

Chapter Seven

The Price of Settling Too Soon

One of the great challenges for the people Israel throughout their biblical journey was deciding on *the place to settle*. Lot settled in the well-watered Jordan plain and became entrapped in Sodom's evil. Abram listened to YHWH's voice and continued on the move. YHWH's promise, though, included the gift of land. God did not intend, according to Genesis and indeed all of the Hebrew Bible, for Israel to remain forever homeless. The great tension in YHWH's gift of Canaan to Israel was that Israel was the "younger brother." Various peoples already occupied the land upon Abram's arrival (13:7).¹ How would Israel know when and where to claim the fulfillment of the promise of a permanent "place"?

We begin with the story of Jacob's attempt to settle after his departure from Esau.

But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house [*vayyiven lo bayit*], and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth. Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem,² which is in the land of Canaan, on his way from Paddan-aram; and he camped before the city. And from the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, he bought for one hundred³ the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent. (33:17–19)

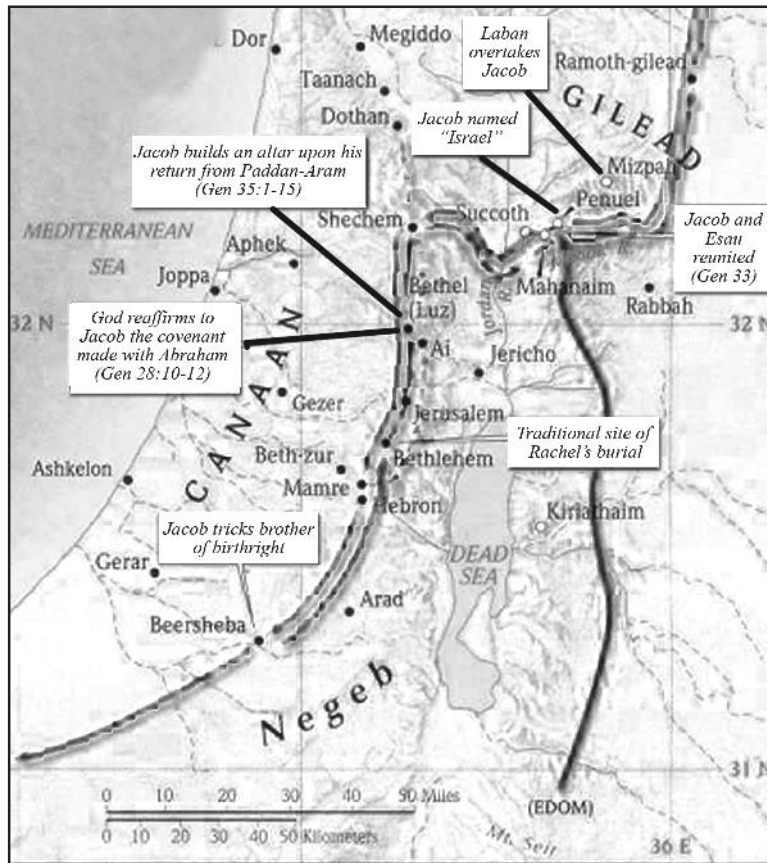
Without any apparent direction from YHWH, Jacob, understandably drained after his life-and-death confrontation with his brother, decides it is time to end the journey. It is clear that this is not simply a rest before completing the return route home to Isaac and Rebekah. He not only builds a house for himself and booths for his animals; he purchases a local plot of land. The only tension left between settling and journeying is that between the "house" and the "tent," which he is said to pitch.

Let's look at the narrative and geographic context to understand Jacob's choice. Jacob began his journey from Beer-sheba, the home established by

1. See also the discussion about the historical relationship between "Israel" and the land in chapter 13.

2. The Hebrew text translated "safely to the city of Shechem," *shalem 'ir shechem*, is ambiguous, and can also be translated "Salem, city of Shechem." Either way, there is a hidden irony in Jacob's "safe" arrival in Shechem. Recall that Abram and Sarai passed through, but did not settle there (12:6–9). "Later," it is the site of Joshua's covenant renewal ceremony (Josh. 24), Rehoboam's enthronement, and Israel's rebellion from his rule (1 Kings 12).

3. The Hebrew text is unclear regarding the monetary units involved.



Map 3: Jacob's Journey

Isaac and Rebekah (26:23, 33; 28:10). After his dream, which revealed the presence of YHWH in “this place,” he vowed to make YHWH his God if he was brought “in shalom” to his “father’s house,” i.e., back to Beer-sheba. After the episode we are about to examine (Gen. 34), God tells Jacob to arise and “go up to Bethel and settle there” (35:1). Jacob obeys the divine Voice and goes to Bethel, but then after Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin, “Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder” and lived in that land (35:21). Jacob then returned to Mamre⁴ for a last visit

4. Mamre is associated here with both the names “Kiriath-arba” and “Hebron”; cf. 13:18; 23:19 (Hebron only). Hebron plays an important role in the Deuteronomistic History, in connection with “sacred violence” (Joshua 10), as the inheritance of Caleb, the only survivor of the Exodus (Josh. 14:13–15), as David’s settlement place and where his royal reign was first established (2 Sam. 2–5), and as the site of Absalom’s rebellion (2 Sam. 15). However, Mamre is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible outside Genesis. As discussed in Part II, the Deuteronomistic History was largely written before the Exile and hence, before Genesis. Does

with the dying Isaac; Esau joins him in burying their father (35:27–29). We next hear the vague, “Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan” (37:1). As the story moves from Jacob to Joseph, the geographic focus shifts to Egypt. It is not until 46:1 that we finally hear that the path has come full circle: “When Israel set out on his journey with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.”

The point is that with Jacob’s settlement in Succoth, near the city of Shechem, he has not completed the journey home. The issue is not legalistic obedience, but listening to YHWH’s Word rather than determining for oneself the choice that will truly lead to *shalom*: true “peace” and “safety.” YHWH desires people to live in peace and security, but the means and outcome of YHWH’s way are the opposite of the “peace and security” which imperial religion offers.⁵ Settling in Beer-sheba would mean living away from the most desirable and, hence, most fought over, land in Canaan. Settling in Shechem, on the other hand, will place Jacob in a land ruled by kings in which there is no real *shalom*.

Furthermore, we are told that Jacob “built” a house. Genesis consistently contrasts building projects that respond to the Creator and those that arise from merely human initiative. They are listed in Table 3. Jacob’s building project, like those of Cain, Nimrod, and the humans in Shinar, sought to settle his family into a way of life of his own determination. Despite his experiences of YHWH’s presence and direction, he has not yet come to complete trust. Jacob, like so many, learns the consequences the hard way.

Some have portrayed the story in Genesis 34 in romantic terms as a love affair between Dinah and Shechem⁶ rejected by Dinah’s brothers.⁷ However, read within its narrative context, it is anything but romantic. Jacob’s daughter “went out to visit the women of the land” and was seized and raped by a local prince. There is no ambiguity in the text: Shechem’s action is that of a man whose social status “entitles” him to take what he wants. In 1 Samuel, this is “what kings do”: they “take your daughters” for their own purposes (1 Sam. 8:13).⁸

Genesis designate Mamre-as-Hebron to comment on Hebron’s traditional connection with the Davidic monarchy? The use of the precise phrase in Genesis and Joshua, “Kiriath-arba, that is, Hebron,” makes the issue more complex (Gen. 23:2; 35:27; cf. 23:19; Josh. 15:13, 54; 20:7; 21:11). A later editor probably harmonized the texts as part of the construction of the longer narrative, Gen.–2 Kings.

5. Compare 1 Thess. 5:3, where Paul tells the young church, “When they say, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!” In this situation, “peace and security” is the voice of the Roman imperial slogan, *pax et securitas*, Koester (1997), 161–62; see the discussion contrasting the Pax Christi with the Pax Romana throughout Part IV.

6. The eponymous connection between Shechem as son and city recalls Cain’s son and city, Enoch (Gen. 4:17), and the violent domination endemic to city life.

7. E.g., Diamant.

8. See p. 191; see also O’Brien.

Table 3: “Building” (Hebrew, *bnh*) in Genesis

<i>Passage</i>	<i>Builder</i>	<i>What Is Built</i>
2:22	God	Humans
4:17	Cain	A city
8:20	Noah	An altar to YHWH
10:11	Nimrod	Nineveh
11:4, 5, 8	Humans	Tower of Babel
12:7–8; 13:18	Abraham	Altars to YHWH
16:2	Sarai/Hagar	Sarai (as a mother)
22:9	Abraham	The altar of sacrifice
26:25	Isaac	An altar to YHWH
30:3	Rachel	Children (family)
33:17	Jacob	A house
35:7	Jacob	An altar to God

The tension is not between a supposed love affair between Dinah and Shechem on one hand and family resistance on the other, but rather, *whether an offer of marriage can excuse rape*. Shechem’s father, Hamor, proposes to Jacob and his sons that a marriage alliance join the two peoples (34:9–10). The question of where to find wives continues to challenge the identity of God’s people. The proffered solution is to blend two peoples into one.

The seemingly peaceful proposal, though, is not acceptable to Jacob’s sons, especially Simeon and Levi, children of Leah (29:33–34) and full brothers of Dinah (30:21). They pretend to go along with the offer by making the “simple” request that the Shechemites be circumcised as a token of good will. The wording of Shechem’s proposal to the people of the city reveals where the emphasis lies:

These people are friendly with us; let them live in the land and trade in it, for the land is large enough for them; let us take their daughters in marriage, and let us give them our daughters. Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised. Will not their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours? Only let us agree with them, and they will live among us. (Gen. 34:21–23).

In other words, for a moment of physical pain, all their wealth will be ours! As with Laban, so with the Shechemites: the possibility of added wealth overcomes all other barriers to intermarriage. Simeon and Levi, of course, counted on this urban perspective, as the grim outcome to the “alliance” reveals:

On the third day, when they were still in pain, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away. And the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, they captured and made their prey. (34:25–29)

The revenge is as comprehensive as it is grisly. The Genesis authors knew that the extent of murder and plunder would lead readers to question the proportionality of crime and punishment. Does one rape justify mass murder and destruction? Certainly “later” biblical law — already familiar to the Genesis audience — said a clear “no,” as we hear in Deuteronomy:

If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman's father, and she shall become his wife. (Deut. 22:28–29)

While our own sensibilities might well tilt toward a punishment greater than a mere fine, the action taken by Simeon and Levi is meant to shock the audience's conscience.

The final verses reveal that Jacob's *premature settling has caused the entire situation*. Jacob tells the brothers that their action “had made my name stink to the inhabitants of the land” (34:30). But the brothers counter, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” Beyond the immediate question of proportional punishment lies the deeper issue: the series of bad choices that occur because of an initial failure to listen to YHWH's Voice. The story parallels the plight of Lot after he chose to settle near Sodom. The lesson for the Genesis audience in exile and after is clear: only when guided by the Creator's Voice will we be led to settle in a place of true safety and peace.

This question continues to resonate when Jacob's youngest son, Joseph, ends up sold into slavery by his jealous older brothers and the entire family ends up settling in the land of Goshen in Egypt (45:10).⁹ Joseph tells his

9. The Joseph story was probably written at a later period, perhaps during the era of Ptolemaic (Egyptian) rule over Judah. As such, it stands against the Jerusalem elite's collaboration with the Ptolemies to maintain “peace.” See discussion in chapter 17. The saga may also express an allegorical reflection on the David/Solomon story, with Jacob as David (the patriarch whose sons fall against one another and whose daughter is raped), Joseph as Solomon (the son of the favored wife (Rachel, Bathsheba), who becomes the strong holder of imperial power; both have dreams of power and rule over or instead of their elder brothers; both marry foreign wives, and their excesses of power lead Israel into slavery in foreign lands); Reuben as Absalom, (both seek to usurp their father's power by lying with the father's concubines), Tamar as “herself” (in both cases the subject of improper male sexual power over familial women) and the other brothers as the Israelites (pulled into the orbit of royal authority in Jerusalem). See chapter 9 for the unraveling of the David/Solomon narrative.

brothers upon their reunion that “it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt” (45:8) and, then sends them to Jacob with the invitation to settle in Egypt. But despite what seems to be the happy ending to the long saga of Joseph’s rise to power in Egypt and his father’s joy at discovering his son still alive, readers should not be too quick to assume that Joseph the theologian has accurately interpreted the signs of the times.

The young man who began as a dreamer and royal dream interpreter has now spent many years as an official at Pharaoh’s court. In fact, in a moment of high irony, Genesis tells us that Joseph’s rise resulted from his teaching Pharaoh how to profit off famine (Gen. 41:25–46)!¹⁰ Joseph marries an Egyptian wife and lives as an Egyptian in everything except the Egyptians’ racist refusal to share meals with him (43:32). This should serve as a warning that sharing royal power is not the same as truly becoming one with the “other,” but Joseph doesn’t seem to notice this “small” distinction.¹¹ By the reunion, we must ask whether Joseph remains truly in relationship with YHWH, or whether he, like many “royal theologians” over the centuries, interprets events according to an imperial sense of the “divine order.”

This subversive interpretation of Joseph’s role as YHWH’s representative is reinforced by the passage that follows in Genesis 47:13–26. At first glance, it seems to be an addendum tacked onto an otherwise carefully constructed tale. It comes immediately after the narrative notice that “Joseph settled his father and his brothers, and granted them a holding in the land of Egypt, in the best part of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had instructed” (47:11). As *Pharaoh*, not YHWH, had instructed. Are we to imagine that Pharaoh’s will and YHWH’s are one and the same? If we are inclined in this direction, Genesis immediately encourages us to reconsider. The passage expresses forcefully and clearly the nature of Joseph’s power in Egypt and is worth a full hearing:

Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh’s house. When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, “Give us food! Why should we

10. Morgenstern, 23, observes that Pharaoh’s internal dream narrative places Pharaoh “on the Nile” (41:1)—as opposed to the story he tells Joseph, “on *the banks* of the Nile” (41:17). Thus, she notes, “For Pharaoh, the major question to be answered concerns the stability and the extent of his own power: ‘Will I be dominant over the Nile—Egypt’s economic and religious life-force—or, alternatively will the Nile dominate me?’” Joseph’s “answer” makes Pharaoh the master—for now.

11. Note the parallel in how the Sodomites continued to see Lot as an “alien” after his many years of residence in the city, Gen. 19:9.

die before your eyes? For our money is gone.” And Joseph answered, “Give me your livestock, and I will give you food in exchange for your livestock, if your money is gone.” So they brought their livestock to Joseph; and Joseph gave them food in exchange for the horses, the flocks, the herds, and the donkeys. That year he supplied them with food in exchange for all their livestock. When that year was ended, they came to him the following year, and said to him, “We can not hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord’s. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.” So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh’s. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. Only the land of the priests he did not buy; for the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh, and lived on the allowance that Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their land. Then Joseph said to the people, “Now that I have this day bought you and your land for Pharaoh, here is seed for you; sow the land. And at the harvests you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh, and four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and as food for yourselves and your households, and as food for your little ones.” They said, “You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh.” So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth. The land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh’s.

Little commentary is necessary. In control of the food supply, Joseph extracts money, livestock, land, and freedom from the hungry and desperate people, who in the end are grateful to *Pharaoh*, who has “saved our lives.” The episode brings full circle Joseph’s relationship with Egypt and reveals that beneath the family story of brotherly betrayal and reconciliation is another story that sets up the Exodus and what follows. The text implicitly asks: Can it ever be YHWH’s will that we settle in a land of empire? Genesis ends with the possibility that it can, but in the opening verses of Exodus, we discover that it cannot. Immediately, we hear: “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). The deal is off. The Israelites, having grown numerous, will now be dealt with “shrewdly” by the new pharaoh and his people. It will take another act by YHWH and another person’s hearing the divine Voice to repair the damage that will befall Israel for settling in Egypt.