

Jacob and Rachel



Genesis 29:15 "Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?' Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.'

So two weeks ago in the Old Testament reading, Jacob stole the birthright and paternal blessing from his elder brother Esau,

who was so angry at the deception that he intended to kill his brother Jacob. Their mother Rebecca, upon hearing this, helped her favored son, Jacob, escape, ostensibly to go and find a wife back in the old country, as his father had done before him. Last week, the Old Testament reading recalled the well-known dream of Jacob's ladder, that stairway to heaven, with angels ascending and descending upon it. But the important part of that dream, for Jacob at least, was that having stolen his elder brother's birthright and blessing, would Jacob really receive God's blessing? Would Jacob really be the inheritor of God's promises to Father Abraham, to receive the Promised Land and to be the father of a great nation, and THAT is what God promised in Jacob's dream and why it is important, though it was still just a dream.

In today's lesson, Jacob has arrived in Haran, the 'old' country to find a bride, and in the verses immediately before today's reading, Jacob meets Rachel at the well, just as Abraham's servant first met Rebecca at the well in the story three weeks ago, Rebecca who became Jacob's mother. Apparently if you want to meet women in those days, you hang around the well. Anyway, Jacob falls in love with Rachel at first sight, and Jacob, we are told, kisses her and weeps. So she takes him to her father Laban, his kinsman, which is where the reading today begins. Now remember that when Abraham arranged Isaac's marriage, he sent his chief servant with ten camels full of gifts and supplies, bracelets and

trinkets, to arrange for the purchase of a bride, or a dowry for the family. But Jacob has just fled Canaan for his very life. He doesn't have ten camels worth of goods with which to bargain, so he agrees instead to work for his uncle Laban for seven years, after which his beloved Rachel and he would be wed.

So he worked for seven years, and the wedding was had, and it must have been a dozy of a wedding, because in the morning after the wedding, Jacob discovered in the marriage tent that he had married not his beloved Rachel, but her older sister Leah, who had something special with her eyes (the Hebrew word used is uncertain). In the older English translations, Leah's eyes were said to be "weak" or "dim," whereas now in the New Revised Standard Version, the translation suggests they were just "lovely." I still prefer the former reading, which would help explain why the elder sister wasn't married yet, and maybe why Laban was desperate enough to trick his kinsman into marrying her in today's story.

Anyway, Jacob loved Rachel, not Leah, so he agreed to work ANOTHER seven years for his uncle Laban in order to also marry Rachel, which he does. And also note that each of his two wives come with a handmaid, or a slave. In the chapters that follow, life goes on in the old country. Jacob soon has four children with Leah, all boys. Rachel got jealous at this, and frustrated that she had borne Jacob no children, so she gave her maid, Bilhah, to

Jacob so that he would have children through her, just as earlier Sara gave Abraham her servant Hagar, for him to bear his children when she was thought to be infertile. So Jacob has a child with Rachel's maid, another son. Then Jacob had another son through Leah, then another son through Rachel's maid Bilhah. Then Leah, fearing that she was infertile, gave her maid to Jacob, so that he would have more children through Leah's maid Zilpah, which he did, two more sons. Then Leah conceived two more sons for Jacob. All in all, Leah bore Jacob six sons, and their only daughter Dinah. Leah's maid Zilpah bore Jacob two sons, and Rachel's maid Bilhah bore him two more sons. Finally, at last, Rachel herself got pregnant; Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, finally bore him a child, a son that became his favorite son of all, because it was hers, because it was theirs. They named him Joseph, whom Jacob gave that famous coat. Later when Jacob and his family returns to Canaan, Rachel will bear another son, Benjamin, the youngest of his 12 boys, but sadly she dies in childbirth bearing him.

So if you were wondering where the twelve tribes of Israel come from, they come from the twelve sons of Jacob. And these twelve sons will later help Jacob fulfill the promise to Abraham, as he becomes the father of a great nation through them. And if you were wondering why later in the story Jacob favored his son, Joseph, now you know, that it was because he was the first born child of his beloved Rachel, for whom he worked for 14 works in

order to marry. And if you were wondering why later Benjamin was so important when Joseph becomes the Prime Minister of Egypt, so important that Joseph insists that Benjamin be brought to him in Egypt to prove that his brothers are trustworthy and that Benjamin was still alive, it was because Benjamin was Joseph's only full brother, each of them born to the same mother, the beloved Rachel. And if you were wondering why Jacob would not let Benjamin go to Egypt with his other brothers in the first place, now you know why, Jacob feared losing him. Jacob believed that he had already lost his beloved son Joseph, and he lost Rachel in her giving birth to Benjamin, and he now feared sending Benjamin with the others to Egypt that he might lose Benjamin as well, the last physical connection he had with his beloved Rachel. And if you are wondering why later, Jacob, when he goes to Egypt himself and joins his twelve sons there, insists that when he dies his sons must promise to return his body to Canaan, so that he could be buried alongside his beloved Rachel, in the cave of Machpelah east of the oaks of Mamre, in a field which their ancestor Abraham bought from the Hittites. So much of the future story of the people of Israel is tied up here with the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, with the stories of Ishmael and Isaac, and with the stories of Jacob and Esau, and Leah and Rachel, and their handmaids.

But I am getting ahead of myself a bit. We are not there yet. First Jacob, after his many years of labor for his uncle Laban, must gather up his now quite large family and his herds and his maids and his many possessions, for he had done well in Haran and had become wealthy, and head back home, back to Canaan, back to the Promised Land, where he must still face the wrath of his elder brother Esau and where along the way he wrestles with God as to whether or not he is the true inheritor of the promises made to Abraham. But that story is yet to come. Amen.