

Lust, Love, and Lousy Leadership

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."

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.

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." – Genesis 34:1-12 ESV

As Jacob settled in the land of Canaan, he chose a place outside the city of Shechem. He purchased land from Hamor, the father of Shechem, for whom the city was named. Hamor was a Hivite. This made him a descendant of Canaan, who was the son of Ham and the grandson of Noah.

Canaan fathered Sidon his firstborn and Heth, and the Jebusites, the Amorites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, the Arkites, the Sinites, the Arvadites, the Zemarites, and the Hamathites. – Genesis 10:15-18 ESV

Technically, the Hivites were Canaanites, the descendants of Canaan. And they were all under the curse that Noah pronounced upon their forefather.

"May Canaan be cursed! May he be the lowest of servants to his relatives." – Genesis 9:25 NLT

Jacob's decision to settle in close proximity to Shechem and the Hivites would prove to be less than ideal. And the story sounds eerily similar to that of Lot, when he "settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom" (Genesis 13:12 ESV). That too proved to be a poor decision.

It seems that Jacob had one daughter named Dinah who was born to his first wife, Leah. This young girl was surrounded by 11 brothers who felt it their duty to protect her. But Dinah was



beautiful, and she soon caught the attention of the men inside Shechem, particularly the man for whom the city was named. Evidently, Jacob and his family lived close enough to the city to have regular contact with its inhabitants. Shechem, “the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land” (Genesis 34:2 ESV), became infatuated with the lovely daughter of Jacob. As the son of the man in charge, Shechem was probably used to

getting his own way. And as his infatuation with Dinah intensified, it turned to lust, which eventually resulted in rape. He was so determined to possess Dinah that he simply took what was not rightfully his and violated her.

Moses indicates that this egregious action “humiliated her” (Genesis 34:2 ESV). In that culture, the loss of her virginity made Dinah “damaged goods” and a social pariah. She would never find a suitor. Though she had done nothing to deserve what had happened, she would suffer greatly for it – far worse than her attacker.

But Moses describes Shechem’s lust slowly turning into love. He longed to be with Dinah and to marry her, so he begged his father to intercede with Jacob and ask for permission for the two to wed. It’s clear from the text that Jacob was aware of Shechem’s treatment of his daughter, but up to this point he has neither said nor done anything. Yet, when Dinah’s 11 brothers hear the devastating news, they rush in from the fields where they were caring for their father’s flocks. They arrived just in time to hear Hamor broach the subject of Shechem marrying Dinah, and they were appalled.

...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. – Genesis 34:7 ESV

This Hivite had treated their sister with disdain and committed the ultimate act of disrespect, and now he was asking for the right to marry her.

Evidently, Hamor sensed the animosity of the 11 men and realized that his son’s life was in danger. If he didn’t act quickly, this whole situation could get ugly. So, he expanded his proposal, hoping to win over the young unmarried sons of Jacob.

“My son Shechem is truly in love with your daughter,” he said. “Please let him marry her. In fact, let’s arrange other marriages, too. You give us your daughters for our sons, and we will give you our daughters for your sons. And you may live among us; the land is

open to you! Settle here and trade with us. And feel free to buy property in the area.” – Genesis 34:8-10 NLT

Hamor was suggesting an alliance between the Hivites and Israelites. It seems that Hamor was trying to soften the blow of his son's unacceptable behavior while, at the same time, encouraging a deepening and potentially profitable relationship between their two clans. Jacob was a wealthy man who had 11 single sons, who each stood to gain a portion of Jacob's inheritance. This could be a win-win for Hamor.

Even Shechem got into the act, virtually begging Jacob and his sons for the right to marry Dinah. After what he had done, it seems quite bold of Shechem to show his face to the brothers of Dinah. But again, this was probably a young man who was used to getting his way. He even tells Jacob to name his price.

“Please be kind to me, and let me marry her,” he begged. “I will give you whatever you ask. No matter what dowry or gift you demand, I will gladly pay it—just give me the girl as my wife.” – Genesis 34:11-12 NLT

This presumptuous young man was obligating his father to pay whatever bride price Jacob demanded. His lust/love for Dinah was insatiable. He was willing to risk everything to have her. And his unbridled enthusiasm is reminiscent of Jacob's actions when he first met Rachel.

Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.” Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.” So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. – Genesis 29:18-20 ESV

Jacob's infatuation with Rachel inhibited his ability to see through Laban's deceit. He ended up working the seven years, only to be tricked by Laban into marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah. Then he was forced to work an additional seven years to earn the right to marry Rachel.

Shechem, like Jacob, was about to discover the deceitful side of Jacob's nature, and it would manifest itself through Jacob's 11 sons. These young men had inherited their father's propensity for deception and trickery and were not afraid to use it. And what will become increasingly clear is the absence of any leadership on Jacob's part. He will simply disappear into the background as he allows his sons to handle the ongoing negotiations between the two clans. This man who had bought the birthright from his older brother would prove to be less than capable of leading his family well. Though blessed by God and having been chosen to be the one through whom the promises of God would be fulfilled, Jacob would exhibit a glaring lack of leadership, allowing his vengeance-driven sons to take matters into their own hands.

Moses doesn't indicate how long Jacob had been in the land of promise since returning from Mesopotamia, but it appears as if it didn't take long for things to take a turn for the worst.

Revenge, Greed, and Deceit, Oh My!

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.”

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.

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?” – Genesis 34:13-31 ESV

One of the things that stands out in this whole affair is the silence of Jacob. As head of his clan, he had a responsibility to defend his daughter’s honor and to manage his sons’ behavior. But he appears to have said little and done nothing. And his silence regarding Dinah’s rape was unacceptable to her two brothers, Simeon, and Levi. They were furious with Shechem for his dishonoring of their sister. And they were appalled that Jacob would consider signing a treaty that would sanction the marriage of their sister to her abuser and promote further unions between the two clans. So, they came up with a plan of their own.



As has been evident throughout the story of Jacob's life, deceit and trickery come into play once again. The sons of Jacob have inherited their father's deceptive ways and are determined to use them for their advantage. They even pull the wool over Jacob's eyes, tricking him into believing that their efforts are

sincere. Yet, Moses uses very precise language when describing their response to Hamor and Shechem.

The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. – Genesis 34:13 ESV

The Hebrew word translated as “deceitfully” is מִרְמָה (*mirmâ*) and it describes the use of guile, falsehood, or craftiness with the intent to deceive. The practice of deceit is repeatedly condemned in the Scriptures. Even David, a descendant of Jacob, wrote:

*But you, O God, will cast them down
into the pit of destruction;
men of blood and **treachery** (*mirmâ*)
shall not live out half their days.
But I will trust in you. – Psalm 55:23 ESV*

Even King Solomon, another descendant of Jacob, penned the following assessment of those who practice deceit.

*Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence,
but a false witness utters **deceit** (*mirmâ*). – Proverbs 12:17 ESV*

Notice that David links treachery or deceit with bloodshed, and that is exactly what takes place in this story. The lies of Jacob's sons were intentional and, ultimately, deadly. Their plan all along was to deceive so that they might enact revenge. They had no intention of keeping their agreement with Hamor and Shechem. And nobody seems to see through their wicked scheme, including their own father.

Amazingly, Hamor and Shechem agreed to the rather bizarre conditions that Jacob's sons added to the treaty. All the men of Shechem would be required to undergo the rite of circumcision to seal the agreement. And when Hamor and Shechem shared the terms of the treaty with their constituents, they received a unanimous affirmation.

So all the men in the town council agreed with Hamor and Shechem, and every male in the town was circumcised. – Genesis 34:24 NLT

This was a radical and painful concession on the part of the Shechemites. But it was not unprecedented. The Israelites were not the only nation to practice the rite of circumcision, and it was most commonly performed on male members of the community. There is some evidence that circumcision was practiced as premarital initiation. There is no indication from the text that Jacob's sons were suggesting the mass conversion of the men of Shechem. They had no intention of welcoming these men into their faith community. It was simply a ploy, a cleverly disguised trick designed to lull the Shechemites into their trap. And it worked.

But it is important to note why the men of Shechem were so willing to endure such a painful procedure and allow themselves to be placed in such a vulnerable condition. Hamor and Shechem had been successful in persuading their countrymen because they had added an important caveat.

"...if we do this, all their livestock and possessions will eventually be ours. Come, let's agree to their terms and let them settle here among us." – Genesis 34:23 NLT

Greed was the impetus behind their decision. By agreeing to the terms of the treaty, the men of Shechem believed they would eventually assimilate the clan of Jacob into their own, and gain control over all their possessions. Intermarriage would result in great wealth and circumcision was a small price to pay for such a reward.

But little did these men know that Jacob's sons had no intention of keeping their word. There would be no marriage between Shechem and Dinah, no blending of the two clans, and no sharing of livestock and possessions. All the Shechemites got out of the agreement was the pain associated with circumcision, followed by the penalty of death. They were slaughtered like helpless, injured animals.

But three days later, when their wounds were still sore, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, who were Dinah's full brothers, took their swords and entered the town without opposition. Then they slaughtered every male there, including Hamor and his son Shechem. They killed them with their swords, then took Dinah from Shechem's house and returned to their camp. – Genesis 34:25-26 NLT

Fueled by their anger and vengeance, Simeon and Levi left no man alive. They paid back the Shechemites for the defilement of their sister, delivering a devastating blow that would leave their father shocked and dismayed. And, to make matters worse, their brothers would join in on the action, looting and plundering the defenseless town. They even took the women and children of Shechem as slaves. And having heard the news of what his sons had done, Jacob confronted Simeon and Levi.

“You have ruined me! You’ve made me stink among all the people of this land—among all the Canaanites and Perizzites. We are so few that they will join forces and crush us. I will be ruined, and my entire household will be wiped out!” – Genesis 34:30 NLT

It’s interesting to note that Jacob was worried about his own reputation but never seems to have considered what Dinah’s rape had done to *her* social standing. Her virginity had been stolen from her, leaving her as little more than a social pariah. Her defilement had left her as “damaged goods” with little hope of ever being married. And Jacob’s willingness to give her to Shechem, the very man who had raped her, seems to indicate that he knew she had no other options. She either married Shechem or remained an unmarried woman the rest of her life.

But Jacob’s failure to deal with the egregious nature of Shechem’s sin left a leadership vacuum in his family, and his sons willingly filled it. And, in response to their father’s reprimand, Simeon and Levi defended their actions by angrily declaring, “But why should we let him treat our sister like a prostitute?” (Genesis 34:31 NLT).

It’s clear from the text that Jacob had already given Dinah to Shechem because the two brothers rescued her from his house. In Jacob’s mind, the deal was done, the treaty had been ratified. But in a single day, his sons had changed all that. And Jacob feared that their actions would end up turning the rest of the nations of Canaan against him. Word would get out and he would become a social pariah in the land of promise. He even feared that their newly acquired reputation for violence would come back to haunt them, resulting in their own eradication. But of all people, Jacob should have known that God had other plans.

He should have never settled outside the city of Shechem and he was wrong for signing an agreement with the citizens of that city. God had set him apart and had promised to make of his descendants a great nation. He and his children were the chosen people of God and the land of Canaan had been promised to them as their inheritance. In a way, Jacob’s sons had done him a favor, albeit by less-than-righteous means. Their spontaneous and anger-fueled response left Jacob with no option but to vacate the region of Shechem. He was no longer safe there. And in the very next chapter, God will direct Jacob to leave Shechem and return to Bethel because, despite Jacob’s fears, his days in Canaan were far from over.

What's In a Name?

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." 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.

⁵ And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. ⁶ And Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, ⁷ and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. ⁸ And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So he called its name Allon-bacuth.

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. – Genesis 35:1-15 ESV

Ten years earlier, when Jacob had been fleeing from Canaan to escape the anger of his older brother, he had stopped at Bethel. While there, he had been received a vision from God in which he was given a divine promise that he would be the inheritor of the Abrahamic Covenant. The promise given to his grandfather of land, a seed, and a blessing would be his.

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." – Genesis 28:13-15 NLT

Despite all that Jacob had done to deceive his brother, God had assured Jacob of His continued provision and protection. And on that occasion, Jacob had made a vow, stating that, if God kept His end of the bargain and returned him safely to Canaan, he would make his way back to Bethel and worship the one true God.

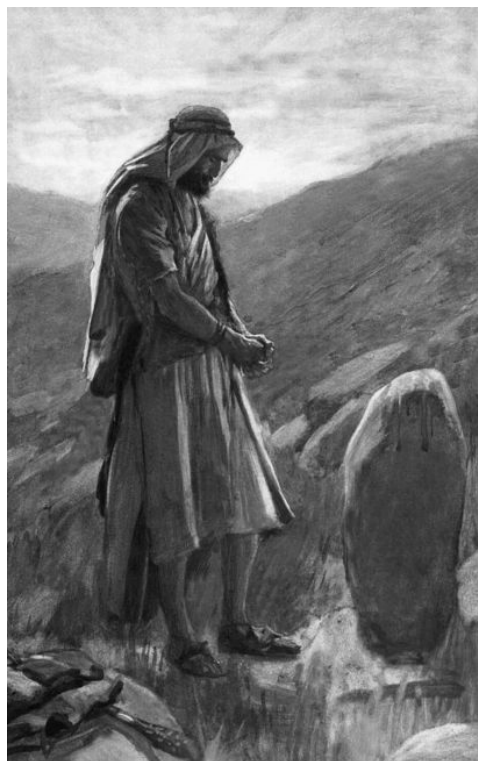
“If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”— Genesis 28:20-22 ESV

But ten years had passed since Jacob had left Paddan-aram. For an entire decade, he had failed to return to Bethel (the house of God) and worship. Instead, he had chosen to settle outside the city of Shechem, and that decision had resulted in the rape of his daughter, Dinah, by the son of the king of Shechem. And while Jacob had been prepared to make a peace alliance with Hamor and his clan, permitting the intermarriage of their people, his sons had chosen a different path. To avenge the dishonoring of their sister, they slaughtered all the men of Shechem and enslaved all the women and children of the city. And just as Jacob had feared, the rumors of this gruesome act spread to the surrounding nations, creating a permanent stain on Jacob’s reputation.

“You have ruined me! You’ve made me stink among all the people of this land—among all the Canaanites and Perizzites. We are so few that they will join forces and crush us. I will be ruined, and my entire household will be wiped out!” – Genesis 34:30 ESV

But Jacob’s assessment of the situation was not quite right. Rather than painting a target on their backs, the actions of his sons had struck fear into the Canaanites.

...a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. – Genesis 35:5 ESV



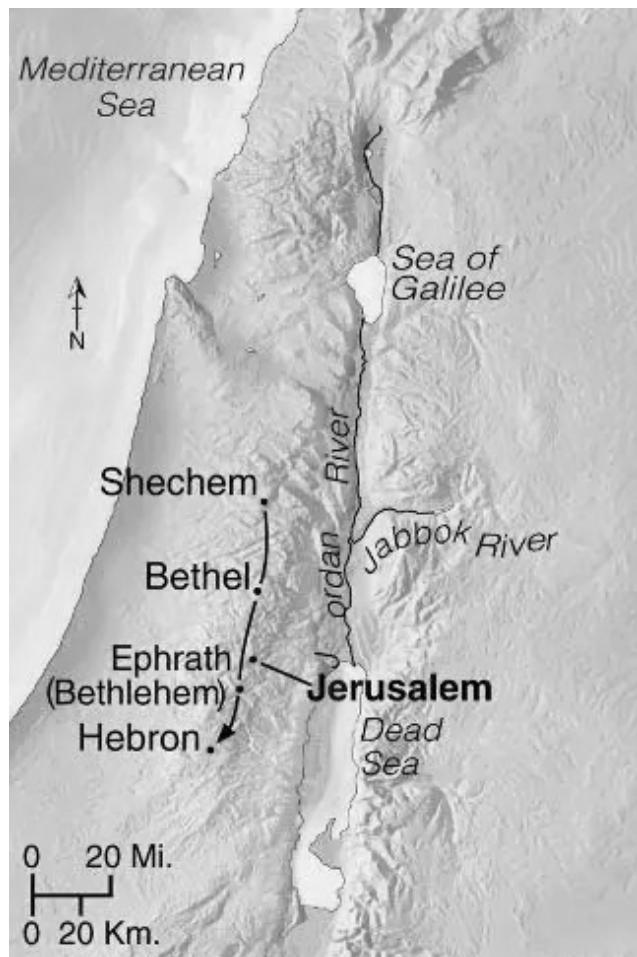
God used the slaughter of the Shechemites to instill a fear of Jacob and his people. The surrounding nations refused to take up arms against the much small and relatively defenseless Israelites, leaving Jacob free to travel from Shechem to Bethel unmolested.

But sadly, Jacob’s return to Bethel had not been his idea. His first response after the debacle at Shechem had not been to seek God but to escape the scene of the crime. But Moses indicates that received divine directions, ordering him to “Get ready and move to Bethel and settle there. Build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother, Esau” (Genesis 35:1 NLT).

What Jacob did next is quite revealing. In preparation for their return to Bethel, he commanded his people to purify themselves, and this was to include the removal of all their pagan idols. Evidently, the household idols that

Rachel had stolen from her father were not the only ones in the possession of Jacob's people. And it appears that Jacob had tolerated their presence for ten years. Perhaps he had turned a blind eye to these pagan gods in the hopes that they might provide an additional source of security and blessing. But now that he was returning to Bethel, he knew it was time to clean house.

"We are now going to Bethel, where I will build an altar to the God who answered my prayers when I was in distress. He has been with me wherever I have gone." – Genesis 35:3 NLT



God had been faithful. Now, it was Jacob's turn. So, with all his family and possessions in tow, Jacob slowly made his way from Shechem to Bethel, a distance of about 30 miles. Upon his arrival, Jacob obeyed God's command and constructed an altar. Then he "named the place El-bethel (which means 'God of Bethel'), because God had appeared to him there when he was fleeing from his brother, Esau" (Genesis 35:7 NLT).

It is important to note that, prior to building the altar and worshiping Yahweh, Jacob had taken the effort to purge his household of false gods and to purify themselves from the bloodguilt incurred by the slaughter of the Shechemites. It could be that God provided these instructions to Jacob so that the Israelites would not enter into His presence defiled and guilty of idolatry. There was a cleansing and a purging necessary before they could expect to enter into the presence of God Almighty.

On an interesting side note, Moses relates the death of Deborah, the handmaid of Jacob's mother, Rebekah. She had accompanied Rebekah from Haran in Mesopotamia when Abraham's servant had come seeking a wife for Isaac. Moses doesn't reveal how she came to live with Jacob, but it could be that she joined him upon his return to Canaan and after the death of Rebekah. But this faithful servant of Jacob's family died, and Jacob honored her by burying her beneath an oak tree in a valley near Bethel.

For the second time since returning to the land of Canaan, Jacob received a divine message regarding his new identity. Upon his arrival back in the land, Jacob had camped beside the Jabbok River, where he had a physical and life-changing encounter with God. He literally

wrestled with the Almighty, eventually receiving a debilitating injury and a blessing for his efforts. And God changed Jacob's name in the process.

"Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." – Genesis 32:28 ESV

Now, as he stood before the altar in Bethel, Jacob received a second reminder that his name had been irreversibly changed by God.

God blessed him, saying, "Your name is Jacob, but you will not be called Jacob any longer. From now on your name will be Israel." So God renamed him Israel. – Genesis 35:9-10 NLT

It would appear that Jacob had failed to use his new God-given name, choosing instead to retain his old one. And, in a sense, Jacob had retained many of the habits associated with his old name. To a great extent, he remained a trickster and a deceiver. But by reminding Jacob of his new name, God was reinforcing His intention to not only rename His servant but to renew and remake him. God had great things in store for Israel.

Then God said, "I am El-Shaddai — 'God Almighty.' Be fruitful and multiply. You will become a great nation, even many nations. Kings will be among your descendants! And I will give you the land I once gave to Abraham and Isaac. Yes, I will give it to you and your descendants after you." – Genesis 35:11-12 NLT

The Abrahamic Covenant was officially passed down to the newly named Israel. As the grandson of Abraham, Israel was the rightful heir to the promise of a land, a seed, and a blessing. God was going to fulfill His covenant promise through Israel and his descendants. And it is essential to remember that one of those descendants would be Joseph, the only son born to Israel through Rachel. He will come to play a major role in the future of God's chosen people. The other descendant of Israel who will factor into the fate of God's people will be Judah, from whom the Messiah will come.

The stage is set, and the future of Israel is secure. God has been working behind the scenes to prepare the way for the unfolding of His divine redemptive plan for mankind. And while the newly named Israel remains oblivious to God's plans, he and his family will play a vital role in its fulfillment.

Two Deaths, a Birth, and a New Beginning

¹⁶ Then they journeyed from Bethel. When they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor. ¹⁷ And when her labor was at its hardest, the midwife said to her, “Do not fear, for you have another son.” ¹⁸ And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), ²⁰ and Jacob set up a pillar over her tomb. It is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day. ²¹ Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

²² While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father’s concubine. And Israel heard of it.

Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. ²³ The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob’s firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. ²⁴ The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. ²⁵ The sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s servant: Dan and Naphtali. ²⁶ The sons of Zilpah, Leah’s servant: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

²⁷ And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. ²⁸ Now the days of Isaac were 180 years. ²⁹ And Isaac breathed his last, and he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him. – Genesis 35:16-29 ESV



After worshiping God at Bethel, Jacob, now going by his new name, Israel, made his way to the town of Ephrah, better known as Bethlehem. But along the way, his wife, Rachel, went into labor, and gave birth to her second child. But her labor proved to be difficult, and she failed to survive the delivery. Just before her death, Rachel was able to verbalize her choice for the baby’s name: Ben-oni, which means “son of my sorrow.” But Israel, while grieved by his wife’s unexpected death, chose to see the positive side of this momentous occasion, and named

his new son, Benjamin, which means, “Son of my good fortune.” From his perspective, the loss of his wife was balanced by the birth of his son. His memory of Rachel would always be associated with Benjamin, the son of his good fortune. In a sense, Israel was glorifying the fact that God had brought life from death.

It should not be overlooked that, at one time, the formerly barren Rachel had demanded that her husband do something about her condition. She desperately wanted to bear a child and, somehow, held him responsible for her condition.

When Rachel saw that she wasn't having any children for Jacob, she became jealous of her sister. She pleaded with Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" – Genesis 30:1 NLT

While Jacob was incapable of doing anything about his wife's dilemma, God graciously stepped in.

Then God remembered Rachel's plight and answered her prayers by enabling her to have children. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. "God has removed my disgrace," she said. And she named him Joseph, for she said, "May the Lord add yet another son to my family." – Genesis 30:22-24 NLT

And it's interesting to note that God also answered her prayer, providing her with "another son" as per her request. But while she had believed that her ongoing barrenness would be her ultimate undoing, it was actually the bearing of children that would result in her death. In a way, her barrenness had been a divine form of protection. She had survived her first delivery, but the second one proved to be deadly.

After having provided Rachel with a proper burial, Israel continued his journey to Bethlehem, where he settled for a time. And somewhere near Bethlehem, "the house of bread," Israel would experience a devastating breakdown in family etiquette. Reuben, his firstborn son born to him by Leah, committed an act of immorality with Bilhah, his father's concubine.

Moses provides no explanation for Reuben's actions. But, besides the obvious motivation of sexual satisfaction, there is probably more going on here than meets the eye. By committing incest with Bilhah, Reuben may have hoped to diminish her status in Israel's eyes. With Rachel dead, Reuben's mother, Leah, would have assumed the role of favored wife. And his illicit affair with Bilhah would assure that she was seen as damaged goods in his father's eyes. But there is also a good chance that his actions were meant to declare his rightful role as the firstborn son and, therefore, heir to the role of leadership over the clan.

This kind of thing would not have been rare or unexpected. In fact, we see one of Israel's descendants playing out that very scenario in the book of 2 Samuel. Absalom, the eldest son of King David, aspired to his father's throne. So, Ahithophel, a former advisor to King David, gave him some advice that he guaranteed would help make his dream come true.

"Go and sleep with your father's concubines, for he has left them here to look after the palace. Then all Israel will know that you have insulted your father beyond hope of reconciliation, and they will throw their support to you." So they set up a tent on the palace roof where everyone could see it, and Absalom went in and had sex with his father's concubines. – 2 Samuel 16:21-22 NLT

Reuben's actions, while unexplained, were immoral and ungodly. And they mirror the behavior of Shechem, who allowed his lust to get the best of him and ended up raping Dinah, the only daughter of Israel. He eventually died for his behavior but there is no indication that Reuben

faced any repercussions for his crime. In keeping with the inaction he displayed at Shechem's defilement of Dinah, Israel did nothing to avenge his Bilhah's honor. It appears that Reuben went unchallenged and unpunished for his actions, and his name appears alongside all the other brothers in the brief genealogy found in verses 22-26.



These are the names of the twelve sons of Jacob: The sons of Leah were Reuben (Jacob's oldest son), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's servant, were Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Zilpah, Leah's servant, were Gad and Asher. These are the names of the sons who were born to Jacob at Paddan-aram. – Genesis 35:22-26 NLT

But there is more to the story than Moses relates. It is not until he penned the book of 1 Chronicles that Moses divulged the consequences for Reuben's actions, and they were severe. Like Esau, Reuben threw away his birthright in a moment of passion.

The oldest son of Israel was Reuben. But since he dishonored his father by sleeping with one of his father's concubines, his birthright was given to the sons of his brother Joseph. For this reason, Reuben is not listed in the genealogical records as the firstborn son. The descendants of Judah became the most powerful tribe and provided a ruler for the nation, but the birthright belonged to Joseph. – 1 Chronicles 5:1-2 NLT

His little fling cost him dearly. And if he had been hoping to prove his superiority over his father by forcibly raping his concubine, he had made an epic error in judgment. A mistake he would regret for the rest of his life.

But, while Reuben would pay dearly for his lack of judgment, he would hold no grudge against Joseph, his younger brother who inherited his birthright. In fact, as the story unfolds, it will be Reuben who attempts to protect the life of Joseph when his brothers plot to murder him.

But when Reuben heard of their scheme, he came to Joseph's rescue. "Let's not kill him," he said. "Why should we shed any blood? Let's just throw him into this empty cistern here in the wilderness. Then he'll die without our laying a hand on him." Reuben was secretly planning to rescue Joseph and return him to his father. – Genesis 37:21-22 NLT

But that's another story for another day. In this chapter, the defilement of Bilhah is followed by the death of Isaac. At some point, Israel made the long-delayed trip back to Hebron, to visit his aging father. And he made it just in time because, having lived 180 years, Isaac was knocking on death's door.

With the death of Isaac, the entire focus of the narrative turns to Israel, the son of Isaac formerly known as Jacob. God was bringing the fulfillment of His promise full circle. It had

passed from Abraham to Isaac and would now belong to Israel (Jacob). And as Isaac's two sons buried his body, the stage was set for the next phase of God's grand plan for the further fulfillment of His covenant promise to Abraham.