

Genesis 34:13-31
Violence and Vengeance
Part 2

Jacob had “return[ed] to the land of your fathers and to your relatives,” as God had commanded him (Genesis 31:3). Jacob had obeyed. And having done so, he no doubt expected the Lord to be faithful. After all, God had promised both His presence and protection in Jacob’s life.

“¹³I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you” (Genesis 28:13-15).

Having proved obedient, Jacob had every reason to believe that he would flourish. He believed that God would grant the long due promises of seed, land, and blessing. God had given Jacob a new name, and Jacob had made the God of his fathers his own God when “he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-Israel” (Genesis 33:20). But Jacob was soon to learn that God’s ways are not our ways, and the pace of His sovereign will is not confined to our sense of urgency. So, instead of immediate prosperity and happiness, Jacob found himself in the midst of a family crisis and brutal hostilities.

What precipitated these events was a casual stroll by his daughter, Dinah. Jacob and his family had begun to be comfortable in the land of Canaan, and his daughter had gone out to visit some friends. While on her way, she had been attacked by the son of one of the leaders of the village in which they lived. This horrific and premeditated act had saddened Jacob and angered his sons. While his sons plotted vengeance against the perpetrators, Shechem, the man who had attacked Dinah, and his father, Hamor, tried to remove any cause for concern by negotiating a marriage between the two families. Glossing over what had brought them to the meeting in the first place, Hamor and Sechem hoped to forestall any retribution on the part of Jacob and his family by entering into an alliance that would bring the Hebrews not only family connections with the leaders of the area, but also economic advantages.

The Plan Proposed

In presenting their proposal, Hamor and Shechem tried to make their offer look generous. Hamor had suggested that after the accord was agreed upon, for Jacob and his family “the land shall be open before you; live and trade in it and acquire property in it” (Genesis 34:10). Shechem, protesting his love for Dinah, had boasted that, “¹¹I will give whatever you say to me. ¹²Ask me ever so much bridal payment and gift, and I will give according as you say to me” (Genesis 34:11-12). It was these proposals that Jacob and his sons duly considered.

It did not take them very long to deliberate. In fact, Dinah’s brothers had already come up with a counter proposal. As the young men had hurriedly returned from the fields where they had been shepherding the flocks when they first heard the news about their sister’s assault, they had determined to exact revenge.

“¹³Jacob’s sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor with deceit, because he had defiled Dinah their sister. ¹⁴They said to them, ‘we cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. ¹⁵Only on this condition will we consent to you: if you will become like us, in that every male of you be circumcised, ¹⁶then we will give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters for ourselves, and we will live with you and become one people. ¹⁷But if you will not listen to us to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go’” (v. 13-17).

Scripture makes it clear that there was nothing admirable in the conduct of Jacob’s sons. Their plot was a ruse from the beginning. Scripture may explain, but does not excuse, their behavior. In fact, the eventual actions of these young men would be proscribed by the Law.

“²⁸If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, ²⁹then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days” (Deuteronomy 22:28-29).

“¹⁶If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and lies with her, he must pay a dowry for her to be his wife. ¹⁷If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the dowry for virgins” (Exodus 22:16-17).

Blood vengeance was to have no place in Israel’s legal system.

There is irony in the language here as well. The word used to describe the ‘deceit’ planned by Jacob’s sons is the same word used to describe Jacob’s own deception, when Isaac sadly informed Esau, “your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing” (Genesis 27:35). But in this case, it was Jacob’s sons who were the deceivers. The narrative also makes it seem as if they were the main negotiators on Dinah’s behalf. Jacob remained, surprisingly, silent during these conversations. Though he was undoubtedly present, there is no sense that he was consulted regarding the arrangement. His role seems passive and uninvolved.

Dinah’s brothers responded to the offers of Hamor and Shechem in reverse order. Addressing Shechem, they claimed that they could not intermarry with the local Canaanites because they were uncircumcised. Such an alliance would violate their cultural and religious mores. It would be disgraceful. The term used refers to public humiliation, such as that offered to Job when God tested him (Job 16:10). Thus, Dinah could not take Shechem for a husband unless he was circumcised. This was in response to Shechem’s offer to “ask me ever so much bridal payment and gift, and I will give according as you say to me” (v. 12). The brothers seemed not to want money as a dowry, but rather assurances that their cultural norms would be respected.

As for Hamor’s proposal, the sons of Jacob suggest that if, however, other Canaanites agreed to be circumcised, then intermarriage between the two groups could occur. So, not only would the brothers agree to the marriage of Shechem and Dinah, but of other marriages between the two peoples. We should understand, though, that this circumcision was not to be a religious ritual. That is, Jacob’s sons were not

offering to make these local Canaanites a part of the covenant. There is no sense in which Scripture is suggesting that the Canaanites had to convert to the worship of Yahweh as a part of the bargain. The act of circumcision was rather presented to the pagan Canaanites as something akin to a marital initiation rite, the type with which they may already have been familiar.

Curiously, the narrative makes it appear as if the sons of Jacob were negotiating from a position of power. The brothers stated that if their terms were not agreed to, “then we will take our daughter and go” (v. 17). In fact, though, we later learn that Dinah was still being held by Shechem (v. 26). She may have been retained as a bargaining chip in the negotiations, or Shechem may have simply assumed that since he had raped her, she would be given to him as his wife if he made the offer. In either case, the absence of their sister must have been a concern to Jacob’s sons, and their bravado was merely a bluff. It would not have been possible for Jacob’s sons, even if accompanied by their many servants, to have forcibly rescued Dinah from her captivity.

The Plan Accepted

Much like Jacob’s sons, Hamor and Shechem took very little time to respond to the offer presented to them. ¹⁸“Their words seemed reasonable to Hamor and Shechem, Hamor’s son. ¹⁹The young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob’s daughter” (v. 18-19). The counteroffer indeed must have seemed good. Shechem would get his wife, and Hamor would get his commercial interests. Apparently the painful procedure they would have to endure to bring this about was inconsequential.

The language of the text could indicate that Shechem submitted to the procedure of circumcision immediately. It states that he “did not delay to do the thing” (v. 19). But, since the immediate consequence of the negotiation with Jacob’s sons was that Hamor and Shechem went to the city gate to inform the townspeople of the results of their mediation, the language may also be taken to mean that Shechem immediately agreed to be circumcised, but did not perform the act until later.

In any case, having agreed to the arrangement, Hamor and his son went to persuade the men of the city. That Hamor used the influence of his son in trying to convince his subjects of the wisdom of their proposal was to be expected, since Shechem “was more respected than all the household of his father” (v. 19). This was, to say the least, going to be an unusual request to make of the men of the town. Most arrangements with other people groups involved the exchange of commodities or promises of nonaggression. This alliance, however, was to be sealed with a painful procedure that these men would undoubtedly have found both curious and grotesque.

²⁰“So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, ²¹“these men are friendly with us; therefore let them live in the land and trade in it, for behold, the land is large enough for them. Let us take their daughters in marriage, and give our daughters to them. ²²Only on this condition will the men consent to us to live with us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. ²³Will not their livestock and their property and all their animals be ours? Only let us consent to them, and they will live with us”” (v. 20-23).

It is here that we see that Hamor and Shechem had their own secret agenda. They tried to persuade the townspeople that once they had begun to intermarry with the much smaller Hebrew population, it was inevitable that, over time, natural procreation would mean that the Hebrews would be assimilated into their own cultural group. The content of the agreement was put forward simply and straightforwardly to the men of the town. The Israelites were described as ‘friendly’ (v. 21). Thus they posed no threat to the men of the town. And there would be no problem with overcrowding because “the land is large enough for them” (v. 21). If the men of the town could simply be persuaded to be circumcised, they would be able to intermarry with these settlers living nearby, and then eventually they would take over their property.

But Hamor and his son were not entirely forthcoming in retelling the negotiations with Jacob and his family. Notice that nothing was said to the people about the reasons for this unusual request. That is, Hamor mentioned nothing about Shechem’s passion for Dinah, nor the assault that had prompted all of this in the first place, though perhaps that may have been because the story had already spread to the men of the town. Hamor also said nothing to his townspeople of his offer to allow the Israelites to acquire property in the region if they formed an alliance. Obviously, he knew that this particular piece of information would not advance his cause, so he tactfully omitted it. Thus, Hamor and his son described only what was to be gained from the proposed alliance, and the idea found a favorable hearing. “All who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamor and to his son Shechem, and every male was circumcised, all who went out of the gate of his city” (v. 24).

Implied in the phrase “all who went out of the gate of the city” is that this included all the able-bodied men of the town. That is, these were all the men who might be able to bear arms and fight. Whether they lined up one by one to go through the ritual of circumcision, or each went home to perform the act himself, Scripture does not say. However, what is clear is that the men of the town were not going to be in any condition to defend themselves.

The Plan Executed

And that was just as Jacob’s sons had planned.

“²⁵Now it came about on the third day, when they were in pain, that two of Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, each took his sword and came upon the city unawares, and killed every male. ²⁶They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem’s house, and went forth. ²⁷Jacob’s sons came upon the slain and looted the city, because they had defiled their sister. ²⁸They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; ²⁹and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses” (v. 25-29).

The strategy worked just as Jacob’s sons had hoped. Their intent had never been to blend the two races and live as one people. Instead, they had hoped to use the rite of circumcision to so incapacitate the men of the town that they could exact their revenge for the assault in their sister. And so they did.

There must have been other options. Throughout history, civilizations have formed laws for the very purpose of mitigating against the endless cycle of blood vengeance. In fact, as we have already mentioned, later Hebrew law offered an alternative to retribitional violence in the case of rape. “²⁸If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, ²⁹then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl’s father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days” (Deuteronomy 22:28-29). It must be mentioned, however, that this applied to fellow Israelites and the purpose was to preserve the integrity of marriage and family within the nation of Israel.

Yet, we must also note that Scripture offers no evidence of a divine directive for this retaliation. God did not command the actions of the sons of Jacob. In fact, this is a narrative in which there were no prayers and no indication of seeking the divine will. Neither was there precedent for this in the history of the patriarchs. Though Abraham had once deceived the Canaanites out of an irrational fear for his own survival (Genesis 20:1-18), in this case the sons of Jacob deceived the Canaanites simply out of a desire for revenge.

And their timing was matchless. They attacked on the third day, which according to rabbinic tradition, was when the wounds were at their most sensitive and the potential for fever and infection was at its highest point. Thus, the men of the city were completely vulnerable. And they were unsuspecting, as well, since the sons of Jacob “came upon the city unawares” (v. 25).

The brothers were ruthless. Specifically, the deaths of Hamor and Shechem are recorded. The attack likely began there in order to retrieve Dinah safely from captivity. Had they begun their attack in another part of the city, word might have spread to Hamor and Shechem and then Dinah might have been used as a hostage. Scripture also clearly states that they “killed every male” (v. 25), even though these men were innocent of any act against either Dinah or the family, though perhaps it could be argued that they were tacitly complicit in the act by harboring Shechem if they were aware of his assault. Nevertheless, the vengeance of Jacob’s sons far exceeded what the original act required for retribution.

Much has been made of the fact that Scripture states that “two of Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, each took his sword and came upon the city” (v. 25). What about the other members of the family? Certainly Jacob was too old to participate in such an attack, but what about his other sons. Indeed, Reuben, Issachar, and Zebulun were also sons of Leah, and thus full-blooded brothers of Dinah.

That they are not specifically mentioned as having taken part in the original attack has been interpreted by some scholars to indicate that Simeon and Levi acted impulsively and without consulting their other family members. Yet how could only two Israelites kill all of the men of Shechem, even if they were incapacitated? Was this the work of God, as He had done for Abraham when He supported his small force of some three hundred men against the armies of four invading kings?

Others have suggested that all of the brothers appear to have been present at the negotiations (unless the word ‘sons’ meant only Simeon and Levi throughout the chapter), and were thus aware of the strategy from the beginning. Perhaps the plan was for Simeon and Levi to enter the city and begin the killing, and

then be joined by the other brothers once Dinah was safe. The two of them could be more stealthy than a group of eleven. And, we must note that while Simeon and Levi might be made to appear the instigators, and may even have developed the plan, “Jacob’s sons came upon the slain and looted the city” (v. 27). That is, they all scavenged among the dead and wounded.

And pillage they did. This was not uncommon in warfare.

“The sons of Israel captured the women of Midian and their little ones; and all their cattle and all their flocks and all their goods they plundered” (Numbers 31:9).

“[David] arose and struck the Philistines until his hand was weary and clung to the sword, and the Lord brought about a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to strip the slain” (2 Samuel 23:10).

“So the people went out and plundered the camp of the Arameans” (2 Kings 7:16).

But this was not warfare. This was the vengeful attack of family members for the wrong done to their sister. Nevertheless, the city was plundered. The narrative seems to indicate that the men left nothing behind. “They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys” (v. 28) They took “that which was in the city and that which was in the field” (v. 28). They “looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses” (v. 29). The sons of Jacob took all the animals, all the portable wealth, and even, it seems some people to serve them as slaves. Scripture leaves none of these men without shame. If Simeon and Levi attacked the weak and sick, the remaining brothers ransacked the homes of the wounded and dying for plunder.

The killing and plunder completed, the sons of Jacob returned to the family’s settlement, no doubt sweaty, bloodstained, and proudly escorting their redeemed sister, Dinah. But despite the considerable wealth that his sons had acquired as a result of their pillaging, their father was not pleased. “³⁰Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, ‘you have brought trouble on me by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and my men being few in number, they will gather together against me and attack me and I will be destroyed, I and my household.’ ³¹But they said, ‘should he treat our sister as a harlot?’” (v. 30-31).

Jacob, it seemed, knew exactly who was to blame. He turned his attention directly toward Simeon and Levi, and not to his other sons. His anger was based both in the ethical violation of breaching an agreement, as well as with the more practical matter of angering the Canaanites. He was fully aware that his family was significantly outnumbered by his adversaries. Though all the men of Shechem had been killed, there were other towns in the region who would hear the news of the atrocities perpetrated by these Hebrews. If Jacob had feared Esau’s four hundred men, he had no hopes of surviving the thousands that might come upon him from throughout the region. It may even be argued that the numerical inferiority of Jacob’s family may have played a role in inspiring Shechem to take Dinah in the first place. Surely Jacob realized his situation as untenable. While the reader might find it ironic that Jacob, of all people, was chastising others for being deceptive, it is impossible not to appreciate the predicament in which he now found himself.

But Simeon and Levi protested. They argued rhetorically that they had defended the family's honor. As had Shechem, Simeon and Levi addressed their father in terms less than those of respect. In fact, these two sons rebuked their father. Yet, the excuse they offered was hardly convincing when compared with the slaughter they had just rendered to the local population. Indeed, Simeon and Levi seemed less concerned about Dinah's reputation than their own.

The immediate consequence of these actions was that Jacob was compelled to move from Shechem to Bethel (Genesis 35:1). In the long-term, we can see that Jacob would remember this act of vengeance by his sons until his dying day.

“⁵Simeon and Levi are brothers;
Their swords are implements of violence.
⁶Let my soul not enter into their council;
Let not my glory be united with their assembly;
Because in their anger they slew men,
And in their self-will they lamed oxen.
⁷Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce;
And their wrath, for it is cruel.
I will disperse them in Jacob,
And scatter them in Israel” (Genesis 49:5-7).

Takeaways

As the narrative of the patriarchs transitions from Jacob to his sons, we see that Jacob's family is fragmenting, and he was powerless to stop its dissolution. We also see the beginnings of the moral decline of his sons, which will play out in future narratives. Ever true, Scripture reveals all of these men, the fathers of the future tribes of Israel, as it shows all of its characters, in their raw, sinful, fallen human form. Such is the truth of the Bible.

And again we see God's grace contrasted with the moral depravity of man. The blessings once promised to Abraham and the patriarchs were again made vulnerable by the actions of man, and again God would act in mercy and grace to move His sovereign will forward.