

SHECHEM

Genesis is full of many of the formative and foundational stories upon which all of Western Civilization is built. In the sweep of all the great epics of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, we seldom take time to consider some of the subplots. They are having their dramatic effect also. Like the story of Shechem. It is one of the sadder stories in the Bible, a Romeo and Juliet tragedy thousands of years before Shakespeare. Yet Jacob never fully recovered from this tragedy, and maybe, in some ways, Israel – and Western Civilization – has never fully recovered either.

In what we think of as the larger setting, Jacob has returned from Haran after many years. He had fled alone, running for his life from Esau, whom he had cheated out of both birthright and blessing. Now he has returned with four wives, eleven grown sons, a host of retainers, and vast flocks and herds. He is a wealthy and powerful chieftain. Our attention is riveted on the encounter that takes place between Jacob and Esau. Jacob comes in peace. Very probably, he is strong enough to come in war if he had chosen to do so. We learn later that none of the towns of Canaan felt strong enough to attack him. And after the peaceful encounter, Esau, though powerful and wealthy himself, nevertheless chooses to go off to Edom, south of the Dead Sea. Though Jacob and Esau have decided to be friends, there is not room enough for both of them in the land. (Genesis 36:6-8) (Maybe Esau had always lived in Edom, depending on which verses we read. (Genesis 33:16))

So after twenty years abroad, Jacob returns, in humility and wisdom and power and wealth, to take up The Big Story where it had left off. Instinctively we feel this as the covenants are reestablished, all the foreign gods are buried, and a new altar is built at Bethel. What had been started with Abraham would now continue through, and beyond, Jacob. And the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is behind it all and in it all, and beckoning toward the promises that await the future. Nice! And truly hopeful.

Tucked away, though in plain sight, is this story about Shechem. How many of you have ever heard a sermon about Shechem? In the midst of all the grandness and greatness of The Big Story moving forward, there is this terrible, needless, unnecessary tragedy. It does not

stop The Big Story, at least not on the surface. But it mars it – mars it so badly we try not to notice. How very often life is that way. Behind the surface of the grand and the glorious – not hidden really, just mostly ignored – are the gashes and wounds of our mistakes, our stupidity, our sin. And the wounds wound the very purposes and dreams for which we struggle and strive and live. Then the few begin to pray, “God, forgive us!” “Christ, have mercy upon us!”

After the encounter with Esau, Jacob and his whole tribe come back across the Jordan River about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and Jerusalem. Going up into the hill country, he buys some land there from Hamor the Hivite for one hundred sheep – a healthy price – and then Jacob and his entourage begin to settle down in Canaan. Jacob’s Well is there, where Jesus later speaks with a Samaritan woman. (*“God is Spirit, and they that worship must worship in spirit and in truth.”* (John 4:23)) So Jacob settles in the pass between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, to the west of the Hivite neighbors who already live there, and from whom he had purchased the land.

Most everybody knows how the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, and how Moses brought them out of slavery and into the wilderness until, eventually, Joshua led them across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. But generations earlier, Jacob – whom the angel renamed Israel, and from whom Israel takes its name – Jacob returned from Haran, far to the north, and crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land. Abraham, his grandfather, had done it first. So they keep finding and losing and finding their Promised Land. Maybe some of you do too. In any case, they are back and they are strong, and it looks like the story will move forward again and the destiny will continue. But as always, there are other people involved. Others already live there. A new and powerful clan moving into the area is always cause for drama. What would happen? How would they get along with “the others,” and “the others” with them? There is suspicion – an uneasy truce at best – between Israel and the Hivites. (The Capulets and the Montagues.)

Now Shechem, by whose name the town would later be known, is the young prince of the region. He is not (as some would have you think, to soften the story’s blow) a wastrel or a villain. He is handsome, courageous, charming, and idealistic, as strong youth frequently are. And he is held in higher respect than anyone else in the region. (Genesis 34:19)

In one clan is this dashing young prince, and in the other is the lovely Dinah, daughter of Leah and Jacob. The two have somehow met, and they have contrived to see each other at every opportunity, no doubt in some secrecy. Their respective clans, while not at war, are definitely not compatible. There is no way Jacob would consent to this marriage; Hamor probably wouldn't hear of it either. So what could the two do? Risk it all – in the logic of youth for thousands of years – and force the issue. Pregnancy can often cause the elders to speak of marriage, when before they would not consider it.

I suspect a true Romeo and Juliet drama. How they met and courted, we do not know. But I suggest that they were deeply in love and determined to marry no matter what the cost. Now, I know that the story is told to suggest that Shechem took Dinah against her will. But it doesn't match the rest of the story. It is the "official" version to justify what happened, but it doesn't add up.

I have been around long enough to observe (and so have most of you) that most young men of family and position do not wish to marry those whom they have used or abused. (There is an aversion reaction.) It's also strange that there is no protest from Dinah throughout, and we notice that she is "taken" from Shechem's house by her brothers, though this is before Shechem can recover from his operation and marry her. (Genesis 34:26) Why is she still with Shechem? She is "taken" from the house by her brothers; she does not flee. Nor is there any hint that she wants to go.

Well, we can read between the lines as much as we like, but the story gets very clear as we go on. Shechem is deeply in love with Dinah. He pleads his cause with both Hamor and Jacob, and is very convincing. Shechem is so well-loved – and his love for Dinah so brilliant, as is hers for him – that it is about to draw the Hivites and the Israelites into one clan of brotherhood and peace. Moreover, the Hivites are willing to adopt some of Israel's ways, to make themselves acceptable. Shechem is so well-respected that all the males of his tribe are willing to undergo circumcision to seal this marriage and this peace. (It's asking a lot, and the knives were not as sharp in those days, either.)

Up to this point, this is a wonderful and inspiring story. Can you imagine all the meetings and speeches and considerations and side plots? If you like exciting congregational meetings, here you go.

In the middle of it all, causing it all, I see the love of Dinah and Shechem transforming both clans, bringing peace and cooperation where animosity and distrust had been. And then ...

Two of the brothers (and only two!) – Simeon and Levi – destroy it all. They are also the sons of Leah, full brothers to Dinah, so maybe they really *are* sticking up for their sister. But Reuben and Judah, far more responsible individuals, and Issachar and Zebulun are also full brothers to Dinah. These other four brothers do not contrive the vengeance. Interesting.

It doesn't look like outrage or passion or justice. Is it greed and scheming and pride? Simeon and Levi do not want to share land or destiny with the Hivites. There is no room in their heads or their hearts for people "not their own." Or do Simeon and Levi feel a greater threat: the weakening of their convictions and destiny by mingling with others who do not understand and who have not come through the same crucible? Simeon and Levi represent, wittingly or unwittingly, the later convictions of their nation (under Moses and Joshua): there shall be no intermarriage and no compromise with peoples, religions, or customs outside the Jewish Covenant. Though never perfect at it – to the disgust and dismay of the prophets – this is the very conviction that has *preserved* Israel in exile, in occupation under Roman rule, and through every other contingency and tragedy that four thousand years of earth history has been able to throw at them.

And yet we weep. We weep for Shechem, and for Dinah, and for Hamor and all his lost tribe that would never be heard from again. And the weeping is real because, once started, we realize that it is the story of lost peace, lost brotherhood, lost cooperation, lost idealism – and the loss of unanimity and love between tribes and races and peoples ever since.

Better for Shechem to have admired from afar – to have stuffed his dreams, disciplined his passions, and died a cynical, withered old man – because that's real life, and we dare not be open and walk trusting and bold and hopeful upon this earth. But Shechem believes in life, and trusts that others will see the vision and the possibility once it stands clearly before them. And so he dies, and gets his whole clan butchered with him.

It is, of course, “our heroes” who do this butchering – two of the sons who will become part of the twelve tribes of the Chosen People, called to lead the world into the WAYS of God: Simeon and Levi. The tribe of Levi will even become the priests of Israel. From Levi will come Aaron and Moses. But that’s later, and is a new beginning. What would we do without new beginnings! Nevertheless, at this time in our story, the other sons seem willing enough to share in the spoils, once the murders have been done. “Oh well, what the hell – might as well take the benefit, now that it’s over.” Now that all the Hivite men are dead, the clans of Jacob swallow up the Hivites totally – wealth, women, children, flocks, cattle, donkeys, looted houses – everything. Now it belongs to Israel without any terms and without any community of sharing, learning, growing, or love. Isn’t that lucky? Now we have the whole territory to ourselves, as well as all the women and the goodies, and we don’t have to bother with communicating or cooperating or learning or sharing.

So The Big Story moves on. Yet that for which The Big Story exists has been killed again – off on the side, when we weren’t looking – by our own people. And we don’t want to notice because it hurts too much and feels so sad. Shechem and his people wanted to live in peace, be friends, be related, share life and destiny, and they were willing to go to almost any lengths to “become acceptable.” And what did they get for it? Treachery and death.

Granted, Jacob was not pleased. In fact, he was utterly furious. (Years later, according to the death-bed blessings Jacob gave to his sons, Jacob was still furious.) But he did not stop The Big Story or kill Simeon and Levi outright. Neither did God. We note, however, that Jacob did not stay in the area. Now that there was nobody to contend with, strangely they decided to leave. The next chapter (35) acts as if nothing had happened except that they had to leave – south to Bethel (then farther, to Hebron). The modern name for Shechem is Nablus, center of the Intifada, source of modern Israel’s worst problems. A total coincidence, of course.

Why do I mention any of this? I don’t know. It’s like we missed some turn back up the road somewhere – like some crucial lesson is missing or ignored. I understand that it isn’t sane, but it feels like some new Shechem and Dinah need to fall in love all over again, and give us all a new chance to want to come together and be one tribe.

It reminds me of two great hungers that have plagued humankind throughout all our histories – wherever we have been, whoever we are. ONE is the hunger to be special, set apart, different, better, unique. THE OTHER is the hunger to be united, together – a community of loving people, helping each other, trying to make life better for each other. Which is the will of God? Which is the true focus of a faithful community of Christians? You will want to say “both,” no doubt. At least I do. But it leaves me in unbearable paradox.

Why has every culture hated mixed marriages? Because we don't want to lose our identity, our WAY, our standards, our truth – what we believe in and call most important. Who will keep the traditions, the ways, and the beliefs that make us who we are, if we mix with others and accept all peoples and beliefs? Important things happen and we swear never to forget them – Passover, Christ's dying and rising – but if we have sworn never to forget the Bodhi tree yet we marry those who neither feel nor know these things, what will the children know or remember?

On the other hand, we long to be open to all and respectful of all – cooperating with everyone, learning from every rich source, bringing peace instead of conflict, mistrust, and cruelty.

Does Jesus help you with this dilemma? Is it clear to you whether we should be a separate community as Christians – keeping certain traditions, practices, beliefs, perspectives – and admitting into our inner circles only those who essentially understand and agree with what we stand for (or who at least wish to follow Jesus in some sincere and intentional manner)? Or do you believe that Jesus' acceptance of so many different people, and the subsequent break of His followers with Judaism, calls us to stop emphasizing beliefs and traditions and, rather, to focus on gathering all peoples and customs into the church – regardless of source or values? As the motto of our denomination states: “*That they may all be one.*” (From Jesus' prayer in John 17:21.)

As a Christian, would it bother you at all if your child married a Buddhist? As a Christian, would it bother you *if it bothered you* that your child married a Buddhist?

Not long ago, someone said to me, “You speak about doubts but you don't appear to have many of your own.” I replied, “I no longer find it fascinating to debate the existence of the ONE whose presence I have

encountered so many times over the years. Many of the doubts I used to have no longer seem very troublesome. But I have *plenty* of doubts, perhaps even some you haven't thought of yet."

Here is one of the doubts I think the church should be wrestling with more than most of the issues I hear it debating:

Which is more Christian:

a.) To be clear about our beliefs and lifestyle until we cast a clear light that offers people a New WAY of Life and something exciting and significant to live for – knowing, nevertheless, that it excludes all those who do not see and believe as we do?

– or –

b.) To be loving and accepting of all people, their convictions, and their beliefs, knowing that the Christ loves them too – and knowing, nevertheless, that this mutes and confuses and compromises any Message we may be called to carry and demonstrate?

Our highest truth is that God loves all people. As Christians, we are constantly embarrassed that we do not. But we also believe that there are attitudes and behaviors that God does not accept: pride, murder, dishonesty, self-centeredness – for openers. In short, remorse, repentance, forgiveness, and penance are basic ingredients of every spiritual path or way.

Would you be upset if you learned that somebody had tried to join this church and that I had told them they were not yet ready to do so?

We are not in the morals business. We are in the forgiveness business. But what of those who have no desire or intention of repenting? (At least not yet.)

By the way, I have never in all my ministry refused church membership to any person. Sadly, it is one of the ways in which I am not a faithful follower of Jesus. Who do *you* think should be allowed to join the Christian church? And on what basis? Should anyone ever be excluded? On what basis?

The truth is: to accept everything is to stand for nothing.