SHALEM: CITY OR SAFELY?

HERBERT COHN

The Book of Genesis recounts Jacob's justified fear his brother Esau, who wanted to kill him because he cunningly snatched the blessing of his father Isaac from him. But Jacob's fear was not realized, and he arrived in Shechem. A literal version of Genesis 33:18 reads: *And Jacob arrived* shalem *city Shechem.*" The word *shalem* is ambiguous here, and can be translated either as "safely" or as the name of a city. Many translations have *shalem* as a city (Septuagint, Vulgate, Jerusalem Bible, Rav Kook's exegesis on Genesis, Rashbam, Chizkuni, R. Yaakov of Vienna, Akedat Yitzchak): *And Jacob arrived in* Shalem, *a city in Shechem.*[1] Many others understood *shalem* as an adverb [entire, complete, intact, perfect, unharmed] or even read it as *shalom* [peace].[2]

COMMENTATORS WHO VIEW *SHALEM* AS SAFELY

Traditional commentators followed the opinion of the Babylonian Talmud: "It is written: 'Jacob arrived *shalem* in Shechem' (Gen. 33:3). Rav said: unimpaired in body, unimpaired in his possessions, unimpaired in his knowledge of the Torah" (Shabbat 33b). Thus, these commentators interpret *shalem* as *Jacob arrived* safely *in Shechem.* While there is a recent trend toward interpreting *shalem* as the name of a city, there are two problems with such a translation. Gramatically, it should read either *l'shalem* or *shalem-ah.* Only two and three verses back, it is stated *And Jacob journeyed on Succot-ah* [to Succot] (33:17) and *So Esau returned . . . Seir-ah* [to Seir] (v. 16). The juxtaposition of *Shalem* and *Shechem* poses another difficulty: is *Shalem* a city of Shechem? Is *Shalem* in Shechem? Is it a city belonging to Shechem, the king of the city of Shechem? Or is *Shalem* another name for Shechem?

WHY *SHALEM* SHOULD BE DEFINED AS A CITY

I maintain that *shalem* is the name of a city for two reasons:

Herbert Cohn, Ph.D., is the translator into Hebrew of the classical book Die Lehren des Judentums nach den Quellen [The Teachings of Judaism according to the Sources] *(Meisharim, Jerusalem, 1991). He is chairman of the Conservative congregation Etz Hayim in Ashdod, Israel, and has been active on Jewish issues for many years.*

1. The rabbis had always used the term *shalem* to refer to Jerusalem, so perhaps they did not want to support the claim of the Samaritans whose Temple was on Mount Gerizim located in Shechem.

2. There are problems with defining *shalem* as an adverb meaning "safely": There is no reference in the entire Bible where the word has this meaning. *Shalem* as an adverb never appears alone, but with the addition of the preposition *im* [with], as in *shalem im* [perfect with][3] Thus we read *Let your heart be perfect with* [shalem im] *the Lord our God, to walk in His statutes and to keep His commandments, as at this day* (I Kg. 8:61), and *It came to pass when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not perfect with* [shalem im] *the Lord his God as was the heart of his father David* (11:4). When the root *sh-l-m* is used in the noun *shalom* [peace], the prefix "*b*" renders it *b'shalom* [in peace), as in *Isaac sent them away and they departed from him in peace* [b'shalom] (Gen. 26:31).[4] This grammatical detail escaped the attention of many translators.

The terms "arriving at" or "coming to" a place appears with the preposition "*l*" ["an" or "to"] in dozens of verses in the Scriptures. However, in many instances, the preposition "*l*" ["at" or "to"] is missing, but the meaning is nevertheless clear. Thus we read: *When the children of Ammon saw that the Syrians had fled, they fled also before Abishai his brother and went* [to] *the city. So Joab returned from the children of Ammon and went* [to] *Jerusalem* (II Sam. 10:14).[5]

The main reason why *shalem* may have been mistranslated as an adverb may have been the juxtaposition of the verb "arrive" or "come" with the name of a place, without the preposition "at" or "to" – *Jacob arrived* [at] *Shalem.* Therefore, the word *shalem* in Genesis 33:18 *And Jacob arrived* shalem *city Shechem* should be translated as: *And Jacob came to Shalem, a city in Shechem.*

NOTES

1. *And Jacob arrived in Shalem, a city in Shechem.* See: Septuaguint, Vulgate, John Wycliffe, William Tyndale, Trinitarian Bible Society, King James Version, British & Foreign Bible Society, The Jerusalem Bible (Koren).

2. *And Jacob came in peace to the city of Shechem.* See: Onkelos (Aramaic), The Jewish Publication Society of America, *The International Critical Commentary: Genesis, The Soncino Chumash, The Holy Bible* (Oxford University Press), *The Anchor Bible, The Jerusalem Bible, The New English Bible with the Apocrypha. Church of England, Church of Scotland, Methodist,*

Baptist and Congregational Churches (Oxford University Press), *The Pentateuch* (S. R. Hirsch), *The Torah, A Modern Commentary* (Union of American Hebrew Congregations), *The JPS Torah Commentary, The Chumash* (ArtScroll Tanach Series), *Schocken Bible, The Harper-Collins Study Bible, Hebrew Publishing Company.*

3. See I Kings 15:3; 15:14.

4. See: Genesis 15:15; 26:29; 28:21; Exodus 18:23; Joshua 10:21; Judges 8:9; 11:13; 11:31; I Samuel 29:6; II Kings. 22:20; Jeremiah 34:5; 43:12; Malachi 2:6; Psalm 4:9; 29:11; 55:19.

5. See: Judges 21:2; Isaiah 4:12, 212:1, 22:5; II Samuel 5:6, 13:38.

עשה תורתך קבע

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2008

April	Amos	1 – 9
	Ovadiah	1
	Jonah	1 – 4
	Micha	1 – 7
	Nahum	1 – 3
	Habakkuk	1 – 3
May	Zephaniah	1 – 3
	Haggai	1 – 2
	Zechariah	1 – 14
	Malachi	1 – 3
	I Chronicles	1 – 4
June	I Chronicles	5 – 29
July	II Chronicles	1 – 26
August	II Chronicles	27 – 36
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 12*

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