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Q&A#128 The Man at Shechem

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Today's question: "In part 27 of Abraham's story you started to talk about the 'random man' who gives Joseph a lot of information in 37:15-17. Could you say some more about this odd character?"

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, in part 27 of Abraham's story, you started to talk about the random man who gives Joseph a lot of information in chapter 37, verses 15 to 17. Could you say some more about this odd character? He reminds me of the expression by Robertson Davis, as he defines the title of his book, makes up a definition.

And his book is called Fifth Business, which he defines as follows, those roles which, being neither those of the hero nor heroine, confidant nor villain, but which were

nonetheless essential to bring about the recognition or the denouement, were called the Fifth Business, in drama and opera companies organized according to the old style. Now, the character that we find here is a character who just chances across Joseph as Joseph is wandering in the fields around Shechem. And that chance encounter leads to Joseph being sent to Dothan, encountering his brothers, his brothers throwing him into the pit, being sent down to Egypt.

All those other events hang upon just a chance encounter. And the whole course of the life of Jacob's family and the life of Joseph is changed from just that one chance encounter. It seems strange to attribute that just to randomness.

There's something about that encounter that is significant, that invites reflection upon who this character might be, this random man. And the Bible doesn't answer, I don't think. But if it did answer, where might we find that answer? First of all, I think as we look through the story of Genesis, there are a few occasions where we have very significant encounters with unnamed men.

And those unnamed men are encountered at key moments in the narrative. We see the unnamed men who visit Abraham in chapter 18 and bring the news about the birth of Isaac. We see the unnamed man who wrestles with Jacob at the fort of the Jabbok at Peniel.

And now in chapter 37, we see the unnamed man in the encounter with Joseph at Shechem. And in all these encounters, I think we might see reason to believe that the figure in chapter 37 could be an angel. And that is certainly not a position that's original to me.

Many Jewish commentators have argued that this figure is an angel, that God is foiling, as it were, perhaps a plan by Jacob to test his son and actually taking things out of his hand. So that just as the brothers later on find things taken out of their hand, as Joseph is taken out of the pit by the Midianites, so by a chance occurrence, which is not really a chance occurrence, but God intervening in the situation, Joseph does not just return to his father, but goes on to his brothers. And he was originally sent to Shechem.

His father perhaps knew that they'd go on to Dothan, that they would have finished that stage of their itinerary and moved on. And so he ends up not going back to his father, but going on to his brothers, to that dangerous site. So maybe it's an angel.

That's one speculation. What might add some more weight to that particular theory? Well, later on, as we read in the story of Exodus, in the story of Exodus, we find many echoes of the story of Jacob and Joseph. We see that Moses has to flee Egypt because his life is threatened.

He goes to the land of Midian and when he goes there, he protects women at a well and

provides for them. And then he serves his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he marries his daughter. And he serves looking after his father-in-law's flocks.

That is pretty much, is powerfully reminiscent of the story of Jacob. Later on, he goes to meet his brother and on the way he's threatened with death as God comes upon him and seeks to kill him. That might remind you of Jacob leaving the house of Laban, going towards Esau.

And on the way God meets him, it's this man and tries to kill him. So that's another encounter that might be of interest. But the story of Joseph is also playing there too.

He's shepherding his father or father-in-law's flocks. He goes to the area of Mount Horeb and there might be a faint stirring of recognition here. Maybe Horeb is related to the name of Hebron.

It's a mixing up of some of the letters and maybe it might be some vague stirring of memory at this point. Then he sees the angel of the Lord appearing to him in a flame of fire in the midst of a bush. And he looks.

Behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. And he turns aside and goes towards it. And as he goes there, he's called and he says, here I am.

And he said, do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet for the place where you stand is holy ground. Maybe there's some sort of significance here.

Later on, God says that he has heard the oppression of his people and all these things, the cries of his people in Egypt. These certain details of that story might recall the story of Joseph shepherding the sheep of his father or father-in-law going to this site and encountering an angel. This significance of do not draw near.

And in the story of Joseph, as he draws near to this site of doom, his brothers see him and say, let's kill him. But do not draw near lest you be killed. He has to take off his sandals, etc.

And there's some have suggested that there is a connection there. I'm not so sure. It's not as strong as I would like.

And I'd like to look a bit further in that connection to see if there's anything more that perhaps. But there are two further connections that are worth bearing in mind. The first one is, as we look back in the story of Hagar and Ishmael, Hagar is sent out.

She's expelled, cast out, much as Joseph is cast out. And as we look through chapter 37, I remarked upon the many parallels between the story of Ishmael and Hagar and the story of Joseph. And we see that later on in chapter 39, too, that in chapter 39, Joseph is like Ishmael.

Has he come into this house to make a mockery of us? Potiphar's wife playing the role of Sarah, casting him out and mistreating him. Whereas Potiphar is more on his side and Potiphar does not want to see him mistreated. So there are similarities between the way Hagar is treated and Ishmael is treated and the way that Joseph is treated.

When we go back to chapter 21 and the story of Hagar, we see there that she is sent out in a very similar way to the way that Joseph is sent out by his father. And she wanders in the wilderness and as she wanders in the wilderness, she is, she casts down the boy. She puts him under a bush and she goes at a distance from him.

And God hears the voice of the lad and the angel of the Lord calls out to Hagar from heaven as she's wandering in the wilderness. And maybe that is a connection that helps us understand what's taking place here. There's also maybe parallels between the story of Moses as we see the bush and other themes like that.

Also worth remembering that Moses is in the sight of Midian at this point. Like Joseph taken by the Midianites, there is something he's playing back through that story. And later on as we read the story of Elijah in chapter 18 and 19 of the story of first Kings, I think we'll see some both of these Moses themes and the Ishmael themes brought together.

And that might help us to understand more of what's taking place. But one way or another, there is this significant encounter in the wilderness where the angel of the Lord comes and meets her and intervenes and acts to provide for her. Provides for her and also sets her on the course down to Egypt.

Is this perhaps a clue to the identity of the person at Shechem? I think it might be that the angel of the Lord is this man that is encountered at Shechem. The other possible clue is as we read the next chapter marked at that point that when we go to the next chapter, we see the site of Dothan echoed in the site of Enaim, which means two springs. In the previous chapter, Dothan means two wells.

So those two sites might be connected. Now, in that story, you have a similar sort of pattern. You have Judah going up to Timnah to shear his sheep.

And on the way there, he encounters Tamar and goes aside to have relations with Tamar. And that encounter with Tamar means he never actually, we don't know if he ever actually goes up to Timnah or he does go up to Timnah. But there's this, Timnah is his journey to Timnah is interrupted and there's an encounter at Enaim on the way to Timnah.

And then on that way to Enaim or the way to Timnah at Enaim, something significant happens that changes the course of events. And that encounter at Enaim, which is associated with Dothan where Joseph ends up, maybe there is some similar theme that

might illumine what's taking place in chapter 37 and the identity of that unknown stranger. I'm not sure.

And these are just ideas about if you were to find an answer, if scripture has given us an answer, where might we find it? Significant encounters on the way, significant encounter on the way to meeting the brothers. And we see maybe the encounter with the angel of the Lord that Joseph, that Jacob has on the way to meet his brother Esau. Maybe there's something there.

Or maybe the fact that just the unnamed men within the story of Genesis tend to be angels. Or maybe the echoes with the story of Moses shepherding his father's sheep going to Mount Horeb and the way that that is seen back through the lens of the story of Elijah and relating that with the story of Ishmael. Maybe that's what's going on.

Anyway, these are some suggestions. Make of it what you may. Thank you very much for listening.

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