeon and Levi could attack and kill them while they were recovering. At this point the story becomes very dark, and will progress to the point that we can no longer pull for Jacob’s family.

The Killing Spree

In verses 13-17, their deceitful plan takes the form of a religious proposition. They told Shechem that they were very religious, and an important part of their religion was circumcision. Their claim was that they could not intermarry or live with men who were not circumcised. Therefore all the men of Shechem would have to submit to circumcision or there was no deal. The proposal was that all the men would be circumcised, and then “we will live with you and become one people.” Shechem was motivated by a fear of loss of sex with Dinah, but Hamor was motivated by pure greed. He intended to own all of Jacob’s stuff, even if he had to be circumcised to get it.

Hamor then proceeded to do a sales job on the city. He did not bring up the Dinah problem, but presented the circumcision as an economic necessity. Their intentions were also deceitful as he told the men in the city, “The bottom line is that they are suckers, and at the end of the day everything they own will become ours.” This seemed like a great idea to the people, and in v.24 we read that every man in town was circumcised.

In Genesis 34:25-31, we read that Simeon and Levi waited until the third day, when the men would be in the peak of their pain, to enter the city and go from house to house with their swords killing the men in each house starting with Hamor and Shechem. Before we say that Shechem got what was coming to him, we must read the rest of the story. The brothers of Dinah massacred all the men in Shechem, then all the sons of Jacob swooped in and plundered everything in the city and enslaved all the women and children. This violated the ancient law of Lex Talionis which said that there had to be a limit on vengeance, and that the punishment must fit the crime. We should be shocked because Jacob’s family was chosen by God to be God’s representatives on earth. We expect them to be virtuous, but there was no virtue. They used circumcision, God’s holy sign of the covenant for genocide.

Jacob’s Response

We must be further shocked by Jacob’s response to the massacre, looting, and enslavement. He was not concerned about the murder and stealing, but he was concerned about his and his family’s safety. Jacob said, “You have brought trouble on me...and the many people

among the Canaanites will attack me and destroy me.” Was he concerned for his daughter or the crimes of his sons? We have not a word about that. Therefore, considering the disasters in this story, “What does happen when God tells you to go to Bethel, but you go to Shechem?”

If we have any doubt about the problems of living so many years amongst pagan idol worshippers, Genesis 35:1-4 provides ample proof of the participation of Jacob’s family in all the evil of Canaan. God once again commanded them to go to Bethel. Put away all the idols, approach God with confession and sacrifice, and purify yourselves, and then go to Bethel, the House of God. Jacob’s family then gave all their many idols along with all their pagan jewelry and clothes to Jacob, and he buried it all at Shechem, and they journeyed on to Bethel.

Conclusion

We must all live temporarily in this world, but are not to be “of it”. We live in a world of idolatry, but we must not participate in it. Look for justice, but not revenge—leave vengeance to God. What happens when you claim to live in Bethel, but your actions belong to Shechem? There are two results: We try to manage our image and thus become hypocrites, or we live a life of guilt and frustration. If we find ourselves in a bad place like Jacob did, it is never too late to do what he did—confess, consecrate (clean up your life), and repent. God will be faithful to restore you just as He graciously did for Jacob.

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