

This is a prelude to the one I finished for this month. They tie together nicely. 😊

EVERY WOMAN IN THE BIBLE

RACHEL & LEAH

Date: About 1875 B.C.

Names: Rachel (Ray-chuhl: "ewe")

Leah (Lee-uh: "wild cow")

Greatest

Accomplishment: These two wives of Jacob and their maidservants gave birth

To the men who founded the twelve Israelite tribes.

Rachel & Leah's role in scripture: Rachel and Leah were sisters whose lives were closely intertwined. They were the daughters of Laban, and both were married to Jacob, the son of their Uncle Isaac. One sister was loved, the other ignored. Ironically, it was not Jacob's beloved bride who was laid to rest with him in tomb of his father and mother, but Leah.

Their life stories: (Gen. 29: 1-30). The two sisters grew up in the family of a sheep-herder. As is sometimes the case, one daughter was beautiful (Rachel), and the other was unattractive. The biblical text says Leah's eyes were "delicate" (Gen. 29:17), better translated as "weak". This may imply nearsightedness, light sensitivity that made her squint, or some other defect. The Jewish Rabbis denied this conclusion, and the Talmud argues that there could be no physical blemish in the righteous Leah.

It remains clear, however, that Rachel was far more attractive than her sister. When Jacob first met Rachel in the fields taking care of her father, Laban's sheep, he fell deeply in love with her. One of Jacob's first acts was to kiss Rachel's hand as a respectful salutation; and as he did, he "wept", a demonstration of his joy, Jacob belonged to a group of demonstrative people whose emotions ran deep.

Jacob met with Rachel's father and offered his own labor for the riches he had not brought with him. Then Laban offered to employ Jacob and asked him to name his wages, without hesitation Jacob offered to serve Laban for seven years for the privilege of marrying Rachel. Jacob had no money to offer Laban for his bride, as custom required, so Jacob offered himself and his services.

The price Jacob offered was actually a handsome one. Old Babylonian contracts from the 19th-16th century B.C., and contracts from Nuzi dating from the 16th to 14th centuries, spell out the responsibilities of shepherders to sheep owners, and vice versa. The wages that Jacob would have earned over seven years were far greater than the bride price any suitor might be expected to offer a father! In fact, Jacob's service for Rachel marks him as the most devoted lover in the Bible. And his love for Rachel was not a passing fancy. It would last until the end of his life.

But when the seven years were complete, Laban substituted Leah for her sister Rachel. After waiting seven years to marry Jacob, Rachel must have been heartbroken to find that her father had given her sister to her beloved. Yet, there are many unanswered questions about this matter. Did Rachel know of her father's plan? If so, why didn't she warn Jacob? If she didn't know, where was she when Leah was given to Jacob instead of herself? And why would Leah go along with this scheme when she knew that Rachel and Jacob loved each other and had waited to wed for seven years? And Jacob awoke to discover that the woman he had lain with the night before was not the woman he loved. Jacob was more than unhappy when the light of day revealed the sister switch. But it was too late then. The best he could do was to give his unwanted bride the week of individual attention she was due, and then wed her sister Rachel, committing himself to serve yet another seven years. So Laban offered to make a second deal for Jacob to earn Rachel by serving another seven years (Gen 29:26-30).

Rachel's rivalry with Leah poisoned her relationship with Jacob. Jacob and Rachel loved each other very much. But as their years together passed it was heartbreaking to Rachel to see her sister bear children for her husband and she remained barren. In desperation, Rachel blamed Jacob; we know however, he was not withholding himself from her. God had made Leah very fruitful,

which only added to Rachel's misery. So she came up with the idea of giving Jacob her servant Bilhah as a surrogate. It was partially successful as she had two sons, and Rachael became very attached to them. In God's time, Rachael finally had a son, named Joseph, who has been described as the most Christlike character in the Old Testament.

Biblical Background (Polygamy): Old Babylonian law prohibited men from having more than one wife except when that wife was childless. Yet 400 or 500 years earlier (second millennium B.C.) at Nuzi, some 25 % of the men in a census of households had two or more wives. So Jacob's experience was not without parallel. Yet Rachel's and Leah's life as sisters married to a single man was further complicated by a competition to give their husbands sons. In this competition each also gave Jacob her slave ["maid"] as a surrogate. The complex relationships this created caused extreme pain for each of the women, and undoubtedly Jacob as well.

So what was the legal relationship between Jacob and his four "wives"? In Old Babylonian law, when a man married two women one was the primary wife, and the other had a lower status. Typically this status was spelled out in a marriage contract a number of which have been recovered by archaeologists. Despite the fact that no contract is mentioned in Scripture, it is clear from Genesis that Jacob loved Rachel, and considered Rachel his primary wife, while he cared less for Leah (that is, rejected Leah's claim to a primary wife position even though he had wed her first).

While the two sisters' use of Bilhah and Zilpah as surrogates would make them Jacob's concubines, they continued to be the slaves of Rachel and Leah. Jacob's recognition of Bilhah's and Zilpah's offspring as his sons gave the sons legitimacy, but it did not change the status of their mothers.

Jacob's experience in no way suggests that the Bible teaches or encourages polygamy. Certainly Scripture's description of the relationship between these two sisters married to the same man serves to warn us away from this course.

Sisterly cooperation (Gen. 31: 1-35): While within the family fierce competition existed, when threats came from the outside the two sisters presented a united front. Jacob served Laban fourteen years for his two wives, and God increased Laban's flocks. For the next six years Jacob oversaw Laban's flocks for payment. God saw to it that Jacob's flocks increased while Laban's decreased. Laban's sons became jealous; complaining to their father that Jacob was getting what was really theirs.

After the birth of Joseph, Jacob began to long to return to his homeland. He had been in Mesopotamia about twenty years, but he could not depart easily, for according to the laws of the time, Laban could still claim his children and his two wives. When Jacob's contract with Laban came up for renewal [in Mesopotamia contracts ran from sheep shearing time to sheep shearing time.] God told Jacob it was time to return to Canaan. Jacob held a family counsel and talked it over with his two wives. For the first time we find his two wives, Rachel and Leah are united. As slaves, neither Bilhah nor Zilpah were consulted, although by custom their sons would inherit equally with the sons of Rachel and Leah. Jacob explained that God had shown him how to increase his share of the herds he supervised for Laban, and Jacob reviewed the growing hostility of Laban and his sons. Jacob also told them of the visitation of the Angel of the Lord instructing him to return to Canaan. When Jacob did not make the decision alone, but consulted his wives, he demonstrated that he, like other patriarchs, took no steps without counseling with his wives. Rachel and Leah considered themselves as their husband's equal. Incidents such as this recorded in Scripture remind us that one's legal position seldom is an accurate reflection of the true state of interpersonal relationships.

While Laban was off sheep-shearing in a far country, Jacob, with his wives and eleven children and his herds, flocks, and servants, set off for his homeland in Canaan. Onward they went, back through many of the same valleys and over the same mountains and through the same endless sands which Jacob's grandfather Abraham, and grandmother Sarah, and his mother Rebekah had traveled.

Three days later, Laban got word that his family had gone. He set out to follow and find them. On the seventh day he overtook his daughters and their large family in the hill country of Gilead. On the way, God warned Laban against taking any action against Jacob. However, Laban did have one valid complaint: his household gods were gone. From Jacob Rachel had kept one secret; the people in the ancient world were idolaters. They believed in many deities, and they fashioned wooden or stone images as objects of worship. Abraham alone had had his vision of one God, and what we now take for granted about God was then a belief held only within Abraham's family.

But it would be a mistake to assume that Rachel, who had stolen her father's household deities, did so for religious reasons. In that time possession of the household gods was significant in establishing a claim to the family estate! Rachel was ready to commit herself and her sons to an uncertain future in Canaan. But just in case, she wanted to hedge the bet she had placed on Jacob and his God.

The plot thickens! Laban finally caught up with Jacob and company, and cried out loudly over the loss of his gods, almost as loudly as he had cried out at the loss of his daughter and their children. Not knowing that Rachel possessed the gods, Jacob answered his angry father-in-law, "With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live." (Gen 31:32).

Laban searched all the tents, first Leah's, and then Rachel's. When he came to Rachel's, he found her sitting on a camel's saddle, beneath which she had probably hidden the gods. There she sat and did not rise, but explained apologetically to her father,

“Let it not upset my lord that I cannot rise up before thee; for the custom of women is upon me” (Gen 31:35). We as females understand that reason quite well. The main thought on the subject is that she claimed to be “ceremonially unclean”. She apologized for not rising when her father entered, pleading her “condition”. Laban searched in vain. Rachel, in her uncleanness even sat on them and nothing happened to her” That shows how little she feared the power her father believed they had.

Later we learn that Jacob hid the entire bunch of strange gods that had been brought out of Mesopotamia under the Oak at Shechem (Gen. 35:4). This leads us to believe that Rachel, like Jacob, now believed in God and not the strange gods of Mesopotamia. Rachel’s actions of course, are subject to varying interpretations. But don’t forget that any personality, ancient or modern has elements that remain a mystery to anyone else.

Leah had had four sons; Ruben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, and a daughter, Dinah, who was the first daughter in the Bible whose name is mentioned at birth Zilpah, had two sons Gad and Asher. Bilhah bore two sons, Dan, & Nephtali. God opened Rachel’s womb and had a son named Joseph. Rachel’s feelings for the new son were the same as the other two sons of Bilhah, so she felt she had three sons now; Dan, Nephtali, and Joseph.

As the caravan neared the edge of Canaan, Jacob began to have fear about the way he had treated Esau, and his inheritance issues, which led to threats upon Jacob’s life before he left his homeland twenty years earlier. Jacob, now a good family man and provider, thought of his growing family’s safety issues. Because of his great love for Rachel, and Joseph, he placed them in the very back of the caravan; he put Zilpah, Bilhah and their children up front, and then Leah and her children in the middle. The thought on the planning also may have included the fact that Rachel was pregnant again.

His fears about Esau were unwarranted, because Esau ran out to meet him, embraced him, and kissed him.

As the caravan neared Ephrath, (Bethlehem) the pains of childbirth started for Rachel, and she gave birth to her second son, Benjamin, in a cave. It was not an easy delivery, and she became the first mother to die in childbirth. She wanted to name him “Ben-oni – meaning child of sorrow.” But Jacob called him Benjamin meaning “son of happiness”. This child completed the number of Jacob’s twelve sons, who were to be designated as the twelve tribes of Israel.

Rachel: an example for today:

1.) Rachel reminds us again that being beautiful does not bring contentment. Nor does a

loving husband; guarantee happiness. In the end, only an intimate relationship with our Father can provide true contentment. All other things may fail us, as long as we continue to pin our hopes on them, we will remain unfulfilled and hurting.

2.) Rachel also reminds us that despite disappointments we can be a blessing to others.

How fortunate Dan and Nephtali were to have her as their “mother”, rather than the rejection like that Ishmael experienced from Sarah.

Leah: an example for today:

1.) Leah’s life reminds us that people are overly impressed by appearance. Sometimes, it seems that God alone seems to care about what He sees in the heart.

2.) Yet from Leah we learn to keep our focus on God. He, not the spouse we love, is the One stable force in our existence.

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