

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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DINAH AND THE SHECHEMITES (*GENESIS 34*)

Jacob had one daughter (as far as we know) among his many sons – Dinah, born to his wife Leah. Unfortunately the only incident concerning Dinah that we have in the Scriptures is her encounter with the son of a local Canaanite ruler who ends up sexually assaulting her.

So far we've seen that Abraham and his descendants lived in the land of Canaan as "strangers and aliens." The LORD promised the entire land to Abraham's family, but the day of fulfilling that Promise would be centuries in the future. Up to this point the Family had to be careful in their interactions with the Canaanites to maintain a peaceful relationship, if possible. This often meant pulling up tent stakes and moving on to avoid trouble. There had been a few incidents that threatened to grow ugly, but the LORD had intervened and defused the situation.

But everyone in the Family knew that the Canaanites were bad news, spiritually. Isaac and Rebekah were disgusted with the Canaanite wives that Esau took. Abraham sent back home to Haran for a wife for his son Isaac, refusing to consider one of the local girls for him. The reason was plain: the Canaanites worshiped false gods so that they could live an immoral lifestyle – immorality of such a nature that was proverbial in the entire region. Witness the reputation that Sodom and Gomorrah had.

When God's people live in proximity to the pagans, it's inevitable that there's going to be a showdown. Pagans won't be satisfied until believers are as dirty as themselves, and believers will never switch sides and leave their God. With such principles at odds, there will be war. But God's righteous Law cannot be compromised, and for those who are passionate about it, they will not let the issue rest until justice is done.

Dinah's trip to town – We are not told any details about the incident besides the fact that Dinah "went out to visit the women of the land." We know her brothers weren't with her, and whether she had servants with her or not we don't know. It was a different world then than what we're used to now: women just didn't go out into the community on their own, for this very reason – they could easily be taken as prostitutes, if not molested in other ways. In fact it's very likely she was alone, since it proved just too easy for Shechem to take her away with him.

We can say at the outset, at the very least, that this was not a wise thing to do. The Canaanite women were just as

godless and immoral as the men were; Dinah should have expected some sort of trouble by socializing with pagans. Her forebears knew not to do it (see Rebekah's comments about her son Esau). "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'" (1 Corinthians 15:33)

Shechem was the son of the local king who ruled over the area where Jacob and his Family were staying. So we can assume that what Shechem wanted, he usually got. Here again we see the tendency of the rulers to take whatever women they wanted while justifying their action based on their preeminence in the community (see the stories of both

Abraham and Isaac as they had to deal with this same issue themselves).

There was no love story here. The Hebrew word used tells us that Shechem “humiliated” Dinah – or as the NIV translates it, “violated” her. He treated her exactly as Jacob’s sons accused him of – as if she were a prostitute, having sex with her against her will, as if she had no rights of her own.

The brothers’ fury – The sons of Jacob were unified in their grief and fury over Dinah’s shame. Whatever we may think of their solution, the crime against their sister *was* something “that should not be done.”

And though we may think that only Simeon and Levi were the central figures in their “solution” of this problem, it’s plain that all the brothers were angry over it. In the end they would all participate in the destruction of the city.

Hamor’s proposition – Hamor evidently was impressed enough with Jacob and his entourage that he took a conciliatory approach toward them. He didn’t want trouble with someone who was so rich and most probably would be some danger to the community if angered.

He proposed a union of the families – and of the two communities as a whole. In his mind, there wasn’t any reason that the two families couldn’t get along and share the resources. Everyone would benefit. He made it sound so easy, so enticing for these homeless wanderers to settle down, fit in, and prosper for a change.

But what he didn’t realize was that he was offering the sons of Jacob something that the LORD had already given them. The very land that Hamor was living on, that he ruled over, was

forfeit – in a few hundred years, the descendants of Jacob would come back and lay claim to the entire area and kill the Canaanites living there.

In light of this, Shechem’s comment that he would give the brothers anything they wanted, as much as they wanted, in order to have Dinah as his wife, was an ignorant thing for him to say. He was about to find out that the brothers *would* take everything they wanted – but not in the way he thought.

The people outside of the Covenant don’t understand the issues involved. There is to be no union between God’s people and the people of idolatry. False gods lead to sin and death; Israel’s God alone takes his people into life.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? (2 Corinthians 6:14-16)

The land is going to belong to the righteous, not to the wicked; it will be a place for the glory and worship of God, not to enable the sins of the Canaanites. The wicked will find out to their grief that their lives are already forfeit, their attempts to win over the people of God are going to collapse around their heads, and everything they thought was theirs will be taken from them and given to the Covenant heirs. “They are preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell upon it forever.” (Psalm 37:28-29) From God’s point of view, there can only be war between the two camps, not peace.

The brothers' deceit – Once again, if we make the mistake of interpreting a passage based on *our* meaning of the words used, we run the risk of taking the wrong meaning from it. It says that the brothers answered Hamor “deceitfully,” which to us means they *lied* to him – and in our modern church culture, lying is always a crime no matter what the reason.

But that would mean that the Allies sinned against Hitler by deceiving him about the Normandy invasion in 1945. And Rahab sinned against the men of Jericho by protecting the Israelite spies with a lie. And Jesus himself sinned against the Pharisees by hiding his glory from them.

On the contrary, it's a crime to tell the enemy what you're about to do to him! It would only have put the Shechemites on the alert, and made it certain that Jacob's fears of being overwhelmed by the locals would come true.

Military strategy often depends on deceiving the enemy. Hamor was after Jacob's wealth and was determined to get his hands on it one way or another – either by Jacob's consent or by force. Jacob's sons, on the other hand (like a judo expert) were using Hamor's greed to disarm and destroy the Shechemites before disaster came upon *them*. Otherwise it's doubtful that any of Jacob's family would have escaped the Shechemites. Hamor, and his son Shechem, had too much at stake to let the deal fall through, and they would have immediately moved to the offensive to protect it. After the offense against Dinah, they had to follow through on their plot immediately.

Hamor's strategy – Shechem's father managed to convince the townspeople to join him in a clever strategy: it was the

age-old subterfuge of political advantage through marriage. The union of the two families would mean prosperity for the Shechemites. As the Israelites intermarried with the Shechemites, they would naturally want to settle down in the area and become part of the community. The two camps would do business with each other; the Israelites would acquire property, marry their sons and daughters to the Shechemites, and form long-range plans and connections with the local inhabitants. Gradually the distinctions would blur and eventually disappear, and the two would become one – under, of course, the flag of the Shechemites. In the end, the Shechemites would be the winners, because (as Hamor put it) ... “Will not their livestock, their property and all their beasts be ours?”

This is exactly what the LORD told the Israelites *not* to do later on in their history.

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. (Exodus 34:12-16)

The land of the Canaanites *was* a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:17), and God had every intention of giving it to Abraham’s descendants according to his Promise. But the danger of the Israelites falling into idolatry and immorality that the Canaanites were so famous for, made mingling with them a sure way of losing their favor with God.

Even though the Law commanding them to avoid mingling with the Canaanites was given to the Israelites 400 years after this crisis with the Shechemites, the Covenant Promise that this land was theirs was a family tradition already three generations old in Abraham’s Family. The sons of Jacob had every good reason to hold on to their hope and treat the *Shechemites* as the outsiders and a threat.

The slaughter – Although all the sons of Jacob were involved in the strategy against the Shechemites, only Simeon and Levi actually went into the town and killed all the males. Why, we aren’t told; probably because the twelve brothers coming to town would have looked like an assault force. But it was an easy matter, since every single man was totally incapacitated and taken off guard. Circumcision is no joke for a grown man; it’s painful to a child and positively debilitating for an adult.

At this point we moderns are disgusted and turned off at their “solution” – it matches the barbaric actions of modern religious groups who seem to think that slaughter of innocents is the way to get what they want. Well, in modern times we may or may not have “better” ways of solving our problems than the tactic they used. But we can’t forget that this is precisely what the LORD had the Israelites do, 400 years later, when they

swept into Canaan under Joshua. At that time they *slaughtered* (this is the only word to describe it) men, women and children.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Gergashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. (Deuteronomy 7:1-2)

To be precise, the Canaanites committed no crime against the Israelites, but their crime against the only God was plain and hideous. They had to be destroyed. The Israelites were God’s executioners, not murders.

Dinah, you will notice, was in Shechem’s home when this military action happened. This only supports the fact that she was being used as a “friendly” hostage during negotiations. If Jacob’s sons had refused Hamor’s offer outright, her life would have been in danger. So it looks for all the world like Simeon and Levi’s drastic action was really a “special forces” rescue mission, which would account for just the two of them going in to do the job.

Notice that after the deed was done, *all* the sons of Jacob went through town and collected “flocks, herds, donkeys, all their wealth, women and children ... plundering everything in their homes.” Could we surmise from this story that

Jacob's wealth just doubled, perhaps tripled what it used to be? In keeping with the principle that has ruled the Family since Abraham's day, Jacob got richer at the expense of the pagans. At every turn, through no action on his own, through decisions and actions of those around him, the Heir of the Covenant gets richer than ever – according to the promise given him by Abraham's God. God intends to make his people prosper at the expense (and pain) of the pagans. He's not out to be "fair" but to bless his own at the enemy's expense.

Jacob's rebuke – Jacob didn't fault his two sons for *what* they did, but rather for possibly putting the Family in danger from the rest of the Canaanites in the area. Their well-being, after all, depended on getting along with the natives, not making them angry. Abraham and Isaac both took peaceful approaches to resolving problems between them and the local inhabitants. Jacob's rebuke, in other words, was based on fear and the necessity of politics to get along with people.

His sons answered him according to the facts. "Should he have treated our sister like a prostitute?" In their mind, Shechem had done "a disgraceful thing ... a thing that should not have been done." How should a father respond to that? Paul tells us that "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." (Romans 12:18) Jacob's policy of peace had worked well up until now; but Shechem's crime against Dinah, and Hamor's insistence that Jacob merge his Family with the Canaanites, had pushed the Family to the point of war. There are some things that can only be solved by war. (Remember Melchizedek's blessing to Abraham after his victory – Genesis 14:20.)

The Point – The sons of Jacob did nothing that the LORD didn't tell the Israelites to do to the Canaanites later in their history. The danger of living alongside unbelievers was always a moral crisis for Israel, and the reason for the danger is made plain in this passage: unbelievers won't rest until we've walked away from our God and dropped down to their moral level, becoming one of them.

Living in this world in a way that one shares its culture, values, gods, morality, property and materialism, only takes one's heart away from God who alone is our source of good and truth. The Covenant people *have* to separate themselves from the world, or suffer the world's fate. "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord." (2 Corinthians 6:17) The unbelievers only want to take advantage of us and use us; and the best way to accomplish that is to tempt us to be one of them.

Later on in Scripture the Law of Moses would be very specific about what to do with the wicked: the Israelites were to "have no mercy." At this point in Genesis, however, one wonders about the justification of Levi and Simeon "taking the law into their own hands" like this. Should they have simply backed off and waited on the LORD to solve the problem?

On the other hand, a crime had already been committed and the family had the legal right to take measures against the perpetrators. In a land with no police force, and no legal institution to turn to for redress against one's enemies, it was up to the victim's family to punish the criminals; nobody else would. The culture expected and encouraged the family of the victim to get justice. (See this principle spelled out

later in the Law – Numbers 35) And as the Law of Moses later specified that raping a woman against her will (in other words, she proves her innocence by screaming for help) is an offense punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:25-27), the brothers' action wasn't out of line.

What Levi did prefigured a critical reality in the lives of God's people. We start to get a sense of Levi's influence in the words of his father Jacob when he blessed each of his sons.

Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their council; O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel. (Genesis 49:5-7)

Later the descendants of Levi were also executioners of the wicked. When Moses found the Israelites worshipping false gods, he called for volunteers.

“Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. (Exodus 32:25-26)

The Levites proceeded through the camp and put 3000 men to death to restore order. For this deadly demonstration of their devotion to the LORD's cause, they were rewarded. They were called to serve in the House of God as representatives of the entire Nation. “Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so

that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.” (Exodus 32:29)

Shortly after this Phinehas the Levite showed his passion for the Law by killing the Israelite who took a Midianite prostitute into his tent. (Numbers 25:13) Note the thing he was praised for: *killing the guilty*.

So we're starting to see a new element at work among the Covenant people. Though God fully intends to richly bless the Nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, yet that doesn't let the wicked go free.

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, *but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation*. (Exodus 34:6-7)

So Levi and his descendants were going to be the sharp edge of the Law of God: as the wicked deserve, so they shall receive. Paul tells us about this function of the Law.

For all who rely on works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the Law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:10-11)

In other words, one of the duties of the Levites was to be the LORD's executioners. It was their duty to instill the fear of the LORD in the rest of the

Israelites, to teach them that these weren't simply abstract concepts or ideas but the actual power of the holiness and presence of God among them. The Law kills. (2 Corinthians 3:6) God's justice requires it.

We have in this story, therefore, a vision of the terror of the Law that targets sinners and, without mercy, condemns them and puts them to death. So the Covenant is not all about mercy and inheritance – there's a sharp distinction between the treatment that sinners will get from the Law versus the grace of God.

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