

Genesis 33:18-20, *The Five Books of Moses* (translated by Robert Alter)

And Jacob came in peace to the town of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-Aram, and he camped before the town. And he bought the parcel of land where he had pitched his tent from the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for a hundred kesitahs. And he set up an altar there and called it El-Elohei-Israel.¹

¹ Alter Robert, *The Five Books of Moses*, n.d.

Holy Ground

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 22, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 33:18-20

This morning we come to perhaps one of the oldest and most durable threads in the story of ancient Israel. At the very beginning of Abraham's journey, even before he was called Abraham, we read that he and his family came from Haran into the land of Canaan. [slide 1]

Genesis 12:6–8 (NRSV)

When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord.

Abram came to Shechem. 21 chapters later Jacob returned over the exact route of his grandfather, from his own trip to Haran, and Jacob, too, comes to Shechem. [slide 2]

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Later, after the bondage in Egypt, after wandering 40 years in the wilderness desert, the Israelites come into the Promised Land. In the book of Joshua we read:

Joshua 24:32 (NRSV)

The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

Centuries later we read in John the story of the woman at the well. As you can see, Sychar and Shechem are the same city. [slide 3]

John 4:1–15 (NRSV)

— Jesus left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.

From the earliest stories of the Patriarchs to the ministry of Jesus this city in the hill country not far north of Jerusalem was a focal point for the people of Israel. Abram found the Canaanites in the land when he came there, but he prospered among them. In this morning's passage Jacob, returning from the old homeland of Haran, follows in Abraham's footsteps and comes to the Canaanite city of Shechem in peace and purchases land. Like his grandfather he sets up an altar. Here Jacob worships God, whom he calls, El-Elohei-Israel, God, the God of Israel. The word he uses for God, El, happens to be the highest God in the Canaanite pantheon. Jacob says the highest God is God, whatever name we ascribe. It seems that in this city ancient Israelites and ancient Canaanites lived together somewhat peacefully, long before the great migration of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land.

Jacob had a well at Shechem. We know because it has been remembered from time immemorial until this very day as Jacob's well. Many centuries after Jacob was there, Jesus came to draw water at Jacob's well. When Jesus came, the peace was more fragile than in Jacob's day, perhaps. In Jesus' day the Samaritans were in the land, and the Samaritans and Jews were at odds. That's what made Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan sting so much. The story says that a Samaritan, who acted charitably toward the man in the ditch, was a better neighbor than the priest who passed him by.

Today, in the 21st century, the tensions in the area of Shechem are at least as great. The location of the old city of Shechem lies in the West Bank just east of the Palestinian city of Nablus. By the Oslo Accords of the mid 1990s the West Bank was divided into three administrative areas. [slide 4] Area A (striped sections on the right hand map) is under full Palestinian civil and security control. It is illegal for Israelis to enter Area A. Area B (green areas on the map) is under Palestinian civil control with shared Israeli and Palestinian security. Area C (yellow on the map) is under full Israeli civil and security control. It is a fragmented mess, and it is easy to understand Palestinian frustration with the situation.

This summer I visited Shechem and Nablus. We drove from the Sea of Galilee, and the most direct route would have been to travel directly south-south-west, like Abraham and Jacob. But on this day cities in Area A were experiencing significant unrest. So it was too dangerous to drive the direct route. We went around the west side of the West Bank and through less dangerous territory to get to Nablus.

Indeed, the area we were going into has few tourists because of the troubles. For the nearly two weeks I was in Israel, Todd Horton was my guide. [slide 5] He and his lovely family live up near the Sea of Galilee. Todd and I drove all over Israel, from the borders with Syria and

Lebanon on the north, to the Mediterranean Sea on the west, to the Jordan River on the East, and to the southerly end of the Dead Sea. But for this trip we needed Arab and Palestinian escorts. [slide 6] Zach is an Arab Muslim antiquities dealer who lives in Israel. Nantaha is a Palestinian woman from Nablus.

Here's where the story gets beautiful and, I think, hopeful. Zach, the antiquities dealer and Todd have become good friends. Zach, as an Arab living in Israel, has more freedom than most to move around through both Israel and the West Bank. As an Arab who stayed in Israel when the West Bank territories were split off, he is an Israeli resident but not an Israeli citizen. That means that he can travel into Area A, unlike Israeli citizens. This brings us to why tourism in most West Bank area, like Shechem or Nablus, is suffering. The first reason, of course, is the worry about danger. Many tourists are rightly cautious. But perhaps even more significant is that tour guides in Israel are almost exclusively Israeli, and they are all licensed by the Israeli government. But Israeli guides cannot go into the Area A sections of the West Bank. You see the problem.

Todd is an American with an Israeli Visa, so he's one of the few guides in Israel who can go into the restricted areas. Zach, who has contacts among the Palestinian Arabs, helps break the ice and make things safe. But get this. Zach and Todd are not just working to increase Todd's reach into the West Bank, or even to increase just tourism. They are working hard to develop economic opportunities for West Bank residents. Currently, Todd and Zach are training Nantaha to be a guide to Shechem. Israeli guides would meet her at a checkpoint, and she would then take the groups and guide them to historical and archaeological sites in Area A. So they are working to develop Palestinian guides in the West Bank and increase tourism in the area. There's more. Zach has his antiquities shop in the Old City mall in Jerusalem. In addition to training Nantaha, he has contracted with Nantaha's husband, who makes olive wood pens in a little shop in his house. Zach sells the pens in his shop in Jerusalem.[slide 7] But before he does that, he takes them to a wood engraver, Walid, in Bethlehem, which is also in Area A. This is a close-up of one that Walid engraved for me. [slide 8] It has a Bible reference on it—John 4:1-42, the passage about Jesus at Jacob's well. These are very small steps at working together in a very complicated part of the world, but I cannot help but believe this building of relationships and networks and economic opportunities a few people at a time will lay the foundation for any possible larger reconciliations.

But this gets a little ahead of ourselves. This day we have come to visit the ancient city of Shechem. The area is a beautiful, if rugged, area. [slide 9] You can see why the same word in Hebrew is translated wilderness and desert, almost interchangeably. Nablus sits between two famous Biblical mountains, Gerazim and Ebal, but the mountains are a story for another day.

Tel Balata is the archaeological site of the ruins of the ancient city of Shechem. [slide 10] It's right in the inhabited area of modern day Nablus, as you can see. The ruins go back about 5000 years. [slide 11] This next picture gives you an idea the kind of knowledge and imagination archaeologists must have to understand what they are seeing. [slide 12] Where I see a flat area with a few broken pillars, archeologists see a temple to the God Baal that stood in the space thousands of years ago. As we walked around the site, we traversed over dusty rocks and packed dirt. Maybe Jacob stepped on this very ground, these very stones. We saw walls that were once proud and existed long before Jacob did. I was entranced by the possibility that we could walk on, see and touch the handiwork of people who built this city thousands of years ago. Zach stooped down and picked up a small stone. At least that's what I thought it was. But when he handed it to me, I could see that it was a broken piece of pottery. A little later he picked up the

curved handle of a pottery jar. All I could find when I looked around were rocks, but the trained eye of the antiquities expert saw things most of us never would. Zach handed them to me said, “These are for you.” [slide 13] I asked him how old they were. He off-handedly said Canaanite. That meant I was holding in my hands pottery that some artisan had molded and shaped with his or her hands as many as 5000 years ago.

I’m going to pass around two eyeglass cases in which I have put the pieces. Look at them and let your mind wonder. What was the artisan’s life like who made the pots? Wouldn’t you like to be able to look at the pottery pieces and just for a moment be transported back in time and see Shechem in those days? I suppose at one level or another that’s part of what we try to do when we study ancient cultures and read ancient texts. We try to get back to the time in some sense. But there’s something solid about the past when you hold a piece of it in your hands.

As we were leaving Tel Balata, Zach asked if I wanted to see Jacob’s well. I wasn’t expecting much, but I said, “Sure.” Zach drove us a small distance to a Greek Orthodox Church. He led us into the entryway and then down an unpromising set of stairs. [slide 14] But at the bottom of the steps, suddenly the basement opened into a medium-sized room with a large water well right in the center of things. And there an old monk let a bucket down a shaft thousands of years old and drew cool clean water from 100 feet below and gave anyone who cared to have it a drink.

A few moments before, I had walked where Jacob may have walked. But here there was no doubt. Wells don’t move, and the references to this well in this place are attested by many sources throughout the centuries. This is where Jacob drank, and Jesus, and the Samaritan woman, and countless pilgrims over the ages, and now I could join the procession of the ages. I was drawn to do more than drink it. After all, even Jesus said this well, like any other would, not cure thirst forever. I felt compelled to wipe my hand along the rim where the water had splashed and run over. I took my dripping hand and brought it to my forehead. I don’t know exactly why. I wasn’t re-baptizing myself exactly. But something in me felt connected to the living water Jesus spoke about at this very spot nearly two thousand years ago.

Maybe, and I believe this may be it, maybe I wanted believe that this ancient place, Shechem, where Abraham and Jacob and the Canaanites lived peaceably, where Jesus told a woman all about her life and accepted her, but where today there is such enmity that it took an escort for us to visit the place, I wanted to believe that by God, and through the kindness and goodness of people like Todd and Zach and Nontaha and Walid and others who live as though the future has possibility, I wanted to believe that these old waters pressed to my forehead would leave a mark of hope forever imprinted there, that they would remind me that I live in a faith that does not flinch to say Isaiah 11:6–9 (NRSV)

The wolf shall live with the lamb,

the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,

and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.
Amen.