

Genesis 34: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 04 February 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 34. Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land. When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, Get me this girl for my wife. Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah, but his sons were with his livestock in the field. So Jacob held his peace until they came.

And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. The sons of Jacob had come in from the field as soon as they heard of it. And the men were indignant and very angry because he had done an outrageous thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing must not be done.

But Hamor spoke with them, saying, The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please, give her to him to be his wife. Make marriages with us. Give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall dwell with us and the land shall be open to you.

Dwell and trade in it and get property in it. Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, Let me find favour in your eyes, and whatever you say to me I will give. Ask me for as great a bride price and gift as you will, and I will give whatever you say to me. Only give me the young woman to be my wife. The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. They said to him, We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. Only on this condition will we agree with you, that you will become as we are by every male among you being circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters to ourselves, and we will dwell with you and become one people. But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and we will be gone. Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem, and the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he delighted in Jacob's daughter.

Now he was the most honoured of all his father's house. So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city, and spoke to the men of their city, saying, These men are at peace with us.

[2 : 2 7] Let them dwell in the land and trade in it, for behold, the land is large enough for them. Let us take their daughters as wives, and let us give them our daughters. Only on this condition will the men agree to dwell with us to become one people, when every male among us is circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock, their property, and all their beasts be ours?

Only let us agree with them, and they will dwell with us. And all who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamor and his son Shechem. And every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city. On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure, and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away. The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered. Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.

But they said, Should he treat our sister like a prostitute? In Genesis chapter 34, Jacob has settled near Shechem and has bought a parcel of land from Hamor, the father of Shechem. The story of the actions of Jacob's sons in Shechem that follow in this chapter are troubling on various fronts.

Jacob seems to have put down some roots, he's bought a parcel of land, and now his daughter Dinah goes out to meet with the women of the land. We might have a sense of unease at this point. We've had a number of previous stories of women being threatened as they go out and relate to the people of the land. We might think of the story of Abimelech just a few chapters earlier in chapter 26, where he says that one of the people might easily have lain with your wife. Now, if it's that easy for someone to lie with an unwilling woman, as presumably Rebecca would have been, it seems that these were not safe places for women to be wandering around. So we might have a reasonable concern for

Dinah's safety. The chapter itself also sticks out in the wider context, so it's worth asking how it relates to the larger narrative as more than just a detached episode. As usual, to understand such a text, it's helpful to consider parallel texts, literary structures, broader themes, narrative movements, and other features that help us to place it more clearly. One of the things that can help us here is considering the way that the story is transitioning from the story of Jacob to the story of Jacob's sons. And this story is focused upon the sons of Jacob and their sister Dinah. The way Dinah is introduced to us, though, is important. She's described as the daughter of Leah. Not the daughter of Jacob, but the daughter of Leah. And later on, we'll see this play off the fact that she is Jacob's daughter. She's also the daughter of Leah. And Simeon and Levi are described as her brothers. Now, why is this important? Leah is the unloved wife. And the favouritism that Jacob has for Rachel over

Leah is something that's playing out in the next generation already. His seeming lack of action or concern for the rape of his daughter Dinah is seen by his sons quite legitimately as a failure to take concern for their side of the family. Ironically, they are in certain ways playing out something that Jacob himself experienced.

[6 : 23] Jacob was the unfavoured son himself. And now we see Jacob failing to break that cycle of favouritism. He has his own favoured side of the family. And he's failing to act on behalf of the unfavoured children.

There are a number of stories of women in the book of Genesis being taken from their families by people of the land without consent. Sarai is taken by Pharaoh and later by Abimelech. Rebecca is almost taken by Abimelech, as we've discussed. Dinah can be placed within this larger pattern. Shechem lies with her, but he also abducts her. And it's not entirely clear whether this is a case of rape or seduction.

And the ways that we would characterise rape are not necessarily the ways that it will be characterised in Scripture. So we have to be very careful of anachronistically reading our categories into the text. We have laws in Scripture that deal with these different sorts of situations in Deuteronomy chapter 22, verse 28 to 29, and in Exodus chapter 22, verse 16. We also have other stories like that of Tamar and Amnon in 2 Samuel chapter 13, which speak of similar situations. In the story of Amnon and Tamar, there is a case of rape. And Tamar sees the failure to actually regularise this relationship in some sort of marital arrangement, as a compounding of the original sin or wrong that Amnon did to her.

The fact that a victim of rape would actually want her rapist to marry her, and see the failure of the rapist to marry her as a compounding of the wrong done to her, is something that can be very difficult for us to understand. And so we do need to get inside the mindset of the culture to understand where exactly they were coming at this from. Now while we know that the wronged woman had the right to veto any such arrangement, as did her father, and there was a duty to pay a price on the part of the rapist, whether or not any relationship resulted, holding the rapist responsible to actually take the wronged woman as his wife was one of the possible resolutions of the situation that could be proposed.

When thinking about such passages in Scripture, we need to be aware of a number of things. First of all, we need to be aware of reading back our principles into the text in a way that fails to reckon with the world of the text itself, and how that world operated, what the limitations that existed within that world were, and how the laws actually spoke to reality on the ground. But on the other hand, we need to resist the temptation to lightly cover over the difficulties of the text, not actually to do serious business with them. So these are questions that we need to wrestle with.

[9 : 10] We shouldn't just shrug them off. We need to consider them carefully. In my experience, the more that you deal with these questions carefully, the more satisfying and illuminating any possible resolution will be. Returning to the story in Genesis chapter 34, Jacob hears about the

action of Shechem, but he holds his peace. His sons here, and they are incensed. Shechem has done an outrageous thing in Israel. This is an expression that we find elsewhere in the story of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Samuel chapter 13. It's a strange thing to encounter here, to talk about an outrageous thing in Israel. Almost seems anachronistic. Israel just has 12 children at this point that we know of.

Benjamin has not yet been born. And so to speak about this as an outrageous thing in Israel is to speak using the corporate name of the people when even Jacob is generally just called Jacob at this point. He's not yet called Israel on a regular basis. This expression is found in a number of places in scripture, generally used of some sexual offence. And in just about every occasion where it's used, the person of whom it is spoken ends up losing their life because of their actions.

Hamor and Shechem strike up negotiations. Hamor desires a more political alliance between the clan of Jacob and the Shechemites, whereas Shechem's concern is to get Dinah. Jacob's sons propose that the Shechemites get circumcised, which will enable them to intermarry and form a collective people group.

Hamor and Shechem then pitch that arrangement to their people as a political alliance, with no mention of Dinah's part in the story. They give the suggestion that this will actually be a means by which they can take over the possessions of Israel. And Jacob's failure to stand up for his daughter Dinah leads to a breach in the family at this point. I should note the similarity with David again, who is displeased with Amnon for his actions towards Tamar in 2 Samuel chapter 13, but fails to take any action. And the result of that is that Absalom takes vengeance for his sister. And there is, again, a breach within the family that results from that. Dinah, as I've already noted, seems to have been abducted, taken into Shechem's house. And this puts Jacob and his sons in a weaker bargaining position. Hamor and Shechem hold the key card, and it's very difficult, perhaps, for Jacob and his sons to stand against them. Which seems to be one of the reasons why Jacob's sons use deceit at this point.

They use a plot using the covenant sign of circumcision as a means of strategic warfare. So they get the Shechemites to circumcise themselves, and when they're still in pain and disabled as a result of the circumcision, they attack and they seek to destroy the Shechemites and their city.

[12:07] They deliver Dinah and bring her back. And at this point, Jacob rebukes them for putting him and his people in a precarious position. And they challenge their father, though not as strongly as they might have done, for his failure to stand up for their sister. Note that they do not give the stronger accusation that they might have done if they said, should he treat your daughter like a prostitute?

Rather, it's our sister. At this point, we may be seeing something of the divide in the family, that it's Simeon and Levi that will actually stand up for Dinah, not Dinah's father. Dinah's defining parent is Leah, rather than Jacob, and Jacob just does not seem to be acting on her behalf as he ought to do. This, then, is a passage in which we're seeing some of the cracks within the family of Jacob, and the tensions that exist between the father, between the unloved sons, and the favoured son, as we'll see later on in the story of Joseph. Levi and Simeon, the two brothers, are later judged for their actions in Genesis chapter 49. Jacob talks about them hamstringing an ox. What do they mean by hamstringing? Well, it seems to be a reference to what they do to Jacob, that he is the ox that is hamstrung by their action. The word for hamstrung and also the word for bringing trouble upon Jacob seem to be a play on words, and here there is an association between their actions and the status of the ox, Jacob, within the land. Some other scholars have proposed that this story lies behind the restriction on yoking an ox with an ass. Hamor means ass, and Jacob is associated with the ox, and so they should not be unequally yoked. That symbolic commandment, then, is a commandment against intermarriage. Looking at this passage, we may see some other things as well. Some patterns that we saw in the story of Jacob being played out in the next generation. We have someone who wants to marry a woman, and will do anything to marry her, and then the marriage agreement not being able to be fulfilled for some reason. The use of deceit to get the desired end. And the way in which this plays out reminds us of Jacob himself in certain respects. Jacob's sons are using the same sort of tactics that Jacob himself employed as the unfavoured son. And then also in other respects, they seem to be playing parts that are similar to Laban. As a final question to reflect upon, how might some of the associations and comparisons and similarities between the story of Jacob and the actions of his sons in this chapter help us to understand what's going on here and how it fits into the larger narrative.