

Jacob & Rachel



Genesis 29:16 "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.' (Uncle) Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.' So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."

So, Jacob secured his brother Esau's birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew, and then literally

stole his brother's paternal blessing by pretending to be Esau, deceiving his father Isaac, and lying to his face about who he was, twice. So, when Esau returned from the hunt and learned of the deceit, he pledged to kill his brother, but 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.

In today's reading, Jacob has arrived in Haran 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 and he was the sister of Laban, the Aramean. 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 there at the well with her. 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 to Rebecca, 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 they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her, and the wedding was had, and it must have been a dozy of a wedding, because in the morning after, Jacob discovered in the marriage tent that he had consummated his marriage, not with his beloved Rachel, but with 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 favor the older translation, 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. For on the evening of the wedding, it was Laban, we are told, who took his daughter Leah, not Rachel, and brought her to Jacob; and he went into her. . . . And when morning came, Jacob discovered it was with Leah! So, Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Laban said, "This is not done in our country - giving the

younger before the firstborn. . . We will give Rachel in return for serving me for another seven years." As I told you two weeks ago, the deceit and tomfoolery continues.

Anyway, Jacob really, really 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, just as Sara earlier had her handmaid Hagar. 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, and thus Ishmael was born. 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, to 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 ever wondered 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, that he becomes the father of a great nation through them. And if you ever wondered 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 ever wondered 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 to him that his brothers were 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 the field which their ancestor Abraham bought from Ephron, the Hittite. 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 his conscience and with God himself as to whether or not he is the true inheritor of the promises made to Abraham. But that story is yet to come. Amen.