

WISDOM FROM THE BEGINNING - PART VII -SECTION I

JACOB AND HIS SONS – CHAPTERS 33-34

- I. After the reconciliation with Esau, the situation begins to settle down, but only in preparation for an explosion.
 - A. After the night with the angel, Jacob seems to have received more confidence, although he still uses cleverness in dealing with Esau.
 1. When Esau is coming, he goes first with the women and children following in waves, starting with the handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah (who are not named), followed by Leah and then Rachel. Each woman has her children with her. The procession is meant to create an aura of good feelings and give a sense of family setting. There is perhaps a sense that Esau will not show forth as much rage with these women and young children present.
 2. Jacob comes humbly to Esau, who asks him about the procession. Jacob refers to them as his family by God's blessings. His piety seems to have increased.
 3. Each of the women and children then comes to Esau and likewise does him homage.
 - B. Between the humility of Jacob, the grace of God, and apparently Esau's own disposition to forgive, the meeting goes well.
 1. Esau himself seems eager for the reconciliation, for he runs to Jacob to embrace him. The text does not see any need to explain Esau's emotions, nor whether he forgave Jacob on his own or whether God warned him that he must do so. But here the positive side of his impulsive spirit is clearly on display. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father runs to his son and embraces him in a similar fashion. See Luke 15:20. Jesus may have been drawing a connection between the events, emphasizing that even pagans can show the love of God.

2. Esau begins by asking why Jacob sent the wealth ahead of him. Esau almost certainly knew it was to gain his favor and forgiveness, but he is acting as though there is nothing to forgive and no need to buy him off.

3. Jacob then explains the reason all the same and, when Esau at first refuses the gift, insists he take it.

a. The conversation could have been actual generosity on the part of both of them, or simply a custom whereby the recipient of a large gift is supposed to refuse at first and only take it when the giver insists. There is apparently a similar custom to this day in parts of the Middle East. See Kaas, [The Beginning of Wisdom](#) 468-69.

b. In insisting that Esau take the gift, Jacob refers to God's blessings and even to an analogy between coming to Esau and coming to God. At one level comparing meeting Esau to meeting God is an extreme form of flattery. But, at a deeper level, the analogy is a precursor to the notion to all people bring the presence of God to us. See 1 John 4:20-21.

c. The fact that Jacob refers to God several times in speaking with Esau indicates that Esau has retained at least some belief in the true God.

C. Despite the reconciliation, Jacob ensures that there will be no final unity between them. He seems to want to make sure that his family will be raised by him and in his faith.

1. Esau first offers to travel with Jacob, apparently back to the south at Seir. It is possible that Esau intended to visit Isaac before returning home, and thus thought that Jacob would want to accompany him. The offer is both a matter of brotherhood and a matter of better security. Jacob demurs, saying that his people and animals must travel slower than those of Esau. He says that he will rejoin Esau in Seir, which he apparently never manages to do.

2. Esau then offers to let some of his soldiers stay with Jacob to guard him. Jacob again says that there is no need for that, for he has gotten this far without guards.
3. Jacob's refusals seem to be unfriendly, but perhaps there is a recognition that the two families, although reconciled, represent two very different ways of life (the devout and the worldly) that cannot, in the end be joined. Jacob may also be worried that the reconciliation will not last and/or that Esau may try to get Jacob to stay with him, reestablishing his dominance.
4. In any case, the two families go their separate ways, with Esau as the founder of Edom and Jacob (Israel) the founder of the people that will be named for him. They are recorded together only once more, at Isaac's burial. Apparently, for now they get along, but are not united. There is temporary peace, but not the harmony we would wish for, although perhaps the harmony is in the end not possible.

D. Jacob then continues the journey home, but not immediately or completely.

1. At first, Jacob proceeds only a small distance to Succoth, still on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Here, he builds a temporary house for himself and shelter for his livestock. The house is the first permanent building for the living that Genesis records the family of Abraham establishing. Although Abraham and Isaac may well have built permanent dwellings, this reference indicates a more stable life in the Promised Land. Jacob, now with a large family is beginning to settle down.

- Here, the land was perhaps plentiful enough that he did not have to purchase it; there is at least no reference of him doing so.

2. Jacob then took the family to a town called Shechem to the north of the places where Abraham and Isaac had stayed.
 - a. There he purchased land in the sight of the city, maintaining a distinctness from them, but also a connection. The value of the purchase price of 100 kesita is not known, but it seems to have been a significant amount. This area is more settled and thus has more expensive land. Jacob's instincts are to live in a community, but doing so is going to cause dangers.
 - b. Noteworthy, Jacob does not go to Bethel, where he first experienced God and where he had promised to return. He also does not settle near his father Isaac, who is back in Mamre (or Hebron) now that Rebekah has died. There is a notable failure of piety, both to God and father, which will cause problems despite the apparent peace.
 - c. Jacob does maintain a worship of God, whom he now identifies as his own, building a shrine to "the God of Israel" and using the name El, which the Canaanites would have also recognized. To some Canaanites, El was the name of one of their gods. But some other Canaanites recognized that there was one absolute God, whom they called El, but they did not think that that God had any concern for humanity; and so they worshipped lesser gods. God revealed Himself as the one absolute God, but also as one who cares deeply for His people.

E. At the end of chapter 33, there seems to be the restoration of peace, as Israel has now patched matters up with Laban, Esau and (apparently) his neighbors in Shechem. However, the looser connection with piety indicates a looming problem.

- Shechem had been one of the first places Abraham had visited when he entered the Promised Land. See Gen. 12:6.

II. Chapter 34 describes the rapid descent from this peace into violence and chaos, with no record of prayer or trust in God.

- A. The chapter opens with Dinah, now probably about 16 or 17, visiting the women in Shechem, apparently alone.
1. Dinah was about 8 when Jacob left the land of Laban. Given that the family was in Succoth for a few years, it is likely that they have been in Shechem for a few years at most, perhaps for a shorter time.
 2. The implication is that Israel and his family were at peace with the people of Shechem and thus that Israel trusted them. Dinah was probably curious about the new people; and, being with 11 brothers, she probably wanted female companionship. It does not appear that she wished for a husband.
 3. Nevertheless, it does seem rather reckless for Israel to let his daughter go alone into the town. It is possible that he was hoping that one of the town's nobility would find her attractive and marry her, thus cementing an alliance between the house of Israel and that town.
- B. A young man named Shechem, the son of Hazor, the chief of Shechem, commits the abomination that creates the next crisis.
1. The young man's name is fitting, for he stands in for the whole town; and his guilt will bring catastrophe upon it.
 2. The name Hazor, which is also the name of the town's founder, means donkey. Apparently donkeys were a sacred animal in Shechem.
 3. The text describes Shechem's desire for Dinah in particular as the cause of his abduction of her. Unlike the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, this was not a generalized violence for the sake of lust or power. He wanted her in particular. If Israel wanted a leading man of Shechem to fall in love with and marry Dinah, the plan has now gone terribly astray.
 4. The text emphasizes that Shechem did, in some sense of the word, love Dinah. Obviously the love is a very selfish one, but apparently not a matter of mere pleasure.
 - a. The myth of Apollo and Daphne has a similar theme, although in that case, Daphne prevents the crime by praying to be turned into the laurel tree.

b. As with Jacob's love for the pagan Rachel and contempt for the religious Leah, there is a warning here again against allowing romantic love to be the main determinant. Any sort of love can go terribly astray if not dedicated to God.

5. Shechem, unlike David's son Amnon (who commits a similar crime in 2 Samuel 14) remains in love with Dinah and wants to marry her. He thus lobbies his father to support the arrangement. Meanwhile Dinah is presumably still being held in the town of Shechem.

C. The focus then shifts to Jacob and his sons.

1. Jacob hears about the terrible events. However, being about 70, he does not do or say anything until his sons, who are aged about 16 to 24, return from the fields. On the positive side, he does finally become concerned for Dinah, whom he seemed to be neglecting until now. On the negative side, the absence of prayer and asking God what should be done is striking, especially given the fact that he was prayerful when the confrontation with Esau was approaching.

2. Hazer probably realizes that Shechem has committed a grave injustice and wants to patch things over.

3. When the sons return, they are understandably furious and know that the action cannot be tolerated. At this point, the sympathy is with them. However, there is also a question of what they can do about it. They are only 11 strong, plus perhaps a some workers. Assuming that Shechem is a town of about 400 or 500, there would likely be about 100 or 125 men of fighting age in it.

D. Hamor and Shechem make the first move by offering marriage.

1. Hamor simply ignores the violence and acts as though the matter was simply a proposal for marriage. He expands the notion even further to say that future daughters (presumably the daughters of Israel's 11 sons) would marry the young men of Shechem, and that the women of Shechem would marry the young men of Israel. There would be thus one people together; and, he thinks, they would be stronger than either alone.

a. The audacity in ignoring the violence is astonishing. However, he may have been hoping that the issue of her consent was ambiguous. In any case, he must deal with the situation as it is.

b. He is, probably in good faith, proposing an alliance, and thus bringing some good out of the situation. One gets the impression, that such has been his intention all along; but now he must press the point. That arrangement would violate the consistent effort on the part of Abraham and Isaac to make sure that their descendants do not intermarry with foreign peoples.

c. In ancient cultures, Hamor would have come off as a clever leader. He does not use sheer force and simply allow his son to keep Dinah on the simple grounds that there is nothing Israel and his sons can do about it. Instead, he wants to settle the matter in a manner he thinks is fair because of one or more considerations: (1) a sense of justice that he must do what he can to ameliorate the injustice; (2) a fear that the God who has blessed Israel will take vengeance; (3) a desire to seem just to others around him, and to maintain a reputation as a peaceful person; and/or (4) a desire to make the situation work to the best for his town.

2. Shechem then steps in with his offer, which shows that he is completely controlled by his emotions and desires.

a. At one level, Shechem also ignores the violence he has committed. But his offer of any price they ask for the hand of Dinah, despite the fact that he represents the stronger party, may reflect the fact that he knows that morally they are in the right.

b. His extravagant offer also reflects the fact that he is not thinking carefully, nor is he letting his more intelligent father conduct the negotiations. Like Esau, he is very impulsive. Unlike Esau, who never actually carries out unjust violence, he is also willing to use force.

3. In both cases, the clever Hamor and the impulsive Shechem, there is no sense of concern for Dinah herself; they never even mention her name. They apparently thought the family's sense of honor or self-interest was dominant.

E. Jacob's sons then step in with a clever proposal.

1. They all act together, unlike Hamor and Shechem, who obviously have not agreed on a strategy. This unity will later become frayed. Jacob seems to be sidelined at this point, possibly because he has no plan of action. In chapter 35, he will take over again, indicating that he can be in charge if he chooses.

2. They act as though the main issue is that they have been circumcised and the residents of Shechem have not. They act at least as though they think of Dinah as theirs to dispose of. They may have actually thought this way, or been acting in such a fashion to deceive the Hamor and Shechem.

3. They thus make the proposal that, if the men of Shechem are circumcised, they will not only give Dinah to Shechem in marriage, but they will have intermarriage among the two peoples.

4. It is not clear that all of them are acting dishonestly. Simon and Levi will later betray the agreement. But the other

brothers may have acted in good faith.

F. Hamor and Shechem believe that they have succeeded for themselves and their town.

1. They present the proposal to the people of Shechem for intermarriage. It is noteworthy that Dinah is currently the only daughter of Israel. It will be some years before any daughter of one of his sons is available for intermarriage. Thus, the people of Shechem were either deceived regarding the situation or were very patient and long planning. The former seems likely, given the fact that they hold the impulsive Shechem in such high regard.

2. Hamor and Shechem appeal to the people's desire for wealth. They all see that Israel and his children are greatly blessed with animals and prosperity generally, and they want that for themselves. Like Hamor, they understand that they cannot simply seize it for themselves, either because of a sense of justice, or a fear of the God of Israel, or a desire to maintain a reputation for justice. And so they seek to get the wealth in a cleverer fashion.

3. Like Shechem, whom they honor greatly, the people of the town are rather impulsive. They do not ask questions, but simply agree to the arrangement quickly; and thus the able-bodied men are circumcised at the same time.

G. The true and violent intentions of Israel's sons, or at least two of them, are revealed, as they slaughter the residents of Shechem.

1. Dinah's second and third oldest brothers, Simon and Levi then take the opportunity to kill the Hamor and Shechem.

a. Because of the arrangement, they probably got past the city's and Hamor's defenses easily.

b. The injustice has already started, for Hamor, although he acts on behalf of his son, did not apparently consent in

the original crime.

2. The other sons then slaughter all of the other able-bodied males of the town. It is not clear whether this attack was part of the original plan, or whether they responded when their brothers committed the original killing. Their killing was not simply a matter of revenge, but also one of self-defense. For, once Hamor and Shechem were discovered murdered, the other residents of the town would likely come after Israel's sons. Nevertheless, the wholesale slaughter turns Israel's sons from defenders of justice to perpetrators of gross and extremely violent injustice.

- The sons then show that they are not interested in justice by taking the women, children and wealth of the city for their own. The oppressed have become the tyrants.

3. Shechem would later be rebuilt and have both a holy and a violent subsequent history. The city would be rebuilt and become the capital of the a central kingdom in the area. It was at Shechem, a central city by that time, that Joshua renewed the covenant given at Sinai around 1300 B.C. See Josh. 24. A couple of hundred years later, Abimilech (no relation to the Canaanite king), Gideon's unjust and violent son, seized control of the Chosen People at Shechem. However, the city later rebelled against him and overthrew him. See Judges 8-9. After the division of the kingdom between north and south in 930 B.C., the new northern king Rehoboam was crowned at Shechem. See 1 Kings 12:1. However, the southern king Jeroboam recaptured it and made it one of his central locations. See 1 Kings 12:25. The town was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. as a prelude to the takeover of the northern kingdom and attempted takeover of the southern kingdom. It was rebuilt by the Samaritans around 350 B.C. and then rebuilt again after being destroyed during the conquest of Samaria by John Hyrcanus, an Israelite king who ruled the country during its brief independence after the Maccabean revolt of 173 – 143 B.C. It was then rebuilt as Samaria regained a distinct status under the Roman Empire. And it was probably the place, or at least near the place, where Jesus met the woman at the well. See John 4:5.

H. Jacob, who has been left out all this time, responds with dismay, not because of the violence, deceit and injustice, but because of the danger that his sons have now created for him and the family.

1. Jacob addresses only Levi and Simeon, indicating that they were in the leadership position both for the killing of Hamor and Shechem and for the slaughter of the men of the town.

2. The concern he addresses to them deals only with the worry that other people in the area will attack him because of this attack on Shechem. He does not appear to have a sense of justice, although that may be simply because he does not believe that Levi and Simeon will care about that consideration.

3. In any case, Levi and Simeon dismiss his concern on the grounds that a sense of justice and honor demanded their action. The fact that they do not seem to worry about long run planning indicates that they are not only violent, but also not as clever as Jacob.

I. The chapter has been referring to Jacob, not Israel. There is an indication that, with his lack of prayer and control over his children, he is losing the right to the name Israel. That name will be restored in the next chapter.