



# THE COST OF COMPROMISE

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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In these studies in the lives of the patriarchs we have looked at Jacob's twenty-year journey from Bethel ("the house of God") to Peniel ("the face of God"). Jacob's wrestling match with the angel of the Lord was the climax of this long trek. In his brokenness the patriarch was renamed "Israel" ("he who prevails with God"). Following that holy encounter, Jacob was reconciled at last with his brother Esau, and was able to return home in peace.

After this long-awaited triumph it seems a quiet transition of leadership to the fourth generation will follow, but suddenly everything falls apart. Jacob's daughter is raped, and two of his enraged sons retaliate by annihilating an entire city, desecrating the covenant symbol of circumcision by using it as a tool for murder. This story has no true heroes. So painful is it that one scholar commented: "This narrative will surely not be widely used in theological exposition."<sup>1</sup> But despite its difficulty, I find it to be a vital reminder of how Christians can easily lose their sense of identity and mission and accommodate themselves to the world around. The cost for Jacob and his family will be immeasurable.

## Introduction: Jacob stops short of his destination

**Now Jacob came safely [lit. "peace"] to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before (facing) the city. He bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. Then he erected there an altar and called it El-Elohe-israel. (Gen 33:18-20, NASB)**

For the first time in the Jacob story, peace (*shalom*), not conflict, surrounds the patriarch. Following twenty years of strife with his parents, his wives, his father-in-law and his brother, he is finally at peace. How especially sweet it must have been to reconcile with his brother Esau at Peniel, following the greatest battle of his life. But peace can have its own set of temptations, and they cast their spell on the patriarch. Captivated by the "face" of the city (a subtle echo reminding us that he has left "Peniel" - "the face of God"), with its alluring idolatry, Jacob gives up his spiritual pilgrimage for a plot of land. There he digs a well (John 4:5-6), and builds an altar to worship. Though he raises his colors in that place, his worship is in the wrong place, far short of his destination (Bethel), and it is done in the wrong order of things. Worship is no longer the driving force of his life, but, rather, an addendum of praise after he has achieved his real goal of financial security. We wonder how could the patriarch revert back to his old ways after wrestling with God at Peniel? Perhaps it is better to ask, how do we do the very same thing?

Notice that Jacob's backsliding is not a total flight from God, but a subtle feeding of appetites that have been scorched with longing. Who among us would not long for community, security and a permanent home after being a fugitive on the run for twenty years? And when longings run deep and we are suddenly "faced" with the attractive solutions of the world, it is easy to accommodate ourselves to its ways to achieve our ends. For decades we have seen the same story played out in this valley, as the lure of the exponential wealth of the high-tech industries fed many people's longstanding dreams of financial security and independence like never before. In the process, faith wasn't always abandoned; it was merely given a back seat. The result for many who accommodated themselves to the relentless demands of the

idols in the workplace was that, like Jacob, the cost of the choices made would be paid in the form of lost sons and daughters.

Our text faithfully tells the story of unfaithfulness in the midst of painful family dynamics, and how God speaks to Jacob's silent shame.

## Literary Outline

Bruce Waltke<sup>2</sup>

A Shechem son of Hamor rapes Jacob's daughter Dinah (34:1-4)

B Reactions to the rape (34:5-24)

1. Reactions (or inaction) of Jacob and sons to defilement
2. Reactions of Hamor and Shechem: proposed intermarriage
3. Reactions of Jacob clan and Shechemites: a treacherous treaty

A' Jacob's sons' rape [city of] Shechem (34:25-29)

B' Reactions to the plunder (34:30-31)

1. Reaction of Jacob
2. Reaction of sons

## I. The Rape of Dinah (34:1-4)

**Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit [lit. "to see"] the daughters of the land. When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her by force. He was deeply attracted [lit. "his soul cleaved"] to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this young girl for a wife." (34:1-4)**

The narrator does not infer how long Jacob was in Succoth before coming to Shechem. Only later we learn that Joseph "who must have been just a little older than Dinah (cf. 30:21), is seventeen some time after Jacob leaves Shechem (37:2), making Dinah at best about sixteen at that time. In all likelihood, the rape of Dinah takes place about a decade after Jacob leaves Paddan Aram; his sons are about sixteen to twenty-two, old enough to fight, and Dinah about fifteen, a nubile girl."<sup>3</sup>

The narrator underscores the fact that Dinah is Leah's daughter. We are left to wonder how Jacob, who had little affection for Dinah's mother, will react to his only daughter. Captivated by the view of the alluring city, in her naïve curiosity Dinah ventures out from her father's camp to take part in Canaanite social life. An unwise act, as Sarna suggests: "Girls of a marriageable age would not normally leave a rural encampment to go unchaperoned into an alien city."<sup>4</sup> But we must remember that it was her father who, in his search of financial security, placed her dangerously close to Canaanite influences. Hardly had Dinah laid her eyes on the city than the town prince laid his eyes on her. This spoiled "son" is used to getting whatever he wanted. His lusts quickly give way to rape, without even a whisper of protest from his conscience.

Having conquered the young girl, Shechem finds he has deep feelings for her and begins to court her. Consummating his brutality with tenderness, yet offering no apology or taking responsibility for his actions, he is a typical abuser. In very disrespectful tones he demands that his father get this young girl for him, as if she were a commodity to be purchased. The narrator censures

Shechem's actions by placing the customary verbs of courtship in reverse order. In the biblical view, courtship begins with tender speech (lit. "he spoke to the heart"), which in turn blossoms into a commitment of love (*ahavah*), and then, only after taking wedding vows, does a man have the right to cleave (*dabaq*, Gen 2:24) to his wife and enjoy the sexual relationship. But Canaanite culture, blinded by its sensual idolatry, betrays no sense of moral outrage when everything is done in reverse. Sadly, our modern world follows suit.

If we feel outrage at this unthinkable act, how will Dinah's father react when he gets the news that his "only" daughter has been raped?

## II. Reactions to Dinah's rape (34:5-24)

### A. Reactions of Jacob and his sons (34:5-7)

**Now Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah his daughter; but his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob kept silent until they came in. Then Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. Now the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were grieved, and they were very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done. (34:5-7)**

No reaction by Jacob is recorded upon his hearing the news. There is no greater pain for a daughter in this situation than to be faced with the silence of her father. It's like a slap in the face. Even worse, we can't be certain whether Jacob even sent word of the rape to his sons. Did they find out after they arrived home?<sup>5</sup> The narrator leaves us in ambiguity.

By contrast, Jacob's sons respond to their sister with proper familial concern. Upon hearing the news, they are stabbed by grief and riveted by anger at such a detestable act. Wenham explains that the term "grieve" "is used to express the most intense form of human emotion, a mixture of rage and bitter anguish"<sup>6</sup> (see Gen 6:6). The narrator's use of the term "defiled" further raises the stakes that this is more than an individual crime with moral guilt, for the act has rendered Dinah "unclean." "Ricoeur has shown that an elemental notion of ritual uncleanness is more powerful, more compelling, and more dangerous than a judgment of moral guilt. That is, the woman is not simply taken. She is made ritually unacceptable...The shift of images from guilt to defilement makes the issue much more outrageous in the perception of Israel."<sup>7</sup> The sons further condemn Jacob for his lack of rage over his honor being disgraced by the rape of his daughter. The shocking act is a reprehensible violation against Israel, the father of this family. Pain penetrates to the core of this home and echoes on all levels, human, familial, national, and religious.

With father and sons now occupying different emotional camps, Hamor begins marriage negotiations for his son.

### B. Reactions of Hamor and Shechem (34:8-12)

**But Hamor spoke with them, saying, "The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. Thus you shall live with us, and the land shall be open before you; live and trade in it and acquire property in it." (34:8-10)**

Hamor makes his offer in the most positive terms, speaking solely of his son's affection while making no mention of the crime. Then in typical Canaanite fashion, he opens wide the world of social and economic intercourse, so that they might become "one people." "The last time such a proposal ('one people') was made was in the building of the city of Babylon (11:6)."<sup>8</sup> Such a proposal flew in the face of the mandate for Israel to be a distinct people; but for the Canaanites, it signified the ideal. That the proposal still has a modern ring to it is evident in today's attempts to create worldwide unity without religious or moral dis-

tinctions.

To further sweeten the proposal, Hamor's son steps forward to add a little generosity of his own.

**Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, "If I find favor in your sight, then I will give whatever you say to me. Ask me ever so much bridal payment and gift, and I will give according as you say to me; but give me the girl in marriage." (34:11-12)**

Shechem politely offers Jacob's family a blank check for the bridal price. He paints himself as a royal "giver"—a little ironic for one who has already "taken." He hopes the lure of financial gain will cause these foreigners to turn a blind eye to what they consider "inappropriate" behavior. He is oblivious to the rage seething within the sons. Will the offer of money quench their rage, or escalate it?

### C. Reactions of Jacob clan and Shechemites (34:13-24)

**But Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor with deceit, because he had defiled Dinah their sister. 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. Only on this condition will we consent to you: if you will become like us, in that every male of you be circumcised, then 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. But if you will not listen to us to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go." (34:13-17)**

Silent once again, Jacob allows his sons to do the negotiating for him. He is probably relieved that they are taking the lead in this delicate matter. His own compromise prevents him from taking the initiative. But the narrator is quick to point out that what follows is anything but the truth, and springs from their rage over what had happened to their sister.<sup>9</sup>

The sons reject any offer of money and seemingly move the discussion to the higher ground of religious principle. They insist that to "give" their sister to someone who was not circumcised would be a "disgrace" to them. Therefore no amount of money would be sufficient. Only mass conversion, symbolized by the rite of circumcision, will do. Then and only then will they consent to intermarry with the Canaanites. As they conclude they insist that this offer is non-negotiable. If the Hivites do not consent, they will "take" their sister and go.

At this juncture in the negotiations the Hivites already have the upper hand, for Dinah is being held against her will, or at least "detained" in Shechem's house. As Sternberg comments: "So, for all their fine language, the Hivites leave their interlocutors no real choice: they again and again ask to be 'given' in due form, but, in marriage negotiations, as in rape, they start with a unilateral taking."<sup>10</sup>

**Now their words seemed reasonable to Hamor and Shechem, Hamor's son. The young man did not delay to do the thing, because he was delighted with Jacob's daughter. Now he was more respected than all the household of his father. (34:18-19)**

Once Shechem hears the condition of circumcision he wastes no time conforming. His lovesick heart more than soothes his pain. But getting him to submit to the knife is one thing; getting the whole town to comply is quite another. How in the world is he going to sell "circumcision" to every male in the city? The narrator feeds our optimism by recording the weight that Shechem carried in those parts. It seems his example will go a long way to convince the populace. So father and son make their way to the city gate, the setting for all commercial and legal transactions, to plead their case.

**So Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the men of their city, saying, "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. Only 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. Will not their livestock and their property and all their animals be ours? Only let us consent to them, and they will live with us.”** (34:20-23)

Like all good politicians, Hamor and Shechem know how to “spin” their case. They know what arguments to offer, what to leave out, and how to arrange their points so as to put their proposal in the best light. Notice that no mention is made of the personal motive driving these negotiations—Shechem’s affections for the girl. They argue solely for the good of the community and the increased economic prospects the risk-free agreement entails. With the seeds of prosperity firmly implanted, the stipulation of circumcision seems minimal. To seal the proposal, they actually breach the contract by offering dominance, not “co-habitation,” suggesting that all Israel’s wealth and property will be theirs. What shrewd salesmen! They would do well in today’s corporate world.

**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.** (34:24)

That day marked a historic moment for father and son. They had worked their magical negotiating skills in perfect tandem to achieve this massive “merger” just to acquire the girl. Without a dissenting vote, the whole town returns home, carried away with dreams of economic prosperity. Though we are fully aware of the deceitfulness of these negotiations, we are unprepared for what happens next: Jacob’s sons rape the city.

### III. Jacob’s sons rape the city of Shechem (Gen 34:25-29)

**Now 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. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the edge of the sword, and took Dinah from Shechem’s house, and went forth.** (34:25-26)

With every male in Shechem incapacitated, Dinah’s two brothers, Simeon and Levi, attack the city. Seething with rage over what happened to their sister, they take up the sword and kill every male in the place. “Some poetic justice does attach to the discovery that Shechem’s punishment started exactly where his sexual crime did, and that the self-inflicted soreness made the rest easy.”<sup>11</sup> The key verb of the text (“take”) matches perfectly with Shechem’s earlier action. Just as he “took” Dinah, the brothers now “take” the sword to “take” their sister back. By the end it is clear that this was a military assault to break through several lines of defense to their sister, who was being held hostage at Shechem’s home. This certainly gives us empathy for Levi and Simeon, who will not allow her to be dishonored. But the punishment is way out of proportion to the crime. What follows goes beyond justice, to rape and orgy-like pillage.

**Jacob’s sons came upon the slain and looted the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city and that which was in the field; and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses.** (34:27-29)

While Simeon and Levi are rescuing their sister, the rest of the brothers act like their Canaanite counterparts and rape the city. This is anything but holy war, where the spoils are respectfully dedicated to God; these spoils feed their own greed. In one fell swoop they come upon the slain like vultures and take everything in sight. In the ponderous description of the looting we feel a sense of horror that no boundary is sacred. There is a sharp distinction between Levi and Simeon and the rest of their brothers. The two take all the risk, while the rest merely capture the spoils

of the slain, and they alone return home to face the music from an angry father.

## IV. Reactions to the plunder (34:30-31)

### A. Reaction of Jacob (34:30)

**Then Jacob 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.”** (34:30)

Simeon and Levi get more than an earful from their father. Jacob, who showed no anger or grief when his daughter was raped, now finds it appropriate to vent all his wrath. But sadly, he finds the slaughter reprehensible only in its consequences. He says nothing about Dinah’s honor, makes no mention of their bravery, and can’t distinguish between the motives behind their rescue of her and the greed of their brothers. The self-consumed Jacob is blinded with self-pity. Eight times in one verse he uses the first person pronoun. In terms of the modern idiom, Jacob is saying, “It’s all about me.” Waltke sums it up well: “At the beginning of this culturally defiling rape episode, Jacob by his silence is much too passive. At the end, when he finally opens his mouth, he betrays fear, not faith. He struggles neither with God nor humans. The narrator appropriately uses his old label, Jacob, not his new name, Israel.”<sup>12</sup>

Even though these two sons are later censured and disqualified from leadership in Israel for their violence (Gen 49:5-7), the narrator still gives them “the last word, not to mention the silence after.”<sup>13</sup>

### B. Reaction of the sons (34:31)

**But they said, “Should he treat our sister as a harlot?”** (34:31)

The fact that the narrator uses the indefinite pronoun “he” leaves us with two possible readings. If the “he” refers to Shechem, they are saying to their father, “Damn the consequences! You may disown Dinah as your daughter, but we will fight to death for her honor, for she is our sister.” What painful words to a father who has shirked his responsibility! Or perhaps, as Sternberg suggests, the conversation took place under their breath as they left their father’s presence, and the “he” refers not to Shechem but to Jacob. Disdainfully they censure their father for his willingness to receive gifts in exchange for Dinah’s rape. “He who twiddles his thumbs about the rape and deems the gifts fair compensation is as guilty of making a whore of Dinah as the rapist and giver himself.”<sup>14</sup> If the first reading is painful, the second is even more condemning, as it places their father in the role of the Canaanite abuser. The sordid tale ends with these words left ringing in Jacob’s ears.

This story is passionately and brutally honest about the human condition. Though void of any true heroes, it strikes ground zero on the stage of human tragedy, where God attempts to awaken us out of our own compromises.

## Reflections from Shechem

### 1. We are never immune to compromise.

The disaster in Shechem reminds us of how quickly we can stray from our calling as Christians. We are never immune to compromise. Like Jacob, we can be especially vulnerable following times of intense spiritual victory, when we are reveling in “peace.” Though I’m usually prepared for spiritual warfare before a ministry trip, I seldom pray about the temptations I might face when the “battles” are over, and am often surprised when they come. May God in his grace keep us ever mindful of our vulnerability.

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,  
Prone to leave the God I love.*

*Here's my heart, O take and seal it;  
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

## 2. The lure of compromise is subtle, yet powerful.

The appeal of the compromise made at Shechem is not to forsake God, but to displace him, to delay or postpone our pilgrimage to the heavenly Zion until we have achieved some deep longing through partnership with the world. So we continue to worship, but like Jacob, worship now takes a back seat to our real longings for worldly security. The point at issue is that, for the comfort of Shechem, Jacob forsook his holy vows to return to Bethel. We too must remember that our pilgrimage is not over until we die. There are no retirement comfort stations for the Christian to relax in before death. Instead we are called to be faithful pilgrims, giving witness to the cause of Christ and his gospel wherever he sends us, until we reach our heavenly home.

## 3. The cost of compromise is immeasurable.

All Jacob wanted was a home, but losing sight of his God in the process cost him dearly. He loses his daughter to rape, then he loses the respect of his sons who now despise him. (In the next scene, Reuben will show his contempt by sleeping with Bilhah, his father's concubine). Finally, Jacob loses his identity, becoming a curse to those around him instead of a blessing. As Moses would later write: "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate me" (Exod 20:5). This is not teaching fatalism. Rather, it is a severe warning that idolatry is contagious and has a way of escalating through the generations. So parents must be careful to guard their own hearts against accommodation with the world, lest their children follow their example.

## 4. Though Jacob is silent, God is not silent.

The most painful aspect of this text is that just when a father is needed most, Jacob is silent. Compromise has robbed him of the ability to speak, the very thing that makes us human. It is a shameful silence in Shechem. But the good news is that even though Jacob is silent, God is not. Earlier we said that there are no true heroes in this text, for no one escapes the narrator's censure. But God's voice still resounds through marred mirrors to awaken Jacob out of his own compromise and model for him how he should act as a father. Jacob's Canaanite counterpart, Hamor, though morally depraved, functions as a better father to Shechem than Jacob does with his sons. He takes initiative with his son, works in concert with him, and serves him at great personal cost and physical discomfort. Again we see as in the case of all the patriarchs, when compromise sets in, God is able to use non-believers to rebuke his people both by word and deed.

And Dinah's brothers, torn by grief and rage, model for Jacob how a daughter's pain deserves to be mourned. Because God loves Jacob he will teach him to mourn as a father should. It won't be long before this silent father will wail in pain over the loss of everything he loves: Rachel his wife, Joseph his son, and finally, Benjamin. In that inconsolable grief he will come to see how God mourned when Dinah was raped.

## 5. Shechem revisited and sanctified.

Finally, we discover that God never forgot what happened at Shechem. When we are riveted in pain, the greatest gift we can receive is when someone comes into the dark world and weeps with us. After September 11 last year, our President went to Ground Zero and stood on top of the rubble of the two collapsed towers and wept with the firemen. The highest official in the land came to console a nation in its grief. This is what God did. Two thousand years after Dinah's rape, God came in person through his Son and paid a visit to Shechem (John 4).

This is a place whose memory most young girls in Israel would just as soon forget. And when Jesus arrives, its spiritual condition was much the same as when Jacob left it: dominated by compromise, intermarriage, and distorted worship. There, in the same spot where Jacob sold out and dug his well, Jesus encounters a woman. She is a grown-up Dinah: outcast, lonely, and, we can surmise, tormented by the sexual abuse of more than one man. She lives in her world, isolated in silence. But here is the new Jacob who is not silent to one living in shame. She is given a voice. Amazingly, after just a short interchange, their conversation turns from the water in Jacob's well to living water, and from the failed men she had lived with to the hope of the Messiah. With one glimpse of the Messiah she runs to the town with the wonderful news, "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Messiah, is it?" (John 4:29). Thus is the memory of the desecration at Shechem transformed and made holy.

Perhaps this culmination of this story leaves us with a paradigm for healing. Is God saying that we can go back to even our darkest memories, and in the pit of pain he will visit us? When we hear his voice in that terrible place, dark wells of pain will turn into springs of living water, and those once weighed down by sorrow's shame will fly free like the birds of the heavens.

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1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 279.
2. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 458.
3. Waltke, *Genesis*, 459.
4. Nahum Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 233.
5. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 452, makes this point giving two possible readings of the text: (a) "Jacob's sons came in from the field when they heard it. The men were grieved and very angry"; or (b) "Jacob's son's came in from the field. When they heard it, the men were grieved and very angry."
6. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 144.
7. Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 275-6.
8. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 200.
9. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 463, points out that "the choice to mention the deceit in advance is much the lesser of two evils. Though it introduces a note of censure, the timely warning manages to keep the brothers far more sympathetic than would any delayed disclosure."
10. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 456-7.
11. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 466-7.
12. Waltke, *Genesis*, 459.
13. This is John Felstiner's description of "Shulamith" in Paul Celan's poem, "Deathfugue." *Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 41.
14. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 475.