

agreement that any of the Lord's people should or should not marry certain categories of people. Clearly, over a period of time, Israelite identity and Jewish identity became as much traceable by maternal ancestry as male; as is said today 'if you're mother is a Jew, you are a Jew'. But the Bible is more liberal than we might think about this, and there are significant and powerful stories of marriages between Israelite men and women of other nations which are an important part of the Bible and of our tradition of Faith, for example, the story of the Moabite Ruth, who married into the ancestral line of David (see the Book of Ruth). Why is the Bible apparently ambivalent? The answer may well be because God's plans are always larger than we can perceive. The whole history of God's people, in both Old and New Testament times is littered with 'exceptions' to general principles which God has used to do His will.

As Dinah's brothers plotted revenge for the offence against their sister, Jacob was worried about the on-going conflict that deception and violence would create within the Promised Land (34:30). He was right to be concerned, and at least consider (see 34:5) whether God had another way. And we all know well that deception and violence amongst Jacob's sons eventually led to the whole family being spilt and eventually having to re-locate in Egypt (the story of Joseph, Gen 37-50).

### Application

There are a complex set of issues at work in this story. Whilst most commentators argue strongly that Jacob was in the wrong to fail to protect Dinah and regard the issue of intermarriage with the same abhorrence found in many other passages of Scripture (quoted above), a careful look at the passage begs us to consider at least another question. What was going on between Dinah and Shechem, and was it really an affront to the future of God's Covenant people? I suspect Jacob's fault may have been that he was not able to reign in his sons, hold them back from acting deceptively (see 34:30) and impart the godly wisdom that marked his father's dealings with the Philistines, for example (26:17f.). Was there a way to preserve the Covenant of God and keep the peace?

There is much that is unresolved in this passage and we will follow through some of these issues tomorrow as we read the rest of the chapter. In the meantime, I suggest that we reflect on the issue of intermarriage today. Clearly, the New Testament guides us towards the ideal of Christian people marrying each other (see 2 Cor 6:14) because of the dangers of a Christian husband or wife being drawn away from faith by the compromises of married life with someone who does not believe. This is good advice, but the church of God is not a religious system of rules, and the grace of God teaches us that He deals with each of us according to a plan and has a purpose for our lives that is highly individual. Let us not be side-tracked away from 'grace' by the more torrid stories of the Old Testament which appear to be black and white about God's Covenant, when a careful reading shows that they are not.

### Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss within your group whether this story has anything to tell people today. If it were a text for a sermon, which verse would you preach from?
2. Do you sense that there could be some peaceful resolution to this situation, or should we side totally with Jacob's sons?
3. Do you believe that there are problems in the church today concerning being obedient to God in choosing partners for marriage? Should it be taught about in church?

### Discipleship

Are there passages of Scripture which you find difficult and impossible to understand? How do you respond to them? Do you just 'leave them out' of your mental map of God's Word, or are you prepared to try and find how they might fit into the patterns of God's revelation? As you reflect upon this passage of scripture, ask yourself about how you find the balance between peaceful resolution of conflicts and direct action.

### Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, open up our lives to the possibilities of Your grace. May we value the disciplines of our faith and also the freedom of Your Spirit, both of which are essential to the life of faith we seek to live. Lead us graciously, and show us how to live graciously, we ask You; AMEN

### Prayer

You, Lord Jesus, have walked a path we could not walk, and given up Your life; a mystery of grace we never fully understand. But we have felt the passion of Your love; You did it all for us! May we never lose this sense of passion, this inexplicable love which embraces us from the Cross, and by Your Spirit may we know the re-creating power of Your transforming love. All praise to You; Holy One; Jesus Christ; Living Lord and God: AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Our Homes

Look around your home, and see if there are things within it which might suggest to our Lord that your life is focussed elsewhere, and not on the things of God; not things that are a problem to us, but things that might be a problem to Him. Pray about what you see within your home, and ask the Lord to show you any action you should take.

### Meditation

*(a word of prophecy for all God's people)*

Be liberated, my people, be set free to be.  
I made you and I saved you; no-one is above you in my Kingdom.  
Those who do so claim to have a place that I have never given.

Read my Word and know that as you do so, I will guide you:  
Pray to me and speak to me; and I will tell the truth to you:  
Worship me; seek my face, let nothing else distract you,  
Come into my presence with an honest, contrite heart.

I knock upon your door, so make your choice to open up and trust me:  
I am with you as you break your bread, whenever you remember me:  
I build my church through you, so I challenge you and empower you,  
I have given you your work, and I will go before you and protect you.

Be liberated, my people, by the Gospel you have received;  
Love each other, fear no-one but me, and do what I tell you.  
But do not stand in my way. Let me build my church.

### Bible Study - Genesis 34:1-17

<sup>1</sup> Dinah, the daughter of Jacob and Leah, went off to see the local women. <sup>2</sup> When the ruler of that place saw her, that is, Shechem the son of Hamor, he raped her. <sup>3</sup> His soul was drawn to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke to her with passion. <sup>4</sup> So Shechem said to his father Hamor, 'Get this girl for me as a wife.' <sup>5</sup> Jacob heard that his daughter Dinah had been defiled, but his sons were in the fields with his livestock, so he thought about what to do until they came home.

<sup>6</sup> Shechem's father Hamor came to Jacob to speak with him, <sup>7</sup> and Jacob's sons came in from the field as soon as they heard the news. They were offended and outraged because Shechem had acted disgracefully against Israel, something that was totally unacceptable.

<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Hamor appealed to them, 'My son Shechem is completely in love with your daughter, please give her to him in marriage. <sup>9</sup> Let marriages happen between us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. <sup>10</sup> You can then live alongside us and the land will be open to you. Live in it, trade in it and obtain property.' <sup>11</sup> Shechem also appealed to Dinah's father and to her brothers, 'Please do me this favour and I will give you whatever you ask. <sup>12</sup> However high you set the bridal price, I will pay you whatever you ask, but please do give me the girl as my wife.

<sup>13</sup> Then Jacob's sons replied to Shechem and his father with deceit, because their sister Dinah had been defiled. <sup>14</sup> 'We cannot do this,' they said, 'because we cannot give our sister to a man who is not circumcised. For us, that would be a scandal. <sup>15</sup> We will agree with you only on this condition; that you become like us, and every man among

you be circumcised.<sup>16</sup> Then we will give you our daughters and take your daughters ourselves, and we will live with you and become one people.<sup>17</sup> But if you will not agree to these terms and be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and be gone.'

## Review

This is the beginning of a substantial story which takes up the whole of Genesis 34. It is one of those long stories of Genesis which are not preached upon because they are long, involved and contain some disagreeable features; in this case, rape and circumcision. Later, we will read some even more difficult and unpalatable things within the story. However, if we can step back and accept that our sensibilities are not the best guide to what God would say to us, then we may find that even this tale has a place in God's Word, and if we can find it, then we will find some interesting and even useful features within the text.

To begin with, this story is the first major event that happens to Jacob's family after they enter the Promised Land, and that is the first major clue to its significance. The whole story of the 'Promised Land' within Scripture is not as secure as we might imagine. Throughout the long history of God's people within the Old Testament, they wandered in and out of it; when they were within it, life was not always easy, and when they were away from it (whilst wandering in the desert, or when they were in exile), they longed to be back there. Some of the problems of living in the Promised Land are foretold within this story, and although it seems initially uninteresting, this is its main purpose; it is a story with a warning.

The main theme of Scripture throughout the stories of the forefathers is that of building up a unique 'people', a nation with whom he would have a Covenant relationship and through whom He would show His love for the World. Up until now, it was essential that Abraham's son Isaac and then his son Jacob should marry into their extended family back in Mesopotamia in order to preserve their unique identity. Now Laban (who was the elder of that wider family) and Jacob had parted ways (31:55), so where were Jacob's sons now going to obtain wives? There were two choices. They could either intermarry with local people, or marry within the wider 'family' that Jacob had now created around him which included not just his own sons and daughter, but also servants and herdsmen. Strangely, Scripture does not say who they did marry, but it does make it clear that God did not want them to marry the local Canaanite women. It is a theme that crops up frequently within Scripture (Josh 23:12,13, Ezra 10:9f. for example).

The way that Scripture goes about telling us this, strangely, is through this story not of Jacob's sons, but of his only daughter, Dinah. Today's passage which begins this lengthy story tells us very clearly that Jacob's family, God's people, were expected to live by a higher standard of morality than those around them, and it emphasises the disgust and dishonour done to the whole family because Shechem raped Dinah and then decided that he wanted her as his wife. Then, as the story unfolds, other intriguing features are revealed, Jacob's sons act with intentional 'deceit' (34:13) and set a trap for Hamor and his son Shechem by insisting upon their circumcision. As yet, we do not know what will happen, but it is obvious to us already that Jacob's sons had no intention of letting this local 'ruler' (34:2) have his way; but in good 'soap opera' style, Scripture keeps us waiting!

## Going Deeper

This story tells us much about the new, reformed man of God; Jacob. Then, apart from understanding the story itself, the most interesting part of studying this story comes from asking why it was that intermarriage with local Canaanite tribes was such a problem. You may be surprised where the journey takes us.

### **A strange story**

Dinah's rape by Shechem is indeed a strange story. It begins by explaining that Dinah's was Leah's daughter, which we already know from earlier (30:21), but we suspect that Jacob did in fact have other daughters because later on, Hamor and Shechem talked of intermarriage between their clan and Jacob's, mentioning other 'daughters' (34:9). Dinah, however, was the one who caused the trouble by wandering too far from her father's camp to go and 'see the local women' (34:1). The words in Hebrew are interesting, because they are used in a similar way in the story of Lot and Sodom, in which Lot was drawn towards Sodom because he liked the city life (Gen 13:8f.), and there is a clear implication that Dinah was equally inquisitive.

It is important for the rest of our text to look carefully at the words and actions of Hamor and Shechem, for they form the background which helps us understand how Jacob and his sons

react to the whole affair. Shechem was attracted to Dinah and had sex with her forcibly. It was hardly something that was new in an age of male domination, indeed, there were rules laid down in the Mosaic Law for such occurrences (Deut 22:28,29) indicating an extremely high 'bride price' of fifty shekels as a type of penalty. Shechem's manner towards Dinah was suspicious, however, and indicative of very arrogant behaviour. He certainly spoke tenderly to Dinah (34:3) and the narrative speaks of his love for her on several occasions (34:8,12, etc); but he also spoke very sharply about her to his father, saying 'get this girl for me as a wife' (34:4) and referred to her as a 'girl' on more than one occasion (34:4,12) using a Hebrew term that meant an immature girl rather than a marriageable woman. What we must bear in mind is that we only discover later in the story that Dinah was in fact being held in Shechem's house, and whether or not this was against her will is not said (34:26).

This position of strength in which Shechem and his father Hamor already held Dinah explains why Jacob acted with great caution when he heard about what had happened to his daughter. Nearly every commentary I have read accuses Jacob of trying to escape his responsibilities as head of the house, and suggests that he should have responded immediately with anger and offence. My translation 'so he thought what to do until they (his sons) came home' is close to the Hebrew and suggests that Jacob was in no position to do anything until his men had returned from their herdsman duties in the field. In addition, there is also a strong hint that Dinah had brought the situation upon herself by straying from the protection of her father's tents. If you look ahead to the end of the story (34:30,31) you will find that Jacob was unhappy with the aggressive response of his sons and believed, rightly or wrongly that the matter could be dealt with in a peaceful way, but we do not know what that would have been!

### **Negotiations and deceit!**

The two Canaanite men, Shechem and Hamor came to speak to Jacob just as Dinah's brothers, principally Simeon and Levi (see 34:30) arrived. From the point of view of these local men, this was a simple case of negotiation in which money would sort out the whole issue. Shechem and Hamor offered no apology or deference to Jacob. However, verses 6 to 12 reveal four very different approaches to the situation. Firstly, Jacob remained silent, wisely or not in the difficult circumstances. Secondly, his sons, Dinah's brothers, were outraged on their father's behalf (34:7); the Hebrew using almost every possible generic term for disgraceful offence! Thirdly, Hamor proposed general respect between all parties and the sharing of land; something Jacob probably needed for his extensive flocks and herds. Fourthly, all Shechem was concerned about was to obtain 'the girl' at any price, and fatefully and arrogantly asked any price to be named (34:12).

It was Jacob's sons who dealt with the situation immediately and without discussing anything with their father. Scripture indicates its disapproval by saying that their plan was one of deception, and we will discover that this is exactly what it was. They set out the condition that Shechem could have Dinah and his father could have the intermarriage and integration if the local Canaanites agreed to circumcision. In this way, they used the sacred sign of the Covenant as a bargaining tool to extract their sister from her unhappy escapade!

### **Intermarriage – a problem for Israel**

This story introduces us to the major theme of the dangers of intermarriage for God's people, but however much we might like Scripture to be prescriptive, it is not as simple as that. In the opening paragraphs I indicated that throughout Israel's history, intermarriage with local people was a problem which caused great trouble amongst God's people, and was banned in the laws of Moses (Deut 7:3). The main problem was this. Whenever intermarriage occurred, the women of other cultures and tribal groups brought with them the gods that they worshipped before they were married, and this was an abomination to God. An example of this was King Solomon, who, despite being a model King in many other respects and the builder of the great Temple, was tempted to 'sin' by marrying wives from other countries around his (see 1 Kings 11:1-13 for a damning indictment of his reign). Another example was King Ahab who married the Phoenician Queen Jezebel who is historically identified with bringing the worship of Ba'al into the heart of the life of the people of Israel (1 Kings 16:31f.). Such actions were blamed for the Assyrian invasion of Israel in 720 BC, and similar ones for the Babylonian invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC (see 2 Kings 16,24,25). Ezra, Nehemiah and others were therefore concerned to make sure that the returning exiles from Babylon did not follow such practices (Ezra 10:9, Malachi 2:11,14f. etc.).

But it is not as simple as that, and God did not make it a general part of the Covenant