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. Grammatically, it should read either l'shalem or shalem-ah. Only two and three verses back, it is stated And Jacob journeyed on Succoth 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]. 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). This grammatical detail escaped the attention of many translators.

3. 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).

4. 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.*


---

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ
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*

[*WITH ECCLESIASTES WHICH IS READ ON THE HOLIDAY OF SUKKOT, WE COMPLETE THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR. STARTING WITH SEPTEMBER, WE AGAIN COMMENCE THE NEW THREE-YEAR CYCLE]*