

Chapter 14: The Passivity of Jacob

Genesis 34:1–31

Leadership is not a blank check to do whatever the leader desires. Primarily, leadership entails sacrificial responsibility—responsibility to those in authority over the leader, and responsibility to those over whom the leader exercises authority. During his earthly ministry, Jesus himself modeled the dynamic of living as a man under the authority of his heavenly Father, while exercising authority of those under him (Matt. 8:9). Therefore, Jesus insisted that he did not come to do his own, personal, private, will, but the will of his Father who sent him (John 6:38). If even Jesus sacrificially submitted his human will to the divine will all the way to the cross (e.g., Matt. 26:39), then why should we expect in this life to do only what pleases us?

In Genesis 34, Jacob experiences a crisis of leadership. He is the chosen recipient of God's covenant, and God has demonstrated his faithfulness by leading Jacob safely back into the land of Canaan. Jacob wants to settle down and enjoy God's blessings, but one of Jacob's new neighbors commits a horrific crime by raping, holding hostage, and demanding to marry one of Jacob's daughters. This is bad enough on its own; however, Dinah, the victim of this brutal attack, is the daughter of Leah, Jacob's unloved wife (cf. Gen. 29:30). What Dinah needs more than anything in this story is for her father to rise up for her defense in the name of the Lord. Sadly, Jacob does not seem to care enough about his daughter to do so. Shockingly, the wicked people of Canaan strike their first blow against God's holy people, and Jacob cannot motivate himself to promote God's righteousness, preserve God's boundaries, or protect God's people. Nevertheless, Genesis 34 reminds us that *God will establish his kingdom without fail, whether by his appointed leaders or by zealous substitutes.*

Promoting God's Righteousness (Gen. 34:1–7)

From the womb, Jacob has been a fighter (Gen. 25:22–23). At long last, Jacob has finally found rest from his conflict after making a peace treaty with Laban and reconciling with Esau (Gen. 31:43–55; 33:1–17). After putting his two greatest enemies behind him, Jacob perhaps imagines that he can now settle into his long-desired rest in the land he purchased from Hamor and Shechem (Gen. 33:19). The supplier of Jacob's retirement home, however, becomes the source of Jacob's next conflict:

[1] Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land. [2] And 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. [3] And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. [4] So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this girl for my wife." (Gen. 34:1–4)

Curiously, the narrator states that Dinah is the daughter of Leah, borne to Jacob, instead of more explicitly stating that Dinah is Jacob's daughter. By identifying Dinah primarily with Jacob's unloved wife, Leah (Gen. 29:30), the text here indicates that there is significant emotional distance between Jacob and Dinah, even if he is her father biologically.¹ Tracing someone's lineage primarily through his or her mother is rare, with only seven examples in the entire Old Testament (Gen. 34:1; 2 Sam. 3:3, 4 (x2); 2 Chron. 24:26 (x2); Esth. 9:29).² From the very first words of this story, we learn a crucial detail about Jacob's nonexistent emotional attachment to Dinah, which helps us to interpret his actions (or lack thereof) in this story.

Dinah's Foolish Wandering

What leads up to Dinah's attack? We have already seen something of Jacob's role in the background of this story as the emotionally distant father. Next, the text tells us that she "went out to see the women of the land" (Gen. 34:1). There may be a connection to the way that Dinah *goes out* with the way that Leah "went out" to seduce her husband after hiring Jacob for mandrakes (Gen. 30:16). If so, Dinah's going out to see the women of the land may not be as innocent as it sounds.³

Even if the phrase "went out to see the women of the land" does not have a sexually suggestive meaning, we should ask why Dinah wants to see the women of the land at all. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did have some interactions with the people of the land, but those interactions were of necessity, not out of a desire to make close friendships (Gen. 20; 21:22–34; 23; 26:6–33). When God's people interacted too closely with the people of the land, disaster soon followed. Consider Lot's too-close relationships with the people of Sodom (Gen. 13:10–13; 14:1–12; 19:1–29) and Esau's unequally-yoked intermarriages with the Hittites and Ishmaelites (Gen. 26:34–35; 28:6–9). On the other hand, Abraham insisted that his son Isaac not intermarry with the women of the land (Gen. 24:2–4), and Rebekah and Isaac made the same demand of their son, Jacob (Gen. 27:46; 28:1).⁴ Finally, the act of *seeing* the wrong thing often leads people into sin (e.g., Gen. 3:6; cf. Gen. 32:30), as we will observe in our study of Shechem's sin in the next section. We may not know exactly what Dinah is doing, but the text seems to paint her actions in a negative light.

Shechem's Entitled Seeing and Taking

Of course, this does not mean that the text blames Dinah for what Shechem does to her. On the contrary, the text places responsibility for this attack squarely on Shechem by telling us that Shechem *sees* Dinah and *takes* (ESV: "seized") her (Gen. 34:2).⁵ This pattern of *see* → *take* appears in at least ten Old Testament passages to describe temptation and sin, respectively (Gen. 3:6; 6:2; 12:15; 28:6, 9; 30:9; 34:2; 38:2; Judg. 14:2; 2 Sam. 11:2–4).⁶ Most similarly, this pattern appeared to describe the sins of the sons of God who *saw* that the daughters of men were attractive (lit., "good"), so that they *took* as their wives any they chose (Gen. 6:2). In that passage, "sons of God" referred to the godly lineage descended from Seth (cf. Gen. 5:1–3), while the "daughters of men" referred to the wicked lineage descended from Cain (cf. Gen. 4:17–24).

In part, this connection helps us to see the way that the text charges Shechem with sin: *he* is the one who *sees* and *takes*. This portrays a shocking kind of entitlement, in that Shechem feels that he is entitled to *take* whatever he *sees*. He has no thought of propriety, boundaries, or righteousness, but simply seizes Dinah for himself. The text, therefore, does not blame Dinah for Shechem's

wickedness. Beyond merely *seeing* and *taking*, the text tells us that Shechem also *lays with her* with language that “often implies forcible illegitimate intercourse (Num 5:13, 19; Ezek 23:8; cf. Gen 34:7; 19:34; 26:10).” The fourth verb is *humiliate*, which “signifies a humbling affliction, even a persecution. This verb was used in Genesis 15:13 in the prediction that Abraham’s seed would be *afflicted* for four hundred years in a foreign land (see Exod. 1:11). Here the text describes the act as a rape, with all its humiliation and violence.”⁸ The text leaves no question that this is an evil, sinful act on Shechem’s part.

Most importantly, the connection of *see* → *take* to Genesis 6:2 helps us to recognize the stakes of this passage: Shechem seeks to mingle the wicked lineage of the people of the land with the godly lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁹ The last time that the godly lineage mingled with a wicked lineage, corruption in the world escalated so far and so fast that God destroyed the world with the Flood (Gen. 6:5–7:24). Shechem’s act not only wickedly violates and defiles Dinah, but represents a clear and present threat to the purity, holiness, and righteousness of the people of God.

Shechem’s Desire for Dinah

Nevertheless, the text also clarifies Shechem’s intentions to marry Dinah after defiling her. Shechem, then, stands in contrast with David’s son Amnon, who hated and despised his half-sister Tamar after raping her (cf. 2 Sam. 13:15–17).¹⁰ Very literally, our text tells us, “And his soul cleaved to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl, and he spoke over the heart to the girl” (Gen. 34:3; my translation). The word for *cleave* is the same word that appeared in Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and *hold fast* to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).¹¹ Nevertheless, Shechem has inverted God’s prescribed order by first engaging sexually with Dinah, second cleaving to her, and third seeking to leave his father and mother to marry her. God created sexual relations as a powerful bonding agent to hold together a husband and a wife; here, however, Shechem’s soul cleaves to Dinah “as sort of an aftereffect on the rapist.”¹² So, while Shechem may not act as reprehensibly as Amnon does, the text still insists that he is behaving perversity.

Shechem, therefore, instructs his father to “Get me this girl for my wife” (Gen. 34:4). Throughout this passage, we consistently see a sense of entitlement among the Hivites. The first, brazen example of entitlement is, of course, Shechem’s rape of Dinah. Next, when Shechem seeks to marry her, he speaks to his father in a demanding tone, without so much as a “please.”¹³ John Walton suggests that all of Shechem’s actions may have even been strategic, designed to force Jacob to give Dinah to him as a wife:

In cultures where parent-arranged marriage is the norm, there are always reasons and means to bypass the system. If it is considered unlikely that a marriage will be arranged by the parents, one or both of the parties can take matters into their own hands. For example, if the man is seduced or the woman raped, or if the couple engages in intercourse by mutual consent, the question of whether arrangements can be made is largely preempted. Once the girl has been deflowered, the chances of making a suitable arrangement with a different family are significantly reduced. In such a situation, arrangements often follow for the couple to be married, though a premium bride price is usually the consequence. The Old Testament law anticipates such possibilities and gives rulings.¹⁴

Has this been Shechem's plan all along? The text strongly suggests this, since the word translated in v. 4 as "get" (lit., "take") is the same word used to describe how Shechem "seized" (Gen. 34:2) her to rape her: "Shechem asks Hamor to do with Dinah what Shechem has already done with Dinah—take her."¹⁵ Shechem feels entitled to Dinah an object for him to claim however he sees fit. We will see further evidence of the sense of entitlement among the Hivites as we continue our study of this passage.

Jacob's Silence

Earlier, we saw a hint of Jacob's emotional distance from Dinah in the way that she was described as Leah's daughter before being described as Jacob's daughter (Gen. 34:1, 3). This detail becomes important as we try to understand Jacob's reaction to news of Dinah's rape:

[5] 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. [6] And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. [7] 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. (Gen. 34:5–7)

The narrator gives us clues as to how we should interpret Jacob's silence by setting up four contrasts. First, Jacob's silence contrasts starkly with his own grieving later on over the loss of Joseph and the prospect of losing Benjamin (Gen. 37:34–35; 42:36–38; 43:14), as well as with David's fierce anger after learning that his son Absalom has raped his daughter Tamar (2 Sam. 13:21).¹⁶ Second, the text contrasts the two fathers in this story, Hamor versus Jacob. In Genesis 34:6, we read that Hamor goes out to speak with Jacob, even though we do not read about the negotiations until Genesis 34:8. The inclusion of this statement here demonstrates that Hamor is willing to do whatever his son wants, while Jacob is not willing to raise much of a fuss over the rape of his own child.¹⁷ If Shechem felt entitled to take Dinah as the means to his own ends, we should recognize that Jacob does not do much better. So long as Dinah benefits him by enlarging his house, he is content to have her as a daughter (e.g., Gen. 33:7). Now, however, when Dinah experiences abuse at the hands of Jacob's neighbors, Jacob sees her as an inconvenience. Neither Shechem nor Jacob see Dinah as a human being made in the image of God, but as a piece of property for their use so long as she benefits them.

Third, Jacob's silence seems all the more callous when compared to the indignation and anger of Jacob's sons when they learn what has happened to their sister (Gen. 34:7).¹⁸ Finally, we should notice the intriguing contrast between the name *Jacob* and the description of this even as "an outrageous thing *in Israel*," which pits the sexual ethics of the Israelites against those of the raping Canaanites.¹⁹ The suggestion is that if Jacob were truly living as Israel, then he should consider Shechem's sin as outrageous as his sons do.²⁰ Jacob's response is poor, and only gets worse through the rest of this story.

Preserving God's Boundaries (Gen. 34:8–24)

Once Hamor arrives, he gets right down to business to negotiate on behalf of his son:

[8] 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. [9] Make marriages with us. Give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. [10] You shall dwell with us, and the land shall be open to you. Dwell and trade in it, and get property in it.” [11] Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, “Let me find favor in your eyes, and whatever you say to me I will give. [12] 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.” (Gen. 34:8–12)

Certainly, Hamor speaks courteously and generously with Jacob's family.²¹ Nevertheless, there are two sinister elements that keep us from giving too much credit to Hamor and Shechem here. First, the narrator is withholding a crucial piece of information that he will drop like a bombshell later: the Hivites are still holding Dinah (Gen. 34:26)! Now, it is possible that Dinah wants to stay with the Hivites out of a confused desire to marry Shechem as a remedy for her humiliation and shame (cf. 2 Sam. 13:12–16). From the perspective of Jacob's family, however, their only logical conclusion is that the Hivites have taken their sister hostage, and that the Hivites are now negotiating by using Dinah as leverage.

The Entitlement of the Hivites

Second, the Hivites' sense of entitlement begins to come through more clearly in this passage. At a high level, the Hivites believe that they are offering mutually agreeable terms when they ask to intermarry with the Israelites. Diplomatically, then, we should expect them to offer *their* daughters in marriage first, before asking for the *Israelites'* daughters, but this is not what Hamor says: “Make marriages with us. Give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves” (Gen. 34:9). The logic of Hamor's words seems to reflect his belief that taking the Israelites' daughters in marriage is something he takes for granted. Rather than selling his plan to a party on equal footing, he believes that he is offering a pacifying concession to a weaker party. It is as though he is saying, “Obviously, we are going to take your daughters as wives, beginning with Dinah. But don't worry! This will all turn out for the best, because we are also willing to give you our own daughters as wives. Isn't that generous of us? Everybody wins!”

Financial Temptations

By offering their daughters as wives for the Israelites, the Hivites are asking the Israelites to enter into a close relationship with them. Even so, their main pitch is not about better relationships, but financial rewards. This time around, Hamor and Shechem make their pitch primarily in terms of how this deal will benefit the Israelites. In part, this will mean opening up trade relations with the Hivites (Gen. 34:10). Not only will the Israelites dwell with the Hivites, but they will also trade and gain property through commerce with the Hivites. Additionally, Shechem promises to give as great a bride-price and a gift as Jacob requests, if he may only keep Dinah as his wife (Gen. 34:11–12).

Even though the Hivites seem to be offering the Israelites a good deal, there are two clues to help

us recognize what a bad deal this would be. First, when Hamor entices the Israelites with the opportunity to “get property” with the Hivites (Gen. 34:10), he uses the verbal form of the word for the everlasting “possession” that God incorporates into his promise to give the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the land of Canaan (cf. Gen. 17:8; 48:4): “Hamor, in effect, offers what God has promised.”²² Just as Abraham refused to take wealth from the king of Sodom (Gen. 14:22–23), and just as Jacob insisted that Laban could not give him anything to enrich him (Gen. 30:31), so Jacob should reject what Hamor is offering him now. Jacob must choose whom he will trust to enrich him, whether God or these Hivites.

Second, Shechem uses the same phrase that Jacob used in his reconciliation with Esau: “Let me find favor in your eyes” (Gen. 34:11; cf. Gen. 32:5; 33:8, 10). Just as Jacob stole something of value from Esau, so Shechem has stolen something of value from Jacob. Therefore, Shechem needs to gain back Jacob’s favor just as Jacob needed to gain back Esau’s favor. There are different ways of seeking favor, however. The first time Jacob tried to find favor in the eyes of Esau, he sent lavish gifts in the hope that those gifts would appease Esau (cf. Gen. 32:20). That is, he tried to use money to buy Esau’s favor. Only later, after wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok, does Jacob seek to bless Esau in view of the favor that Esau has *already* extended to him (Gen. 34:10). Shechem is following in the footsteps of Jacob’s first attempt at reconciling with Esau by trying to buy the favor of Jacob’s family in order to marry Dinah. This is a pagan approach to relational reconciliation. It didn’t work for Jacob, and it won’t work for Shechem.

Like Father, Like Sons

The text tells us immediately that the sons of Jacob respond to the offer of the Hivites *deceitfully*:

[13] The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. [14] They 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. [15] Only on this condition will we agree with you—that you will become as we are by every male among you being circumcised. [16] 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. [17] But if you will not listen to us and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter, and we will be gone.” (Gen. 34:13–17)

Genesis 34:13 is the third time that we have seen the word *deceitfully*.²³ First, Isaac used the word to explain to Esau how Jacob stole the blessing: “Your brother came *deceitfully*, and he has taken away your blessing” (Gen. 27:35). Second, Jacob used the verbal form of the word when he realized that Laban had tricked him with Leah and Rachel: “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you *deceived* me?” (Gen. 29:25). God humbled and sanctified Jacob’s deceitfulness through Jacob’s suffering at the hands of another deceiver, Laban. Even so, Jacob’s sons are following in the footsteps of their father. To put it another way, we might say that they come by their deceptiveness honestly.

Specifically, the sons of Jacob deceive the Hivites by appealing to circumcision as the only barrier between the intermarriage of the two peoples. If the Hivites will only consent to be circumcised, then the Hivites and the Israelites shall not only dwell together, but they will become “one

people” (Gen. 34:16). This is where the threat to the chosen offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob comes into clear focus, since “last time such a proposal (‘one people’) was made was in the building of the city of Babylon (11:6).”²⁴ It is along these lines that God originally gave the sign of circumcision to separate God’s people from the rest of the world, and yet the sons of Jacob propose to unify their two nations by administering circumcision “promiscuously and without discrimination.”²⁵ Indeed, there is a wordplay between the word that refers to the “sign” (אוֹת; *’ót*; Gen. 17:11) of circumcision and the verb for “agree” (אָזַן; *’áz*; Gen. 34:15, 22–23).²⁶ As a *sign*, God offers circumcision to mark the dividing barrier of separation from God’s people and the world. As an *agreement*, the people of God offer circumcision as a way for removing the final barrier of separation between themselves and the world.

Of course, the sons of Jacob are saying this deceitfully, since they intend to use circumcision as a means for “taking” their daughter Dinah back, as they foreshadow here (Gen. 34:17; cf. Gen. 34:26).²⁷ Remember, this word “take” is also the word that describes Shechem’s “taking” (ESV: “seized”) Dinah to rape her (Gen. 34:2) as well as Shechem’s instructions to Hamor to “take” (ESV: “get”) Dinah as his wife (Gen. 34:4).²⁸ How, then, are we to judge the actions of the sons of Jacob? It is possible to read this text in two ways. On the one hand, by identifying their deceit, the text may be leading us to condemn their actions, just as we condemned Jacob’s actions of deceitfully stealing the blessing from Esau. On this reading, we would also charge Jacob’s sons with making a sacrilege of God’s holy sacrament of circumcision.²⁹

On the other hand, it is also possible to see this tactic as an understandable response to the Hivites’ brutality not only in raping Dinah, but in continuing to hold her hostage. During the conquest, Rahab lies to preserve the lies of the Israelites spies (Josh. 2), and the Israelites set a deceptive ambush to destroy the city of Ai (Josh. 8). Should we see the deception of the sons of Israel to the Hivites as a preview of the conquest? If so, does that justify their actions? In my opinion, it is important to recognize that the narrator goes out of his way to show the desperation of the situation that the sons of Jacob are facing if they want to save their sister. This does not completely justify what the sons of Jacob do, but it also seems to avoid fully condemning them. We will return to answer this question more fully later.

Jacob’s Tacit Consent

For the moment, the tacit consent that Jacob gives to this plan is the most troubling part of the story. We know that Jacob is involved in these negotiations for Dinah (Gen. 34:6, 11), but he is silent as his sons negotiate (Gen. 34:13–17). When the sons of Jacob actually carry out the deception by destroying the Hivites, Jacob is shocked and angry by what they have done (Gen. 34:30), suggesting that Jacob does not know what his sons are planning during these negotiations. Indeed, the text tells us only that *Jacob’s sons* answer Shechem deceitfully, excluding Jacob from the deceit (Gen. 34:13). If Jacob is unaware of what his sons are planning, though, this means that Jacob tacitly consents to the plan of merging the two nations by circumcision! He knows full well that God has set apart his family, but his greed and desire for comfort and security entices him to dissolve God’s boundaries in order to make his Dinah problems go away and to gain possessions from the Hivites that God has promised to give him by faith. Here again we have a silent man who stands by passively while his family is led off into sin (cf. Gen. 3:6).

Deceived by Seeing a False Good

The offer from the sons of Jacob captures the imaginations of Hamor and Shechem, and they eagerly go to sell the deal to their fellow citizens of Shechem:

[18] Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem. [19] And the young man did not delay to do the thing, because he delighted in Jacob's daughter. Now he was the most honored of all his father's house. [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 at peace with us; 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. [22] 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. [23] Will not their livestock, their property and all their beasts be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will dwell with us." [24] 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. (Gen. 34:18–24)

Literally, Genesis 34:18 says this: "Their words were good [verb: **יָטַב**; *yāṭab*; "to be good"] in the eyes of Hamor and in the eyes of Shechem, son of Hamor." Earlier, we observed that the pattern of *see* → *take* (Gen. 34:2) occurs at least ten times in the Old Testament to describe some kind of sin. A fuller version of this pattern appeared in Genesis 6:2: *see* → *good* [**טוֹב**; *ṭôḇ*; ESV: "attractive"] → *take*. In v. 18, then, we are finding the *good* that the Hivites *see* (lit: "in the eyes of..."), and the text tells us explicitly that the words of the Israelites were good in the eyes of Hamor *and* in the eyes of Shechem. Here is the expanded pattern of temptation and sin in the way that the Hivites fall hook, line, and sinker for the deception of the Israelites. Like Eve, the sons of God, Achan, and David (cf. Gen. 3:6; 6:2; Josh. 7:21; 2 Sam. 11:2–4), the Hivites are tempted to sin when they are deceived by a false sense of what is truly good.

Deceived by a Sense of Entitlement

When Hamor and Shechem appeal to the men of the city, they fail to mention Shechem's personal desire to marry Dinah; instead, they go straight to the possibility of intermarrying with the Israelites in generic terms.³⁰ Once again, the sense of entitlement comes to the forefront, since Hamor and Shechem first mention taking *Israelite* daughters as their wives, and only subsequently mention giving *their* daughters to the Israelites (Gen. 34:21). In the context, however, this makes more sense, since they are trying to put the deal's best foot forward to their audience. Here, they respect their fellow citizens as on essentially equal footing in a way that they did not see the Israelites. Nevertheless, their basic strategy for selling the deal is to appeal to their citizens shared sense of entitlement—not only to marry the daughters of the Israelites, but also by asking, "Will not their livestock, their property, and all their beasts be ours?" (Gen. 34:23).

Even so, there is a price to lay hold of this opportunity in the form of circumcision. Most likely, the citizens understood that taking the sign of circumcision was some kind of religious ceremony, and yet the men do not hesitate to receive circumcision without learning anything about its significance.³¹ On the whole, this suggests a rather cavalier approach to religion. More than that, their

willingness to be circumcised reflects their opportunism to gain the promise of the sons of Israel: to become “one people” with the Israelites (Gen. 34:16, 22). Their greed blinds them to the danger that lies ahead.

Protecting God’s People (Gen. 34:25–31)

When the men of Shechem are at their most vulnerable point, two of Dinah’s full brothers come to her rescue:

[25] 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. [26] They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away. [27] The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. [28] They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. [29] All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and plundered. (Gen. 34:25–29)

To some degree, this narrative reflects a sense of talionic, eye-for-an-eye justice, since the text tells us that Simeon and Levi “take” their swords with the same word to describe how Shechem and Hamor “took” Dinah (Gen. 34:2, 4, 25).³² Then, the same word appears to describe how they “took” Dinah out of Shechem’s house and went away (Gen. 34:26).

Liberating Dinah and Plundering the City

As we observed earlier, the fact that Dinah has remained in the house of Shechem up to this point hits readers like a bombshell. While we are in the middle of sorting out how we feel about the deception and brutality of the sons of Jacob to trick the Hivites into circumcision in order to slaughter them, we suddenly gain a piece of information that perhaps helps to justify their actions—to some degree, at least. Indeed, this may put the whole story into a different light, as Meir Sternberg writes:

[The Hivites] have largely brought down that violence on themselves by seeking to impose their will on Jacob’s family. With Dinah in Shechem’s hands, the option of polite declining is closed to her guardians. And once the brothers refused to submit to the Hivite version of a shotgun wedding, they were left no avenue to the retrieval of their sister except force. Hence also the need for ‘deceit.’ Considering the numerical superiority of the troops behind the ‘prince of the land’—‘two of Jacob’s sons’ faced a whole city—no wonder the brothers resorted to trickery to make odds more even. And the order of presentation supports the reading of the slaughter as an act enforced and purposive rather than expressing blind fury. First comes the attack on the townsmen, next the killing of Hamor and Shechem, and only then the extrication of Dinah: to rescue their sister, this orderly movement implies, they had to deal with all possible resistance, let alone future retaliation.³³

The phrase “went away” in Genesis 34:26 adds further weight to this reading, since this is the same verb the Jacob used to describe his own liberation from captivity under Laban (e.g., Gen. 30:25), and it is the same verb that Moses will use on God’s behalf to demand that Pharaoh “Let my people go” from Egypt (e.g., Ex. 5:1). In this light, we see that Shechem has held Dinah captive in a house of bondage. Furthermore, we see that God’s people have brought plagues of bodily sores (Ex. 9:8–12) on the house of Shechem in order to let God’s people go.

Furthermore, just as the Israelites will later plunder the Egyptians on their way out of Egypt (Ex. 12:36), and just as Jacob plundered Laban on his way out of Mesopotamia (Gen. 31:16), so also the Israelites now plunder the Hivites (Gen. 34:27), although this text uses a different verb than the other two texts. The text even gives a reason for plundering the city: “because they had defiled their sister” (Gen. 34:27). It is interesting that the text tells us that “they” defiled Dinah in plural form, since the same verb appeared twice earlier in singular form to describe how Shechem alone defiled Dinah (Gen. 34:5, 13). In some sense, “the whole populace of the city is deemed accountable for its acquiescence to Shechem’s deed.”³⁴

The Zeal of the Levites

Additionally, the violence of Levi foreshadows the violence of one of Levi’s descendants, Phinehas, as Gordon Wenham points out:

...many of the same terms are found in the account of the Israelites’ revenge on Midian in Num 31. The Midianites had seduced the Israelites, and Phineas, son of Aaron of the tribe of Levi, had killed the guilty man and woman (Num 25). Later, vengeance is wreaked on all the Midianites as directed in 25:17 by all the tribes of Israel. They slew every male (Num 31:7; cf. Gen 34:25); then they slew the Midianite kings (Num 31:8; cf. Gen 34:26; Hamor was prince, i.e., local king, according to Gen 34:2). Then Num 31:9 repeats Gen 34:29 almost word-for-word in reverse order....

In Num 25 vengeance is first taken by Phineas the Levite, then by all Israel (25:17; 31:4–7), just as Levi’s action here (34:26) is followed by his brothers (34:27–29). Second, these parallels suggest that the brothers’ action here is not viewed as unequivocally evil, for the later action of Phineas is seen as extremely meritorious, and the follow-up attack by all Israel is expressly commanded by God. As Jacob’s sons here foreshadow the actions of their descendants, this seems to imply the narrator’s qualified approval. “Because they had defiled their sister” is thus another reminder that it was primarily the sexual offenses of Canaan that were to lead to its conquest by Israel (cf. Gen 19; Lev 18:3; 20:23).³⁵

Indeed, when Phinehas rose up to kill an Israelite who committed sexual sin with a Midianite, the Lord vindicates his action:

[10] And the LORD said to Moses, [11] “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. [12] Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, [13] and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his

God and made atonement for the people of Israel.” (Num. 25:10–13)

Indeed, the Psalms later declare that Phinehas’s deed “was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever” (Ps. 106:31). Ironically, the Israelite involved in the sexual sin with the Midianite woman was a Simeonite, the descendant of the other man involved in slaying the Hivites in our passage (Num. 25:14).

The many connections between these two passages seem to demand that we read them together. If we judge the morally ambiguous actions of the sons of Jacob in light of the later actions of Phinehas, we have even more reason for justifying what Simeon and Levi did to rescue Dinah by executing God’s judgment against a wicked people. Indeed, this story seems to be a preview of the conquest of Israel into the land of Canaan. The stories of the violence against the inhabitants of Canaan in the book of Joshua make modern readers uncomfortable too, but, as Graeme Goldsworthy explains, they are stories about *God’s* justice, not about *human* vengeance: “The destruction of the Canaanites must be understood as the invasion of the kingdom of God into an alien and rebellious world. The saving acts of God on behalf of his chosen people are thus acts of judgment on godless nations.”³⁶ Indeed, one of the main charges that God brings against the Canaanites to justify their condemnation is in the area of their gross sexual sins (cf. Gen. 19; Lev. 18:3; 20:23).³⁷

Still, the rest of the book of Genesis does not allow us to justify the sons of Jacob completely. When it comes time for Jacob to bless his sons at the end of his life, Jacob curses Simeon and Levi for what they have done:

[5] “Simeon and Levi are brothers;
 weapons of violence are their swords.
 [6] 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.
 [7] 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.” (Gen. 49:5–7)

In my opinion, the text lays out the reasons for violence against the whole city, since the whole city is complicit in the crimes of Shechem: “because *they* had defiled their sister” (Gen. 34:27). This is not a virtuous city who has the misfortune of having a rapist living in their midst; this is a city of people who blindly support the rape and kidnapping of Dinah. Still, the text does not let Simeon and Levi off the hook, but leads us to believe that they go too far in their violence. This is more than a holy war, but it represents vengeance and personal vendetta. Furthermore, there is no question that Simeon and Levi sin grievously by using circumcision, the holy sign and seal of God’s covenant of grace, as their weapon. This text teaches us that, even under the old covenant, not all violence is justifiable. The New Testament will take this one step further by authorizing only the state to wield the sword for justice (Rom. 13:1–7), while insisting that the warfare of the Church is spiritual rather than physical (Eph. 6:10–20).

Jacob's Fearful Complaint

Nevertheless, when Jacob hears what his sons have done, he is horrified, but for the wrong reasons:

[30] 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.” [31] But they said, “Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?” (Gen. 34:30–31)

Jacob was not upset over the rape and imprisonment of his daughter, and he is not even upset over any perceived immorality by the actions of his sons. Instead, Jacob is upset because he worries that his sons may have brought danger on his family.³⁸ Jacob was similarly worried that Esau would kill him (Gen. 32:11), but even the Lord's deliverance through that situation does not give him confidence here.³⁹

The response of Jacob's sons silences Jacob, however: “Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?” (Gen. 34:31). It would have been right for the sons to speak of Dinah as “your daughter,” but the text carries the emotional distance between Jacob and Dinah through from the first verse to the last verse of this chapter: Jacob does not really care about his daughter, so he forces his sons to rise up to defend their sister.⁴⁰ Intriguingly, Dinah does not speak through this entire chapter, which enhances her need for protectors to rise up on her behalf.⁴¹ While Jacob should have defended his daughter, he, like his father and grandfather before him, puts the safety of his women in jeopardy to save himself (cf. Gen. 12:10–20; 20; 26:6–14).⁴² As in the cases of Abraham and Isaac, God does indeed protect Jacob here, but not without severe relational and spiritual cost.

Discussion Questions

1. What does the *see* → *take* pattern tell us about Shechem's sense of entitlement (Gen. 34:2)? Does Shechem have the right to *take* whatever he *sees*? Where does a sense of entitlement lurk in your life? Of what you have *seen*, what do you falsely believe that you have the right to *take*? Where might you need to repent from your prideful sense of entitlement?
2. Why is Jacob willing to forfeit his God-given leadership in exchange for comfort, peace, and status in the land? For what purpose does God entrust various kinds of leadership and authority to his people? What kind of authority has God entrusted to you? How might you cultivate the love for those whom you lead—the kind of love that Jacob lacked toward Dinah?
3. What role does greed play in Jacob's willingness to go along with the proposal of the Hivites and the deception of his sons? Why does greed so powerfully lead us to become willing to transgress God's boundaries? What kind of greed can easily gain a foothold in your life? What are you hoping to gain by it? What will greed cause you to lose? Where do you need to repent?

4. Do you think that the violence of Simeon and Levi was justified? Why or why not? Do you think that Israel's conquest of Canaan was justified? Why or why not? By what means does God call new covenant believers to protect his people? What opportunities has God entrusted to you for the protection of his people? How faithfully are you protecting God's people?

Notes

1. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 308.
2. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 353.
3. “However, *Genesis Rabbah* sees the comment about her being Leah's daughter as being condemnatory. Leah ‘went out’ to allure Jacob (30:16), and here Dinah is copying her mother's example. Though ‘went out to visit the girls of the land’ sounds perfectly innocent, the terms used may suggest Dinah's imprudence, if not impropriety. In LH 141 the cognate Akkadian verb *wasû* describes a housewife who conducts herself improperly outside her home, and the targums translate ‘cult prostitute’ as ‘one who goes out in the countryside.’ Furthermore, Genesis regularly condemns all intermarriage with women of the land (Gen 24:3, 37; 27:46; 38:1, 6, 8), so it may be doubted whether it totally approves of Dinah meeting the girls of the land, for they might have introduced her to one of the boys. Dinah was at least sailing close to the wind!” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 310.)
4. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 200.
5. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 354.
6. Jacob Gerber, “How to Fight Temptation (Part 1): Satan's Scouting Report,” September 12, 2018. <<https://jacobgerber.org/fight-temptation-satans-scouting-report/>>
7. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 306.
8. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 572.
9. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 200.
10. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 311.
11. Kidner, *Genesis*, 184.
12. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 355.
13. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 311.
14. Walton, *Genesis*, 628.
15. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 355.
16. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 308, 311.
17. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 311.
18. Kidner, *Genesis*, 184.
19. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 599.
20. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 312.
21. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 222. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xii.i.html>>
22. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 312.
23. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 362.
24. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 200.
25. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 223. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xii.i.html>>
26. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 201–02.
27. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 313.
28. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 602.

29. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 222–23. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xii.i.html>>
30. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 314.
31. Calvin, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 225. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom02.xii.i.html>>
32. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 315.
33. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 468. Quoted in Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 315.
34. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 608.
35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 316.
36. Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 161.
37. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 316.
38. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 577.
39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 316.
40. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 317.
41. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 372.
42. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 318–19.