

“Women of the Bible: Leah & Rachel”

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful (Genesis 29:16-17).

Genesis 29-31 ¹

When we left the story last week, Jacob (as in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Hebrew Patriarchs) was running away to his mother’s family in what we know today as southeastern Turkey to escape the murderous purposes of his brother, Esau. And you probably remember that Esau intended to kill his brother because Jacob had stolen Esau’s birthright and blessing through swindling, deceit, and intrigue . . . aided and abetted by their mother, Rebekah.

As Jacob arrived in the neighborhood of the last known whereabouts of his family, he came upon a well where shepherds were preparing to water their sheep. With providential guidance very similar to that which had guided his grandfather Abraham’s servant to the very village where Abraham’s kinfolk lived, so Jacob now found his comely cousin, Rachel, bringing her flocks to the very well at which he sat.

Jacob was smitten at once, and Rachel excitedly took him home to meet her father and the rest of the family. We know that Rachel’s father and his newly-discovered nephew shared in common the fact that both were liars, deceivers, and cheats; but it took them a while to discover this connection. Laban, Rachel’s father (and Jacob’s uncle), asked Jacob what wages he required in order to work on the family estate, and Jacob agreed to work for seven years in return for Rachel’s hand in marriage. Laban agreed to this.

When the time for the wedding eventually came, however, Laban secretly substituted his older and less comely daughter, Leah, for Rachel in the wedding tent. How this subterfuge went unnoticed is an interesting matter to which we will return; but you’ll not be surprised to hear that Jacob was not a happy camper the next morning. Laban made lame excuses of one sort and another, and agreed to let Jacob marry Rachel, too . . . in return for another seven years of work.

So now Jacob had two wives, one he loved and had intended to marry, and one he did not love and had not intended to marry. This set up all kinds of fairly painful and predictable dynamics in the family, and gave birth to a long-standing rivalry between the two sisters. Using the currency most available to them in those days, Rachel and Leah tried to outdo one another by having more children than the other, a contest in which Rachel the beloved was considerably bested by Leah the unloved.

As time went by, twelve sons were born to Jacob through Leah, Leah’s maid, Zilpah, and through Rachel and Rachel’s maid, Bilhah. (You may remember that Abraham and Sarah tried this same have-children-with-my-maid gambit. It didn’t turn out well.) God eventually changed Jacob’s name to “Israel” (“He strives against God”), and Jacob’s twelve sons became the founding fathers of what would later become the Twelve Tribes of Israel. This is the outline of our story, but there is much to read “between the lines.”

I’d like to think with you for a bit about these two sisters, the last of the wives of Israel’s first Patriarchs. Their stories are both passionate and poignant.

Let’s begin with the two verses that are our text for the morning: ***Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful*** (Genesis 29:16-17).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 10, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

One woman wrote, “I used to believe that Genesis 29:17 was the meanest verse in the Bible: *Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful*. No disclaimers. No excuses. The Bible just goes right out and says it: ‘Rachel was hot. Leah was not.’ And that’s it.”²

Jacob was close to his mother, and perhaps he saw his mother in his cousin, Rachel. In any event, the text tells us that Jacob was quickly smitten, and he asked for her hand in marriage before a month had passed.

When the appointed bride-price had been worked off (which took seven years!), treachery entered the story when Laban substituted his older daughter for his younger daughter in the darkness of the bridal tent. Treachery was certainly not out of character for Laban, but Jewish tradition suggests some other possible interpretations of what happened.

One tradition holds that Rebekah and Laban had made an agreement that their children would eventually marry. Rebekah’s oldest, Esau, would marry Laban’s oldest, Leah; while Rebekah’s youngest, Jacob, would marry Laban’s youngest, Rachel.

Complicating this plan, we learn in Genesis 28:9 that Esau married his cousin on his father’s side—Mahalath, the daughter of his uncle, Ishmael—and Laban may have been fearful that the previous arrangement that had secured Leah’s marriage was now off. Because we know that Leah was somewhat less than stunningly beautiful, Laban may have panicked, thinking that the trick he played on Jacob was the only way Leah would ever get married.³

Whatever the truth of the matter, it must have been devastating to Leah for her father to tell her—by his actions, if not his words—“You aren’t pretty enough for any man to ever love you, and I’m never going to get you married if I don’t pull a fast one on Jacob.”⁴

We don’t really know what the text means when it says that Leah had “soft” or “tender” or “weak” eyes. One translation calls them “weary” eyes, and another translation laments “that there was no sparkle in her eyes.”⁵ On this line of reasoning, being deemed undesirable by all of the men who were important in her life, it is no wonder that there was “no sparkle in her eyes.”

I suppose Leah might have agreed to such a deception on the basis of sad agreement with her father’s conclusion; but where was Rachel in this bargain? Did she not have to somehow agree or at least acquiesce to this deception? The Jewish tradition offers a possible explanation for this as well.

According to this tradition, Jacob and Rachel had suspected that Laban might play such a trick, and they had agreed upon a secret password by which the veiled Rachel might confirm to Jacob her true identity as they entered the darkened tent. As the moment of deception came near, this tradition holds that Rachel’s tender heart was unable to bear the thought of the horrendous embarrassment and public shame that would be heaped upon her sister when she was found out and rejected on the wedding night . . . so she gave her sister the password. ⁶

² <http://comparedtowho.me/2015/03/14/rachel-rachel-rachel-three-lessons-leah-can-teach-us-about-beauty-and-body-image/>

³ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-midrash-and-aggadah>

⁴ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-midrash-and-aggadah>

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leah>

⁶ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-midrash-and-aggadah>

What a sacrifice of love that would have been. And what a bittersweet night that must have been for Leah. While she must have desperately wanted to savor the passion that was being poured out on her, she also knew that none of it was intended for her at all.⁷

While such a theory doesn't answer every question about how Jacob might have been deceived, it does help a little bit toward the exclamation, "*but when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah!*" (Genesis 29:25). Can't you imagine the conversation that followed that discovery?! One ancient midrash describes it this way:

All that night he called her "Rachel," and she answered him. In the morning, "there was Leah!" He told her: "What is this, you are a deceiver the daughter of a deceiver!"

She retorted: "And is there a [teacher] without pupils? Did not your father call you 'Esau,' and you answered him falsely? You, too, called me 'Rachel,' and I answered you" (*B'reshith Rabba*, 70:16).⁸

As painful as all that must have been, Leah's wedding celebration continued, and a week later, Jacob was allowed to marry Rachel, too—in return for seven more years of labor.

Neither of these experiences was an auspicious beginning to a marriage. Leah, the pawn in someone else's trickery, now had to live out her life married to a man who did not love her, did not choose her, and did not want her. Every day for the rest of her life, she faced the fact that her husband loved her younger sister, not her.

We can hear this deep pain in her comments as she named her sons: "*Now my husband will love me*"; "*The LORD heard that I was unloved and has given me another son*"; "*Surely this time my husband will feel affection for me*"; "*Now my husband will treat me with respect, for I have given him six sons.*"⁹

And while Leah lived with this sad refrain year after year, Rachel, her younger, beautiful, beloved sister, appeared to have everything going for her except the ability to bear children. Leah seemed to have no problem getting pregnant, so every day for many, many years, Rachel heard the sound of her sister's children outside her tent, and she yearned and wept for a child of her own.¹⁰

Finally, God allowed Rachel to have a son, whom she named Joseph. As the only child and only son of the loved and favored wife, Jacob's deep love for Joseph was beyond his ability to fully express . . . though he tried. And, as the favoritism that had plagued his grandfather, Abraham and his father, Isaac, was passed on from Jacob to Joseph, the poison that favoritism always brings about in families came to harvest once again in the murderous hatred that Leah's sons came to have for Rachel's son.

Not long after Joseph's birth, Jacob took his family back to Canaan, risking the encounter he knew he must have with his twice-robbled brother, Esau. It was on this journey that Jacob wrestled with God's angel and received the new name, "Israel," or "He who strives against God" (Genesis 32:28).¹¹ It was also on this journey that Rachel's second son, Benjamin, was born.

⁷ <http://comparedtowho.me/2015/03/14/rachel-rachel-rachel-three-lessons-leah-can-teach-us-about-beauty-and-body-image/>

⁸ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-midrash-and-aggadah>

⁹ Genesis 29:32, 33, 34, 30:20

¹⁰ <http://discovertheword.org/?p=5964>

¹¹ This return journey includes the puzzling story of Rachel's stealing her father's household gods (Genesis 31:22-42). The Jewish commentators present the interesting view that she stole the gods to

Benjamin was born just outside of what we know as Bethlehem, and Rachel, the beloved wife, died in the process of giving birth. So it was that Benjamin became the only one of “the Twelve Patriarchs” to be actually born in the Promised Land, and his mother’s tomb stands beside the Bethlehem road to this day.

In the end, Leah received honor in death, if not in life, because Jacob buried her in the Cave of Machpelah, where Abraham and Sarah were buried as well as Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 49:29-32). But there’s more.

From Rachel’s son, Joseph, would eventually come Joshua, who would lead God’s people to conquer the Promised Land; and from her son, Benjamin, would come Saul, Israel’s first king. But from Leah, the rejected wife, would come Moses, greatest of all the prophets, Levi, the source of the priesthood, David, Israel’s greatest king, and finally, Jesus, the promised Messiah and heaven’s Eternal King.

As we begin to wrap this up, we can notice first of all that the envy and jealousy that characterized the relationship between these two sister-wives brought nothing good with it. Envy doesn’t solve our problems or get for us what we desire. But it does make us blind to the blessings we already have and miserable about what eludes us.¹²

We can also remind ourselves that there is more to life than physical beauty. Yes, Rachel was certified by the very Word of God as gorgeous, and she thought that being married to her dashing and handsome cousin would make her happy “ever after.” But that didn’t happen.

After all, the Bible wisely tells us that *Charm is deceptive, and beauty does not last; but a woman who fears the LORD will be greatly praised* (Proverbs 31:30). The Bible also tells us not to be concerned about the outward beauty of fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God (1 Peter 3:3-4).

My friend, if physical beauty has been given to you—and be sure of this: it is a gift, not an achievement—then live in gratitude, working always to become as beautiful within as you are without. If God has made you beautiful, then God intends for you to use that beauty to give glory to your Creator, not to yourself.

And if “gorgeous” is not a word often applied to you, remember that God used rejected Leah in powerful—and indeed, in eternal ways—for God’s glory. She became the earthly ancestor of Him who will reign forever and ever in the New Creation.

My friend, if you feel ignored by the men in your life, if you feel unloved by your father, your boyfriend, your husband, or your son, let Leah’s story remind you that God loves you—right at this very moment—with a passionate and holy love that welcomes the person that you are and the body you inhabit. You have a Father who adores you. You have a Father who blesses you. You have a Father who calls you to help transform the world.¹³

When all is said and done, here’s the real deal: Abraham was old, Jacob was insecure, Leah was unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses stuttered, Gideon was poor, Samson was codependent, Rahab was immoral, David had an affair and all kinds of family problems, Elijah

prevent her father’s using dark, voodoo-like powers to harm her and her family.
www.aish.com/jl/b/women/Women-in-the-Bible-4-Rachel-Leah-Part-2.html

¹² <http://discovertheword.org/?p=5964>

¹³ <http://comparedtowho.me/2015/03/14/rachel-rachel-rachel-three-lessons-leah-can-teach-us-about-beauty-and-body-image/>

was suicidal, Jeremiah was depressed, Jonah was reluctant, Naomi was a widow, John the Baptist was weird, Peter was impulsive, Martha was anxious, the Samaritan woman had four failed marriages, Zacchaeus was unpopular, Thomas had doubts, Paul lived with constant pain, and Timothy was timid.

The Bible is filled with misfits, but God used every one of them to change the world. And God will use you, too, if you stop making excuses¹⁴ and choose to “live loved.” Sounds like a pretty good deal to me.

¹⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002), p. 233.