

[This is a part of my [Scriptural Inquiries](#) set of articles]

### The inquiry:

Upon reading the story of Jacob and his children in Genesis afresh recently and paying attention to details, themes, and narrative flow I have a question that puzzles me after reading all the scandals that Jacob's children got into or were a part of (wittingly or unwittingly) in regards to marriage and relations with the Canaanites. Abraham, a wandering Aramaean (**Deuteronomy 26:5**)

, never married a Canaanite woman, though he had a wife from his native land and a concubine from Egypt (Hagar). Abraham tells his son Isaac to not marry any Canaanite women (**Genesis 28:1**)

but rather to seek a spouse from Laban's family. Esau seems to be the first to marry a Canaanite woman, after marrying a Hittite women, though I fail to see how marrying a Canaanite was a wise choice to alleviate the problem Isaac and Rebecca had with Esau's Hittite wife (though

**Genesis 36:2**

seems to equate Hittite & Canaanite). So Jacob, when he learned that Esau's marriages didn't please his parents, also sought a wife from Laban's household.

Fast forward to Jacob's children. I found myself puzzling over the series of stories of improper intermingling with the Canaanites that Jacob's children had (starting with Genesis 34), but especially wondered what alternative Jacob's children had in terms of potential spouses. If you look ahead in the grand themes of Genesis and also Exodus you will see that it was God's will that Abraham's line eventually end up in Egypt until future deliverance, and so what time that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's offspring spent there was merely spent as a band of sojourners. Yet three generations of Abraham's offspring had to live there while sojourning, and they would have to determine how they would "be fruitful and multiply". We know that God's ultimate plan for Abraham's offspring possessing the land of Canaan was through conquest, and not through purchasing land (some of which Abraham did, but on no large scale) and assimilating (which Jacob's sons suggested, albeit under false pretenses, in **Genesis 34:15-17**). And we also know that the conquest was tied to the iniquity of the Amorites who inhabited the land of Canaan

**(Genesis 15:16)**

, which was a major reason for not associating with them.

God told Abraham all this in advance:

*God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete"* **Genesis 15:13-16**

Yet, despite this clear plan God had told Isaac to stay put for the time being:

*The Lord appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land of which I shall tell you."* **Genesis 26:1-2**

Thus, to the puzzle and inquiry at hand, the larger in number that Abraham's offspring got the more the need for marriages grew. But whom should they marry? The solution throughout the whole of the family's history up until Jacob had been to marry outside of Canaan, especially with Laban's clan. Yet it still can be legitimately asked, given that they are told to stay in Canaan and are growing, yet are seemingly not supposed marry Canaanites: **What alternative is there?** Is it really reasonable that all 13 of Jacob's children should continue to travel a great distance back to Mesopotamia to Laban's household to find spouses? Laban probably didn't have enough people in his own family for that to work anyway. Not to mention that bridge and "solution" may have been burned, and been irreparable, given the way Jacob and Laban left things.

That leaves only two legitimate alternatives in my mind: Marriage with Esau's line or marriage with the Egyptians (the latter is never condemned actually, and both Abraham and Joseph had Egyptian women as companions/spouses). Reuben (who can't be credited as thinking of a righteous alternative) foolishly decided to sleep with his father's wife Bilhah, which was especially out of bounds (and he lost his blessing as firstborn because of it - **Genesis 49:3-4**). Dinah was tragically raped by a Canaanite (tradition later tells us she had offspring from that union). But Judah and his children willingly married Canaanites. But before Judah's massive indiscretion with his daughter-in-law after his wife died, how can he be faulted for having a Canaanite wife

? Or else

### **who should he have married**

? We know it was Abraham and Isaac's preference that their children not marry Canaanites, but I don't remember any direct commands from God in Genesis against it.

Nonetheless, it seems that the right course of action, as indicated from the narrative, was indeed to avoid mingling with the Canaanites at all, because of the iniquity that they were doing in the land for which God would eventually drive them out. However, the whole issue cannot simply be a matter of wanting to not marry a woman (or man in Dinah's case) from a people group that practiced pagan polytheism, because that's all that existed outside of Abraham's family on the whole planet

! Laban and his family were pagan polytheists (remember his daughter stealing the household gods?), the Egyptians were pagan polytheists, so too the Hittites, and the Canaanites. Yet once a spouse was married to anyone in Abraham's line they clearly had to give up that polytheism, as Jacob told his family: "

*So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments'*

"

### **(Genesis 35:2)**

. But outside of Jacob's family at the time possibly only Esau's branch of the family line had kept the faithful worship of Yahweh alone, yet even Esau married women from the land of Canaan.

So this is an interesting puzzle. My best guess? I say they should have married Egyptians, since Joseph did that and Ephraim and Manasseh (two majorly important tribes in Israel's history) were the product of that union. Either that or marrying Canaanite women was not all that out of bounds after all, but that seems to present some tension with Abraham and Isaac's previous preferences for their children. If you have any suggestions for solving this puzzle though feel free to send them to me and I may feature them at the bottom of the article here.

Whatever the case though it is clear that God's redemption was prevalent throughout the whole Genesis story as he demonstrated his faithfulness to the covenant that he swore to Abraham, because even from Judah's offspring with Tamar God used such a mistaken union to produce the very line that the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, would come from (**Matthew 1:3**). Thank God for his loving and sovereign redemption from the wages of our sins and his covenant faithfulness!