

The Road to Bethel

Genesis 34:1 – 35:29 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: When studying, it is important to remind oneself of the identity of the human author of the text. The Divine Author is God Himself, yet the Ancient of Days compelled and employed the human author. Without violating the will or compromising the person, God wrote the text through the man as if the man were the quill in the hand of the Divine.

The human author gives the particular document both its style and its context. The human author of Genesis was Moses - the man God had chosen to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land. Soon, under the leadership of Josuah, they would be called to claim the land of promise and to utterly destroy the inhabitants.

That context is helpful when making sense of the story that is before us today. Were chapter 34 to be made into a movie, it would receive, at best, a restricted rating. Even as a sermon, it deserves the label that Parental Guidance is suggested.

Yet, the story has been preserved by God, and as such it is "...profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" **2 Timothy 3:16 (ESV)**

CONTEXT: After wrestling with God at Peniel and making peace with his brother Esau, Jacob should have gone straight to **Bethel**, where God had first appeared to him. Yet, for whatever reason, he chose to settle in Shechem. Remember, he promised God that he would come to worship Him in Bethel. Why then do we find him at the end of chapter 33, buying property in Shechem?

Shechem was a major crossroad in Canaan - it was due north of Bethel. Remember, Bethel was less developed, with fewer amenities.

ILLUSTRATION: Years ago, a Pastor friend was called to serve as the lead pastor of a great church, but the church was well off the beaten path. This brother told me that he was honored they called him, but he couldn't see himself settling there because they didn't have enough restaurants, not even a Target. He stayed in the larger city with a target, and within ten years, his wife left him for another man, his kids left the faith, and the church no longer needed his services. Before you relocate your family, make sure God is in it - it's better to be at ***Bethel under God's blessing than at Shechem with a Target.***

Jacob tries to make up for his disobedience to God by building an altar in a godless city. But as is so often the case, the world will affect Israel more than Israel will affect the world.

TEXT: Genesis 34:1–4 (ESV)

¹ Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land.

The reader would have known who Dinah is. Moses included this bit of information for a reason - he is reminding us that Leah is the Mother of Dinah. Leah, the unwanted, Leah, the unloved. It is quite possible that Jacob's dislike of Leah carried over to their daughter. If this is the case, perhaps that is why Dinah is seeking companionship with the women of the land.

At face value, Dinah is doing nothing different from any other teenage girl. She wants friends; she wants to do what the other girls are doing. However, keep in mind, this is Shechem. Later, in Leviticus 18, we are told that the Cananites of the land are marked by the most deviant sexual practices.

We aren't told whether Dinah went into Shechem with her Father's approval or in secret, but it's evident that the relationship between father and daughter was not healthy.

May this be a warning to you, Fathers. God gave you a daughter, not only to provide for, but to protect. Know her friends, be aware of where she goes for entertainment. I've never understood how a family can allow a teenager unfiltered access to the internet in the privacy of their room. Do you remember what it was like to be that age? You say, "Well, Pastor, don't you trust your kids?" No! I don't trust myself either. Paul said it best, "Make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof". But Dinah enters the city and seeks her entertainment.

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.

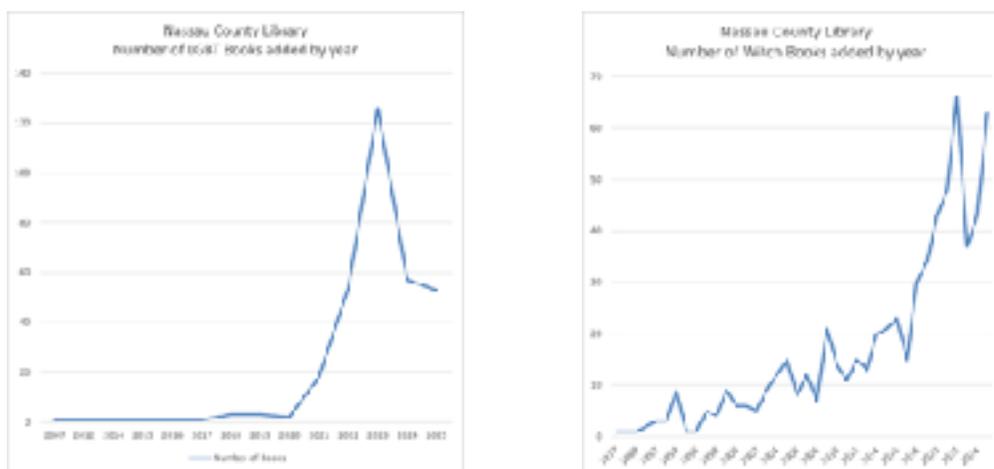
Let's be absolutely clear: this was rape. The Hebrew word for "humiliated" is the same word used throughout Scripture for sexual violence. Shechem saw Dinah, seized her, and violated her. There is no ambiguity in the text. This was not a misunderstanding, not a cultural difference, not a "mistake." This was a violent crime against a young woman.

Moses reminds us that **Shechem** did this, and he was a **Prince in the land**.

Solomon reminds us in **Proverbs 29:2 (ESV)** ² When the righteous increase, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan.

This is why we should pray for Godly people to be in government, locally and nationally. When godless people rule, the people will always suffer.

ILLUSTRATION: It was recently brought to my attention that our local county library suddenly experienced a significant uptick in book purchases of a certain nature.



Genesis 34:5–7 (ESV)

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.

Jacob's response: silence. Where is the father's outrage? Where is the protective fury? Where is the justice? Jacob does nothing. He's paralyzed. And that silence—that failure to act, to speak up, to defend his daughter—**compounds the trauma**. Dinah has been violated, and her own father won't even acknowledge it.

So many have experienced this. The assault itself is horrific, but then comes the silence. The family that doesn't believe you. The church that tells you to move on.

Silence can be almost as damaging as the assault itself.

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.

The brothers, at least, are angry. They call what happened an "outrageous thing"—a phrase that in Hebrew means a **covenant-breaking abomination**. They recognize the evil.

When someone has been violated or exposed to something sick and twisted, it is necessary that they speak up and clearly label what has happened. If they fail to do so, the soul of the victim will find no healing - and generations will suffer in the wake.

Genesis 34:8–31 (ESV) Shechem's dad comes to Jacob and tries to make amends. He does what people with no biblically defined moral compass tend to do: they tend to assume that two wrongs will make a right.

This has happened, we all agree it was horrible - but to make it up to you, we will have Dinah marry Shechem and spend the rest of her life with the man who violated her. A shotgun wedding, if you will. Not only that - we will combine tribes, all of the godless pagans of our city will intermarry with all of you followers of Yahweh. To sweeten the deal, we will give you money as a bride price. Jacob remains silent...His sons do not.

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."

Shechem fell for it - he commanded the men of the city to be circumcised, and on the third day, when the pain was great -

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.

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?"

When Jacob failed to be the Spiritual Leader, the less qualified took it upon themselves to do so. What resulted was tragic, it was unjust, it was a sin against the Covenant with Yahweh, and of all things, they weaponized the covenant sign of circumcision.

Saddest of all - it could have been prevented had Jacob led his family to Bethel. Chapter 35 is where the story pivots. Everyone has suffered, everyone has been through Trauma - but they finally make a good move in Chapter 35 - Jacob takes all of the sin and pain to God at Bethel.

Genesis 35:1 (ESV)

¹ God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau."

God intervenes. "Jacob, lead your family back to me". He doesn't tell Jacob to fix what happened; he doesn't chastise him. He simply says, if you and your family will find healing, it will be at Bethel.

Genesis 35:2-4 (ESV)

² So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and purify yourselves and change your garments. ³ Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." ⁴ So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem.

Wait a minute—foreign gods? Jacob's household had been living with idols this whole time? Rachel stole her father's household gods back in chapter 31, and apparently,

nobody dealt with it. For years, they'd been carrying these false gods around, paying lip service to Yahweh while hedging their bets with pagan deities.

And now, after all the chaos and trauma of Shechem, Jacob finally says: Enough. Put them away. Get rid of them. Purify yourselves. Change your clothes. We're going back to Bethel.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to show us where we've been compromising.

Sometimes God allows us to see the consequences of settling in Shechem so we'll finally be willing to go to Bethel. The pain wakes us up. The brokenness drives us home.

THREE TRUTHS FOR THE ROAD BACK:

1. Healing Requires Honesty

The first step toward healing is naming what happened. Jacob tried silence. It didn't work. The brothers tried revenge. That made things worse. But God's way starts with honesty: acknowledge the trauma, call sin what it is, and bring it into the light.

BTW, If you've been sexually assaulted or violated, you need to tell someone. Not because you're weak, but because secrets keep you sick. Find a safe person—a trusted friend, a counselor, a pastor who will believe you and support you. You don't have to carry this alone.

Psalm 147:3 (ESV) He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Christ dies for our sins, but He also died for the sins committed against us - by HIS stripes, we find healing.

The cross is God's demonstration that sin is real, and it has eternal consequences, and Justice will either fall on Christ or on the sinner forever and ever. But no sin has been or will be overlooked. Bring Him your broken heart. You have to let Him see your wounds.

Healing requires honesty...

2. Healing Requires Release

Several things had to change for Jacob's household if healing would occur.

They had to stop compromising in Shechem and return to Bethel.

They had to get rid of their idols.

They had to believe God is enough.

The reason we cling to idols is that they are small enough for us to feel some measure of control. Victims, in particular, have a tendency to be drawn to that which they can control, because a loss of control is what got them in the mess in the first place.

It is not uncommon for them to bow at the altar of a bottle, a pill, maybe they throw themselves into work, or the gym. All in an attempt to control something.

God's call to put away foreign gods is an invitation to freedom. You don't have to perform to have value. You don't have to control everything to be safe. You don't have to numb the pain to survive. Come to Bethel. Let God be God. Trust Him with your healing.

Healing requires honesty, release...

3. Healing Requires Returning

This is the heart of the passage. God says, "Go to Bethel and make an altar."

Worship is not a luxury for people who have it all together. Worship is how broken people find healing. Worship reorients us. It reminds us that God is still God, even when our world has been shattered. It reconnects us to the One who sees us, knows us, and loves us anyway.

Jacob had been avoiding Bethel—the place where God first appeared to him. Maybe he felt too compromised, too guilty, too broken. But God says, "Come anyway. Come now. Come back to the place of encounter."

Some of you have been avoiding church, avoiding worship, avoiding God because you feel too damaged. You think, "I'll come back when I'm better. I'll worship when I have my life together. I'll seek God when I'm clean enough." But that's backwards. You come to Bethel broken. You worship your way toward wholeness. You encounter God in your mess, and He meets you there.

Genesis 35:9–15 (ESV)

⁹ God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. ¹⁰ And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. ¹¹ And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. ¹² The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you." ¹³ Then God went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. ¹⁴ And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. ¹⁵ So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

CONCLUSION: Where are you today? Are you sojourning in Shechem or worshipping at Bethel? What has it cost you? Is it worth it?

The road back to Bethel is available to all of us. It doesn't matter what you've done or what's been done to you. It doesn't matter how long you've been in Shechem. God is calling you home. He's calling you back to the place of encounter, the place of covenant, the place of blessing.

FOOTNOTES:

1. For resources on supporting survivors of sexual assault, contact RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) at 1-800-656-4673 or visit www.rainn.org.
2. The Hebrew word for "humiliated" (אָנָה, anah) in Genesis 34:2 is consistently used throughout the Old Testament for sexual violation. See Deuteronomy 22:24, 29; 2 Samuel 13:12-14; Judges 19:24.
3. The phrase "outrageous thing in Israel" (Hebrew: nebalah b'Yisrael) in Genesis 34:7 becomes a technical term for covenant-breaking sin. See Joshua 7:15; Judges 20:6, 10; 2 Samuel 13:12.
4. Jacob's deathbed curse of Simeon and Levi (Genesis 49:5-7) was historically fulfilled when Simeon's tribe was absorbed into Judah and the Levites received no land inheritance but were scattered as priests among the tribes.