

## LESSON 5

### **Jacob Returns to Bethel (Genesis 33:17-35:29)**

Jacob has met two adversaries on this journey, his father-in-law Laban and his brother Esau, and God has protected him from both. But there are dangers in Canaan, too.

#### **Living in Succoth (33:17)**

The first place Jacob lives in Canaan after his return is on the east side of the Jordan, a location known as Succoth.

"Jacob, however, went to Succoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Succoth." (33:17)

The place name Succoth (*sūkkôt*, the plural of *sukkâ*, "booth") is so named because Jacob built shelters or booths for his livestock there. He also built a house, since he apparently planned to stay for a while. In fact, though this residence only takes one verse in the Bible, he probably lived there for several years. Dinah is a child of about seven when the family left Haran, but is perhaps 15 by the time of her abduction in Shechem.



#### **Jacob Settles in Shechem (33:18-20)**

Now, after several years, Jacob and his family move to Shechem, to the west of the Jordan in Canaan.

"<sup>18</sup> After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. <sup>19</sup> For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent." (33:18-19)

He is planning to stay here, too, as evidenced by the fact that he purchases the land he will live on. Shechem had been a stopping place for Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, as well.

"Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem.... The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him." (12:6-7)

Like his forebear, Jacob builds an altar there:

"There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel." (33:20)

Jacob is going by a new name now -- Israel -- given by the Lord (32:28), so he names the altar "El Elohe Israel," which means "God (is) God of Israel," recalling Jacob's vow made in Bethel:

"If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey ... then the Lord will be my God." (28:20-21)

### **The Rape of Dinah (34:1-5)**

Being so close to the city, it is natural for Jacob's children, now teenagers, to develop friends in town, and to go into town when they have finished their chores. Dinah often visits her friends in town, and more and more she catches the eye of Shechem, the son of Hamor, leader of the town. One day, Shechem follows his lusts, takes<sup>1</sup> her, and rapes<sup>2</sup> her. Yet, in spite of his violent act, he loves her and is eager to marry her. He tells his father, "Get me this girl as my wife," that is, arrange a marriage for me.

Word travels fast. It is distressing to see Jacob's reaction -- silence.

"When Jacob heard that his daughter Dinah had been defiled, his sons were in the fields with his livestock; so he kept quiet about it until they came home." (34:5)

Jacob keeps quiet about it, meaning he doesn't rush to find and help his daughter Dinah or to confront the young man or his father. Jacob is about 104 years old at this point and probably frail. He waits until his sons come home -- probably out of fear of the Shechemites.

### **Jacob's Sons Deceive Shechem (34:6-24)**

As soon as they hear the news, the boys rush home "filled with grief and fury."

Shechem's father Hamor, leaves Dinah at Shechem's house (34:17, 26) and, with Shechem and his other sons, come out to Jacob's tent to seek terms for marriage between Shechem and Dinah. Hamor asks Jacob to name whatever he wants for a bride price. We read no answer from Jacob, only from his sons.

"We can't give our sister to a man who is not circumcised," they say. They insist that all the men of Shechem be circumcised for a marriage to take place. This might seem plausible. Even though the Shechemites didn't practice circumcision, they had, no doubt, heard of peoples who circumcised men prior to marriage.<sup>3</sup> Hamor and Shechem, as members of the leading family in the town, convince the other men to consent. But where is Jacob's voice in this? Silent.

Three days after the circumcisions, when all the men are sore, Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's full brothers (children of Leah) -- probably joined by their servants -- attack the town surreptitiously, kill all the men, and retrieve their sister. Then the other brothers loot the houses and carry off the women and children as slaves.

Just before Jacob's death, in Jacob's blessing of his sons, we find that this terrible sin has become a curse to them:

"<sup>5</sup> Simeon and Levi are brothers --  
their swords are weapons of violence.

<sup>6</sup> Let me not enter their council,  
let me not join their assembly,  
for they have killed men in their anger



and hamstring oxen as they pleased.  
Cursed be their anger, so fierce,  
and their fury, so cruel!  
I will scatter them in Jacob  
and disperse them in Israel." (49:5-7)

### **Jacob Intervenes -- Too Late (34:30-31)**

What should Jacob have done? Probably he should have pressed a legal accusation before the elders of the town, contending that the young man Shechem must be punished. Under the Mosaic Law centuries later, such a crime would have been punishable by death (Deuteronomy 22:25), though we don't know what law would prevail in this town at the time. Would the town elders have consented to punish Shechem? We don't know. On the one hand, Shechem is the son of the leader, but on the other hand, Jacob is a wealthy man in his own right who has influence in the area.

Nevertheless, instead of taking Shechem to court, Jacob is silent. The result is that he allows his sons to take matters into their own hands and commit a horrible crime.

Q1. (Genesis 34) Why do you think Jacob is so silent after the rape of his daughter? What should he have done instead of being silent? What was right about the sons' reaction? What was wrong? What threat does the family now face if they stay in Shechem?

### **The Dangers of Intermarriage**

But let's look at the situation from another perspective for a moment. Let's say Jacob's family *had* reached an agreement with the people of Shechem and begun to intermarry. How long do you think Jacob's descendants would have retained their unique understanding of Yahweh, the true God? Not long. Centuries later through Moses, God gave these commands to the Israelites:

"And when you choose some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters prostitute themselves to their gods, they will lead your sons to do the same." (Exodus 34:16)

"Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD'S anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you." (Deuteronomy 7:3-4)

After the Israelites conquered the land under Joshua, there was continual intermarriage with the Canaanites, the people of the land. Chief among the offenders was King Solomon.

"King Solomon loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter -- Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, 'You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.' Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love.

He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.

As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.

On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods."

(1 Kings 11:1-8)

Intermarriage was never a racial issue, but a religious one. The Jews were separatist and exclusivist because God intended them to be. If there had not been a continual emphasis on Israel's uniqueness and separateness (holiness), the faith God was trying to teach them ~~would~~ have dissipated rapidly through syncretism (the combination of different religions and religious practices).

## **The Time to Teach a Nation**

It took many generations for God to teach his people. He began through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob -- and then through Moses and Joshua, through Samuel and David, through the prophets.

How long does it take to infuse an entire nation with a radical conviction about the One True God (monotheism), in sharp contrast with the degraded polytheism of their neighbors? God is preparing his people so he might reveal Christ to them and redeem them "when the time had fully come" (Galatians 4:4).

## **Intermarriage in the New Testament**

We read the same command against intermarriage in the New Testament. Again, this is not racial but religious.

"Do not be **yoked together** with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?"

(2 Corinthians 6:14)

"A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but **he must belong to the Lord.**" (1 Corinthians 7:39)

## **If You Are Married to an Unbelieving Spouse**

The New Testament forbids intermarriage with unbelievers. But what if you're already married to an unbelieving spouse? In the early church, that was the case with thousands of people, especially among the Gentiles.

There's no way you can undo the past, even if you've made mistakes when you knew better. So confess it to God and make the best of it. He can still bless you as you surrender your life to him now. And there is hope for your spouse, too. Here's what the Apostle Paul taught on the subject:



<sup>12</sup> To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.

<sup>13</sup> And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. <sup>14</sup> For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband.

Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

<sup>15</sup> But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

<sup>16</sup> How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (1 Corinthians 7:12-16)

We've explored intermarriage in the Bible. Now let's go back to the story of Jacob and his sons and the rape of his daughter Dinah. Jacob seems too willing to compromise and his sons too willing to act out of anger. Which course, in this case, best accomplished God's will for Jacob's family? Probably that of his hot-headed sons. What would have happened if Jacob had just stood up and said, "No!" to the Shechemites on behalf of his family and refused to allow Dinah to marry Shechem? I wonder.

Q2. What happened when the Israelites disobeyed God and intermarried with the Canaanites? Why do you think God commanded them not to intermarry? Was this racial or spiritual or both? Why are Christians to marry "in the Lord"?

### **A Call to Rededication (35:1-15)**

At the crisis following the slaughter at Shechem, God intervenes:

"Then God said to Jacob, 'Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.'" (35:1)

This isn't just an escape from the danger of staying in Shechem. This is a renewed invitation to faith. Jacob sees it as a call to holiness and separation, and so he commands his household and other servants to purify themselves.

"<sup>2</sup> Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. <sup>3</sup> Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone." (35:2-3)

Who would have foreign gods in Jacob's household? His beloved wife, Rachel, for one. She had stolen her father's household gods when they had fled from Haran years before (31:19). She had clung to the false gods of her family.

Jacob's clan now included dozens of wives and children captured from Shechem, all of whom had grown up believing in idols and amulets. Some became family slaves, no doubt. Others may have become wives for his sons -- we don't know. But apparently some of the Shechemite women and children wore earrings and other jewelry which had religious symbols or connotations. When they left Shechem to go to the house of God (Beth-el), Jacob was determined that they make a clean break with idolatry and to lead his suddenly-expanded household to trust in the true God Yahweh and in him only.



"<sup>4</sup> So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had and the rings in their ears, and Jacob buried them under the oak at Shechem. <sup>5</sup> Then they set out, and the terror of God fell upon the towns all around them so that no one pursued them." (35:4-5)

### **Building the Altar at Bethel (35:6-7)**

"<sup>6</sup> Jacob and all the people with him came to Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan. <sup>7</sup> There he built an altar, and he called the place El Bethel, because it was there that God revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother." (35:6-7)  
Jacob calls his household to prepare themselves spiritually first. "Then come," he says, "let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God" (35:3). In Bethel, Jacob built the altar, no doubt with the assistance of his sons. With them he has fulfilled the vow he made decades before in this very spot. It is a time of renewal and closeness to God.

### **God Appears to Jacob Again (35:9-13)**

The narrator inserts here a blessing that Jacob receives about this time:

"After Jacob returned from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him." (35:9)

God confirms to him the name of Israel, which Jacob had first received at Peniel (32:28). Then God reaffirms to him the Blessing of Abraham that we studied in Lesson 2.

"<sup>11</sup> And God said to him, 'I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body. <sup>12</sup> The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you.' <sup>13</sup> Then God went up from him at the place where he had talked with him." (35:11-13)

Look at the elements of this blessing:

1. "I am God Almighty" (*El Shaddai*, 35:11b).
2. "Be fruitful and increase in number" (35:11c).
3. "A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body" (35:11d).
4. "The land I gave to Abraham and Isaac I also give to you, and I will give this land to your descendants after you" (35:12).

God identifies himself this time as God Almighty, *El Shaddai*, a title God used first when he revealed himself to Abraham (17:1), and repeats here, and in 43:14; 48:3; and 49:25.

The name may be linked to the word for "destroy, overpower,"<sup>2</sup> but we can't be sure.

However, "Almighty" is probably a good translation.

The command to "be fruitful and multiply" is reminiscent of God's first command to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:28). The promises of a great people and the land are part of the blessing that Jacob's father and grandfather had received before him.

**Q4. (Genesis 35:9-15) Why do you think God appears to Jacob yet another time? What are the primary promises that God renews to Jacob?**

## Acts of Worship (35:14-15)

"<sup>14</sup> Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. <sup>15</sup> Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel." (35:14-15)

Jacob responded this time as he had responded the first time God had appeared to him at Bethel ("house of God"). He commemorated the event by setting up a memorial stone to the LORD and anointing it. But here he performs another act of worship:

"He poured out a drink offering on it" (35:14b).

This is the first time in Scripture that we see the drink offering or libation poured out before the Lord. But later, in the time of the tabernacle and temple, drink offerings were offered twice daily. For example:

"With the first lamb offer a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives, and a quarter of a hin of wine as a drink offering." (Exodus 29:40)

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul likened his imprisonment and sufferings as "being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith" (Philippians 2:17).

Jacob never built a physical "house of God" on this site at Bethel. All he built was an altar and a pillar, and with them were the memories of a sacrifice -- of a lamb, of oil, of wine -- and especially of the presence and word of the Lord. It was a precious place to Jacob.

## Four Heartaches

Chapter 35 records three deaths, and the sin of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn.

**1. Deborah, Rebekah's nurse,** dies near Bethel (35:8). This short mention tells us several things. First, Jacob had gone to his father Isaac's home soon after Jacob had returned from Haran. (35:27 does not necessarily occur immediately prior to Isaac's death.) That explains Deborah living with Jacob's family in Bethel. And while the account mentions Deborah's death, it does not record Rebekah's. Jacob's mother Rebekah must have died during the twenty years Jacob was in exile in Haran. He had missed being with her at her death.

**2. Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife,** dies in childbirth as the family is traveling south (35:16-20), perhaps on their way to visit Jacob's father Isaac in Hebron. Rachel is Jacob's first love, and now she dies bearing for Jacob her second son. As she dies, she names the boy Ben-Oni ("son of my trouble"), but Jacob renames him Benjamin ("son of my right hand"). Benjamin is the last child of his favorite wife -- and the last son born to him that we know of. After Joseph is kidnapped, Jacob's "life is closely bound up with the boy's life" (44:30).



**3. Reuben, the firstborn son,** is found sleeping with Jacob's concubine Bilhah (35:22), clouding the firstborn's claim to be eventual leader of the clan. This was more than youthful passion, it was a direct insult to his father. We don't read what action Jacob took, if any, but Jacob's disappointment is clear in the prophecy he gives over Reuben just before Jacob's death:

"Reuben, you are my firstborn,  
my might, the first sign of my strength,  
excelling in honor, excelling in power.  
Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel,  
for you went up onto your father's bed,  
onto my couch and defiled it." (49:3-4)

Q5. (Genesis 35:22) What is the significance of Reuben's sin? In what way does it go beyond a sexual sin? We're not told, but how do you think this affected the family dynamics? Extra credit: Reuben has acted dishonorably here. In what ways does Reuben act honorably in the future? (37:21-29; 42:22, 37)

**4. Isaac, Jacob's father,** dies at the family home in Hebron at the ripe old age of 180. "He breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years." (35:29)

Isaac's death marks the end of an era. Certainly Isaac was a blessed man, to see God's promise of descendents begin to blossom, with 12 grandsons, as well as a number of granddaughters. Esau and Jacob together bury him, perhaps the last time they meet.