

The story of Levi is different. Moses and Aaron were Levites, and at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the tribe of Levi was 'set aside' by God for priestly service. This service was partially fulfilled in the following years, but they were given no land in the allotment by Joshua on the assumption that they received their pay by priestly service (Josh 14:2,3) though they later received some cities within other tribal lands (Joshua 21:1f.). They too were 'dispersed' amongst the rest of God's people. Over time, the priestly duties within Israel were dominated by the great High Priestly families descending from Zadok and Abiathar, and the Levites were largely dispossessed. Indeed, it is assumed in much of scripture that the Levites were the poor people of the land, to whom charity was due because of their poverty, alongside 'widows', 'aliens' and 'orphans' (see Deut 14:29, 16:11, 26:12).

The story we have read in Genesis 34 is prophetic of these later developments within the tribes of Israel, and we cannot ignore the fact that those who wrote this story down saw it as evidence of why the tribes of Simeon and Levi became dispersed within Israel. It may not mean much to us, but it meant a great deal to people in later times who sought to restore God's people Israel.

Application

In our so called 'post-modern' world, what has happened to people in the past is regarded by most people as irrelevant. Few would feel interested or bothered about the minutiae of what happened to Simeon and Levi. We do, however, have a duty to account for one another as God's people, for what happens to one group of Christians does indeed affect the others. Jesus Himself taught that we are his 'body' (Matt 26:26), being united in Him is vital. Have you heard people argue against Christianity because of the evils done in the past by wars fought in the name of God? It is a common barrier thrown up by those who do not wish to hear the true claims of the Gospel, but we need to have an answer to the challenge. We may even have to say 'sorry' on behalf of others, simply so that our own witness to the truth of our faith can be heard. At the very least, this dreadful story of the rape of Dinah and the slaughter of Shechem and the city of Saleem by Simeon and Levi, warns us that past violence by people of faith is something that we may have to account for. It is an unpleasant truth, but no stone should be turned in our attempts to overcome all the obstacles that Satan places in the way of the Gospel.

One other small application is worth mentioning. How many times have you been in a situation where something troublesome has happened (not on the same level as the murder and intrigue of this story), but it has been compounded by others 'wading in' and making it worse? This is a reprehensible feature of this story and one of which Scripture clearly disapproves. This passage at least contains the moral suggestion that a person of faith should wisely, like Jacob, stand back from those often emotional responses which 'make matters worse'. God is always on the side of truth and love.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss what you think about the deception planned by Jacob's sons, and the deceptions planned by Hamor and Shechem. Was any one worse than the other?
2. How important is the original rape of Dinah to the final outcomes of the story? Was it simply the trigger to the events, or something more?
3. Was Jacob justified in taking no action except chastising his two sons?

Discipleship

It is not easy to find examples of discipleship issues within this text! Nevertheless, The story does raise all kinds of questions about violence and pacifism which do not go away, and which remain important questions for all Christians even though for many people, they have never been satisfactorily resolved. It is important for all of us to ask ourselves how we would react if someone very close to us was treated with violence. It happens to many, and is a supreme test of humanity and faith.

Final Prayer

Jesus, You died upholding truth; the truth of the Father's love for all. Help us to uphold truth and justice, and act wisely in all our affairs not simply because it is right to do so, but because in so doing, we copy You, our Lord and Saviour: AMEN

Prayer

All praise to You, Father Almighty. Bring joy to us as we let You lead our lives; bring peace to us as we rest in Your love; bring hope to us as we place our trust in You; bring love to us as we need it day by day. Thank You for these blessing, Lord; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Our Homes

Pray today for the fabric of your home. We take these things for granted, but when something goes wrong, we can feel very vulnerable; even under spiritual attack. Ask the Lord's blessing on the fabric of your home; and as you pray through different things, structure, heating, roof, for example, ask the Lord to help you to spot problems before they become serious!

Meditation

What do you see when you look into your church building?

An open space that can be used?
Banners, notices, signs of life and activity?
A sanctuary dedicated to the worship of God?
The size and position of the Cross – what does it say?
A building structure with various maintenance needs?
Tidiness or clutter; what does this say about worship?
The colours, good or bad, and how they make you feel?
And cleanliness; is the place really cared for by anyone?

Remember, those who come to visit you

Will not see your building as you do.

And you cannot shirk the vital question

Does it speak to them of the God you worship there?

Bible Study - Genesis 34:18-31

¹⁸ The proposal pleased Hamor and his son Shechem. ¹⁹ The young man did not delay to do what was required because the thought of Jacob's daughter gave him great pleasure, and he was the most privileged of all his father's sons. ²⁰ So Hamor and Shechem went to the gates of their city and had a discussion with the city elders. They said ²¹ 'These men are friendly towards us; let them live amongst us and do business here for there is enough land for them. We can marry their daughters and they can marry ours. ²² But they will agree to live among us with one condition only, and that is that our men be circumcised as they are circumcised. ²³ Will not their livestock, property and all their animals become ours as well? Let us agree to their condition and then they can live amongst us.' ²⁴ All who left the meeting agreed with Hamor and his son Shechem, and everyone at the meeting and all the males of the city were circumcised.

²⁵ On the third day, when they were still sore, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons who were Dinah's brothers, took their swords and attacked the city without difficulty and slaughtered every male. ²⁶ They killed Hamor and his son Shechem and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and left. ²⁷ Jacob's other sons then followed up the slaughter by plundering the city in response to the outrage against their sister. ²⁸ They seized their flocks and herds and donkeys and everything else they found in the city and the fields. ²⁹ They made off with all their possessions, their women and their children, and they looted their houses.

³⁰ Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, 'You have brought trouble on me by making me loathsome to the people who live here, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. There are only a few of us, and if they join forces against us and attack us, we shall all be destroyed! Both me and my household!' ³¹ But they responded, 'Should our sister have been treated like a prostitute?'

Review

I hope you will have had the chance to read through yesterday's study, for this passage is the second and concluding half of a distasteful episode in the life of Jacob and his family. We do not find it easy to cope with this kind of story in Scripture, because the violence and brutality that is described seems unworthy of God's Word. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that God's Word reflects both the truth about God, and secondly the truth about this world and the sinful condition of humanity. The Bible does indeed record war and human violence in many places, but it does so in order to expose extreme evil for what it is (as when Jesus was crucified, for example). We will discover the purpose of this passage in Scripture if instead of focussing too much on its details (which we do still need to know), we look at what is implied by the people who, under the guidance of God's Spirit, wrote this ancient story down in the book of Genesis. It is unfortunately true that it is only when you read it in the original Hebrew that clues can be found about what the authors thought; we all know how a 'turn of phrase' can easily change the meaning of what is said, and such things are often lost in translation. It is my opinion that although the story does contain elements of ancient laws of revenge and also some comment about the issue of 'mixed marriages', the writers of this story were appalled at the violent actions of Simeon and Levi, and although Jacob could not control the situation or deal with it effectively, this great forefather was not himself the reason for the dreadful offence of war.

Simeon and Levi played a game of deception with the Canaanite citizens of the city of Saleem (not Shechem – see 33:18-20) and not only abused circumcision, the sacred sign of the Covenant (see 17:1f.) but committed atrocities that were amongst the worst recorded in Scripture. They set a challenge to Shechem following his rape of their sister Dinah; either be circumcised to become 'one of us' (34:17), or they would take their sister and go. Dinah had remained at Shechem's house after the rape (34:26), but the words used in Scripture indicate that she may well have been happy to stay. What started out as forced sex (rape) had become something of an unfathomable relationship intrigue. When Shechem and Hamor accepted the terms and persuaded their fellow citizens to do the same, the obvious temporary advantage was taken by first Simeon and Levi, and then all Jacob's sons (34:27) in a wanton rampage of destruction (34:25-29).

Jacob was horrified (34:30) and saw that only trouble would be caused by what his sons had done, even though he had not been able either to control them or suggest an alternative course of action. Perhaps he thought the local Canaanites would refuse circumcision and agree to hand back Dinah (34:17), thus extracting his family from the situation. The last words of the story were spoken by Simeon and Levi 'Should our sister have been treated like a prostitute?' Do the writers of Scripture want us to read this as a justifiable reason for what was done, or do they present these words as evidence of the appalling vengeful nature of the brothers? I am certain that the second is true.

Going Deeper

We will look at the story in detail, and then look at its consequences for the people of Israel. These were far more extensive than you might imagine, and as we follow this lead, we will find that the story was possibly prophetic, containing a warning about sins that affected some of God's people.

What really happened?

We are in the dark about much of what happened. As soon as we look carefully into the details, everything becomes very murky. I have already mentioned, both today and yesterday, that Dinah's part in this is suspect; although she was raped, the Hebrew word used is less aggressive than we might assume, which is why some translations have 'forced sex'. We may justly be of the opinion that there is no difference, but there is a clear hint in the text that Dinah's wandering to the city and staying in Shechem's house after the rape were entirely voluntary. Secondly, Shechem was evidently passionate about Dinah (34:8,19) but he also talked about her in a high handed manner (34:4) and conveniently omitted to tell his fellow citizens that he was really asking them all to undergo circumcision so that he could get the wife he wanted! (34:21-23)

Our passage today begins at the point where Shechem and Hamor decided to accept the condition of circumcision set down by Simeon and Levi for peaceful co-existence. It is not immediately obvious to us whether the two brothers thought this condition would be accepted or not, but Scripture nevertheless describes their words as 'deceitful' (34:13), so it is suggested to

us by the authors of Genesis that the brothers were prepared for conflict, and hoped that Hamor and Shechem would do as they did. Such was their anger not just at the rape itself but at the family 'honour' impugned by what had happened (34:7).

Most of the story is contained in two speeches, firstly (in yesterday's passage) a speech by Hamor (34:8-12) asking for a family marriage contract and intermarriage between the local Canaanites and Israel, and secondly, a speech given to the citizens of Saleem by both Hamor and Shechem in which they asked for general acceptance of the offer of intermarriage if the townspeople will accept circumcision. A comparison between the two speeches tells us a great deal about what was going on. Hamor and Shechem described Jacob and his family as 'friendly' (34:21), when the negotiations they had just been party to had been far from polite (34:14-17). They were manoeuvring for their own purposes. They were leading figures in the 'city' (we should note that a 'city' in those times meant what we might call a small town or village today; the word means 'a permanent settlement') and they could see personal benefit from any agreement. Specifically, they hoped to assimilate Jacob's flocks and herds into their own 'wealth'. From the point of view of God's Covenant, they hoped for the complete annihilation of God's people as an identifiable tribe (yet to become a nation). As we read this, we are tempted to 'side' with Jacob's sons against the people of Saleem; but the story is not as simple as that.

Simeon and Levi, two of Dinah's older brothers, took advantage of the incapacity of the men of the city after the rite of circumcision and slaughtered them (34:25). This response could possibly be called justifiable reaction on their part given the ancient times in which they lived, although it is disgusting to us. Ancient laws of retaliation which have been discovered from that time were punitive, and far in excess of the famous 'Lex Talionis' ('an eye for an eye') in the laws of Moses (Ex 21:24), which were designed not to encourage vengeance, but limit retaliation to a reasonable level of equality of treatment. We are told that Simeon and Levi then took Dinah from Shechem's house and left (v26); but what is really shocking is that the other sons of Jacob followed up the slaughter with what the Hebrew describes as 'plunder'. In other words, they sacked and looted the city and took away everything they could find; including possessions, women and children.

Although Jacob chastised Simeon and Levi for what happened, it is what the other sons did that was offensive to any moral code of the day. Indeed, that is why Jacob feared for the future (34:30)

The consequences

Two things can be said about this whole story without difficulty. Firstly, it was used by the people of Israel as a parable of the dangers of intermarriage, or of even contemplating it. It was a cautionary tale most likely used by leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah (e.g. Ezra 10:9f.) when they attempted to re-establish Israel's identity after the horrors of Exile in Babylon. Secondly, the immediate consequence of this sorry tale was that Jacob, having already purchased land in the area, had to move away (35:1f.); of which we will hear more tomorrow.

The next clue to the impact of this story comes towards the end of Genesis, where Jacob 'blesses' his sons before he dies (Gen 49:1-27). There are complex reasons for each of the blessings that Jacob gives, but the most startling are given to Simeon and Levi:

'Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. May I never come into their council; may I not be joined to their company - for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstrung oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.' (Gen 49:5-7)

Clearly, Jacob felt that his second and third sons by Leah were compromised by their actions, and the blessing he gave them sounds more like a 'curse'! This is not merely whimsical, for the truth is that Simeon and Levi were the forefathers of two tribes that almost 'disappeared' within the people of Israel over the ensuing years.

There is not much in Scripture about the tribe of Simeon, and this is because as early as the time of Joshua and the Judges, Simeon was assimilated into the tribal lands of his younger but more prominent brother Judah (Joshua 9:1-9), and Judah became the tribe that God blessed through the line of King David and its capital city of Jerusalem. Jacob prophesied (above) 'I will divide them in Jacob', which could be translated 'I will disperse them in Jacob' and in the history of God's people, this came true.