

## **BIBLE WOMEN - Lesson 4**

### **Leah / Rachel / Bilhah / Zilpah**

**By Beverly McKey**

- I. Jacob left his parents and went to Haran to find a wife.**
- A. Rebekah was afraid that Esau would kill Jacob for cheating him out of the blessing from their father.
1. She told Isaac that her life was not worth living because of the Hittite women that Esau had married in Canaan.
  2. She could not bear the thought of Jacob marrying a Canaanite woman, so she begged him to send Jacob back to Haran to find a wife among her relatives.
  3. Isaac spoke to Jacob and instructed him that he must not take a wife from the women of Canaan and that he must go to Haran to take a wife from among his mother's relatives.
  4. When Esau understood how much his parents disapproved of his Canaanite wives, he went to Ishmael (his first cousin) and took Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael as his third wife, in an effort to please his father.
  5. Esau's descendants became the nation known as Edom (Edomites).
- B. Isaac and his family lived in Beersheba in the southernmost part of Canaan.
1. Isaac left there to go north to Haran as he was instructed by his parents. (*See the attached map of the journeys of Abraham's family, Abraham's servant and Jacob*)
  2. Jacob came to a well where three flocks of sheep were resting. (**Genesis 29:1-12**)
    - a. Jacob asked them where they were from – they replied "Haran".
    - b. Jacob asked if they knew Laban, the son of Nahor – they said they did and then they pointed to one of the shepherds and said, "His daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep."
    - c. Jacob greeted Rachel (his first cousin) and told her that he was her father's relative and that Rebekah was his mother.
  3. Rachel ran to tell her father that Jacob had come to visit. (**Gen. 29:13-14**)
    - a. When Laban heard that his sister's son was there he ran to him and embraced him.
    - b. Jacob stayed for a month and worked with Laban.
  4. After the month, Laban realized that Jacob should not work for him for nothing, so he asked Jacob, "What should your wages be?" (**vs. 15-20**)
    - a. Jacob loved Rachel, so he offered to work for Laban for seven years if Laban would give him Rachel for his wife.

- b. Laban agreed to Jacob's terms and Jacob worked for seven years, but because Jacob loved Rachel so much, it seemed like only a few days to him.
- c. At the end of the seven years, Jacob asked Laban to keep his word and give Rachel to him so they could be married.

## II. The deception:

### A. The Marriage: **Genesis 29:21-30**

1. Laban gathered all of the men of the place and held a great feast.
2. In the evening, Laban brought his daughter, **Leah**, to Jacob to finalize the marriage. He also sent Zilpah, her maid, with her.
  - a. The custom at that time was for the bride to wear a veil which was not to be removed until she was taken to her new home with her husband.
  - b. Since it was night, Jacob did not realize that he had taken Leah instead of Rachel.
3. The next morning, Jacob saw that it was Leah and NOT Rachel.
4. Jacob went to Laban and said, *"What have you done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served you? Why then have you deceived me?"* (vs 27)
  - a. The deceiver has now become the deceived.
  - b. **Galatians 6:9** – *"Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap."*

### B. Laban had tricked Jacob, just as Jacob had tricked his own father.

1. Should we be surprised that the brother of Rebekah used trickery to manipulate circumstances in his own favor? Did Rebekah learn such behavior from the family she grew up in?
2. Laban's excuse was that according to their customs, the younger daughter must not be given in marriage before the older daughter.
  - a. Did Laban bother to explain this custom when he made the agreement with Jacob? NO
  - b. Perhaps he thought that surely Leah would be married within this seven year period, and there would be no problem.
  - c. When the seven years were ended and Jacob asked for his reward (Rachel), why didn't he tell Jacob the truth?
  - d. What part did Leah play in the deception? Did she agree to trick Jacob? If not, why did she participate in Laban's plan? Why didn't she identify herself when she went in to Jacob's tent?
  - e. Did Laban's trickery have another motive? Was he taking advantage of this opportunity to marry off his less attractive, older daughter?
    - (1) Women customarily were married at a young age at this time.
    - (2) **Genesis 29:17** refers to Leah's "delicate eyes", but it also states that Rachel was "beautiful of form and appearance".

- (3) The fact that Leah was not married during the seven years may indicate that she had some physical flaw that detracted from her appearance.
3. When Joseph confronted Laban, he was caught between a rock and a hard place, so he offered a solution to Jacob.
- The wedding feast was to last a week, and Laban did not want to be embarrassed before his guests, nor did he want Leah embarrassed.
  - Laban asked Jacob to keep quiet during the week of the feast and then he would give Rachel to him as his wife **IF** Jacob would work seven more years.
    - Is it a coincidence that Laban was greatly benefitted by this deceitful plan? Seven more years of free work from Jacob.
    - Genesis 30:27** – Laban admitted that he had learned by experience that the Lord had blessed him because of Jacob so that he became wealthy.
  - Jacob agreed, since his love for Rachel was great, so he fulfilled the week with Leah and Laban gave Rachel to him as his wife at the end of the week. Bilhah was given to Rachel for her maid.
  - However, Jacob was obligated to work seven more years.

### III. Laban's deception resulted in unhappiness for both of his daughters.

- A. Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. **Genesis 29:30**
- It was not by choice that Jacob was bound to Leah as her husband and Leah knew it.
    - Imagine how humiliating it must have been for Leah to have to resort to deception to get a husband.
    - Leah knew that Jacob loved Rachel and not her.
    - A relationship between sisters, which should have been loving and supportive, became envious and contentious.
  - Even God considered that Leah was "unloved". (**Genesis 29:31**) – *"When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, He opened her womb; but Rachel was barren."*
    - Polygamy was never God's idea, nor did he approve of it.
    - Perhaps this is why He looked favorably upon Leah, since she was indeed the legitimate wife.
    - Leah thought being able to have children would improve her standing with Jacob. (**Genesis 29:31-36**)
      - When Leah gave birth to her firstborn, she named him Reuben and said, *"The LORD has surely looked on my affliction. **Now** therefore, my husband will love me."* (vs. 32)
        - Reuben means "behold a son".
        - By naming him that, she was saying to Jacob, "Look! I have borne a son for you."
        - Leah hoped desperately that by giving Jacob a son, he would surely love her, but he did not.

- (2) When Leah had her second son she said, "*Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also.*" And she named him Simeon (meaning "God has heard that I am unloved"), which I am sure Jacob understood.
- (3) When her third son was born, she said, "*Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.*" (vs, 34) and she named him Levi (meaning "attached or joined").
- (4) After the birth of her fourth son Leah said, "*Now I will praise the LORD.*" Then she stopped bearing children.
  - (a) She named him Judah meaning "Let God be praised."
  - (b) Had Leah finally given up hope that Jacob would ever love her?
  - (c) Had she decided to just accept her children as blessings from God, knowing that Jacob would never love her?

- B. When Rachel saw that her sister was able to give Jacob sons, she envied her sister. Oddly, each sisters envied the other. (**Genesis 301-22**)
1. Rachel blamed Jacob for her lack of children, and said "Give me children or else I will die!" Jacob reminded her that he was not God.
  2. Rachel behaved in the same manner as Sarah. She took matters into her own hands.
    - a. Rachel gave Jacob her maid, Bilhah, in order to raise up children for her.
    - b. Rachel referred to her as a "wife" when in reality she was a "concubine", which is defined as a woman who lives with a married man but has lower status than his wife.
    - c. According to the custom of the time, the children of Bilhah were counted as Rachel's.
    - d. Bilhah gave birth to a son and Rachel said, "*God has judged my case; and He has also heard my voice and given me a son.*" (**Gen. 30:3**) so she named him Dan (meaning judge).
    - e. Bilhah gave birth again to a son and Rachel said, "*With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed.*" and Rachel named him Naphtali (meaning wrestling or fighting).
- C. When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing children, she took Zilpah, her maid, and gave her to Jacob, also as a concubine.
1. When Zilpah gave birth to her firstborn son, Leah named him Gad, which seems to mean "good fortune" .
  2. Again, Zilpah gave birth to her second son and Leah was happy saying she would be called "blessed" because of her children, so she named him Asher, which means "happy".

D. Many years passed, but the envy and friction continued between the sisters.

1. One day when Reuben had been in the field, he brought home some mandrakes. These were plants which apparently were rarely available.
  - a. Jewish commentaries suggest that mandrakes were thought to help barren women to conceive a child.
  - b. Rachel asked Leah for some of her son's mandrakes, Leah responded, *"Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?"* (**Genesis 30:15**)
  - c. Their enmity toward each other was not an insignificant thing.
  - d. Rachel bartered with Leah for the mandrakes by forfeiting her right to be with Jacob that night and allowing Leah to have her time.
  - e. Apparently they each had scheduled time to spend with Jacob. I am sure that Jacob's life was very stressful, being traded back and forth between the feuding sisters, not to mention the concubines.
  - f. Apparently, Rachel thought that by eating the mandrakes, it would end her barrenness and she would finally be able to have children herself.

2. When Leah went in to Jacob that night, she said, *"You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son's mandrakes."* (**Gen. 30:16**)

What sad conditions for a marriage. How could any of them be happy?

- a. This is just another humiliation for Leah – to have to admit that she had to "buy Jacob's attention."
- b. However, Leah is rewarded for her humiliation again when she conceived and she gave birth to a son, named Issachar, which means "I have been paid back for what I hired."
- c. Leah conceived again and gave birth to her sixth son and her hope was rekindled when she regained her ability to provide Jacob with more sons.
- d. Leah said, *"God has endowed me with a good endowment; **now my husband will dwell with me**, because I have borne him six sons."* (**Genesis 30:20**). She named him Zebulun (meaning an endowment or to bestow)
- e. Leah had one more child, a daughter, named Dinah.

E. *"Then, God remembered Rachel and listened to her and opened her womb."*

(**Genesis 30:22**)

1. Rachel has been Jacob's wife for many years and still had no children.
2. When Rachel's first son was born she said, *"God has taken away my reproach."* and *"The Lord shall add to me another son."* So she named her son Joseph (meaning God will increase).

3. Perhaps by this time she had learned some important lessons about trusting in God.

#### **IV. JOSEPH PREPARES TO LEAVE LABAN TO RETURN TO CANAAN.**

- A. The fourteen years of Jacob's service came to an end and he told Laban that he wanted to take his family and his possessions back to Canaan (**Genesis 30:25-41 thru chapter 31**)
  1. Laban was not very excited at the idea of Jacob leaving, so he asked Jacob to stay. Laban said to Jacob, "name your wages and I will give it".
  2. Jacob reminded Laban that when Jacob arrived in Haran, Laban owned very little, but the Lord had blessed Laban since Jacob came and now he had a great amount.
  3. Jacob said, "*What shall I provide for my own house?*" Everything belonged to Laban, so he asked Jacob, "*What shall I give you?*"
    - a. Jacob did not want any "gifts" from Laban, so he struck another bargain with Laban.
    - b. Jacob agreed to feed his flock if he could pass through the flock that day and remove all the speckled and spotted sheep, all the brown ones among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats
    - c. Then all of the newborn lambs and goats from that point forward that were spotted or speckled or streaked would belong to Jacob. This is how he would be able to build up enough wealth to take care of his large family.
    - d. Joseph wanted Laban to know that he did not intend to cheat him and that any animals that were not spotted found among those he selects will be considered stolen.
  4. Laban agreed with this plan, but he didn't trust Jacob to remove all of the spotted animals, which would give Jacob an advantage in breeding animals with spots and streaks.
    - a. Laban removed them and gave them to his own sons to care for at a distance of three days away from where Jacob tended Laban's flocks.
    - b. Since Laban had profitted from the first agreements with Jacob, he intended to profit from this agreement as well.
- B. Jacob was much older and wiser by this time and he thought he had a plan that would provide wealth for him and his family at the expense of Laban, who had often treated Jacob unfairly.
  1. Jacob enacted some practices that can only be considered "superstitions" used by the people in that area. This plan was NOT given to him by God.
    - a. First he prepared rods of green poplar, almond and chestnut trees. He peeled white strips in them and he set these rods before the

- flocks when they came to be watered, believing it would cause the animals to bear spotted and speckled animals.
- b. Then Jacob separated the lambs and made the flocks face toward the streaked and brown flock Laban had separated out originally (even though they were too far away to see them). Jacob also believed these animals would then bear speckled and spotted offspring.
  - c. Thirdly, he separated the flocks to have all of the strong animals together and all of the weaker animals together. Then Jacob placed his rods before the strong animals only so that he would breed stronger animals, while Laban would get weaker flocks.
2. The fact is that none of these superstitious methods were the cause of the increase in the birth of spotted or speckled lambs.
    - a. Because Jacob even tried these superstitious methods gives us some insight into Jacob's attitude toward Laban, which we will discuss further a little later.
    - b. In **Genesis 31:10-13**, Jacob was given a dream by God to let him know that the increase to his flock was by the power of God.
  3. Jacob served Laban six more years and continued to increasing his own flock of spotted and speckled animals.

#### V. God tells Jacob to take his family back to Canaan. (Gen. 31)

- A. Laban's sons saw the amazing increase in the birth rate of the spotted and speckled animals.
  1. While Jacobs herds were quickly increasing, Laban's herds were not thriving as well.
  2. Jacob overheard the brothers saying, "*Jacob has taken away all that was our father's, and from what was our father's he has acquired all this wealth.*" (**Genesis 31:1**)
  3. Jacob also saw that Laban did not favor him as he had before.
- B. **Genesis 31:3** – "*Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your fathers and to your family, and I will be with you."*"
  1. Jacob called Leah and Rachel to the field to tell them his plans.
    - a. He told them that he had served Laban with all his might for 20 years.
    - b. He reminded them that Laban had deceived him and changed his wages ten times.
    - c. He told them that an angel had told him that God had seen all that Laban had done to Jacob and so He caused the flock to produce speckled and spotted offspring.
  2. Jacob may have been surprised to see that Leah and Rachel were happy to accept his plan to leave. Here is what they said about their father:

- a. "We don't have any portion of inheritance from our father."
  - b. "We are considered strangers to our father."
  - c. "Our father SOLD us and completely consumed our money".
    - (1) They felt that they were treated no better than slaves who could be bought and sold.
    - (2) The profit Laban received by having Jacob work for him for twenty years had all been used on himself and their brothers, who would receive all of the inheritance.
    - (3) They told Jacob that all that God had taken from Laban was really what Laban owed them and their children.
    - (4) They counseled Jacob to do whatever God told him to do.
    - (5) About the only thing Leah and Rachel agreed on was their contempt for their father.
3. Jacob set his sons and his wives on camels and carried away all of his livestock and his possessions which he had acquired in the last six years.
- a. Apparently, Jacob had made great profit from the spotted sheep and goats so that he could purchase camels, cattle, donkeys and servants (which will be seen in chapter 32 as they prepare to meet Esau).
  - b. Before leaving, while Laban had gone to shear his sheep, Rachel stole his household idols.
  - c. This is our first confirmation that Laban's household were idolaters. Rachel and Leah had been raised to worship idols instead of God.
  - d. No wonder this family finds deception and dishonesty so easy.
  - e. Jacob and his family left without telling Laban that they were going, so they were gone three days before Laban noticed.
4. When Laban found his idols missing and Jacob's family gone, he chased after them for seven days before he overtook them.
- a. Laban was angry that they left without notice and he accused Jacob of stealing his idols.
  - b. However, God had warned Laban not to do any harm to Jacob.
  - c. Jacob said he was afraid that Laban would try to take his wives from him by force and he told Laban to search his camp for his idols and whoever had them would die – he didn't know Rachel had taken them.
  - d. Rachel hid the idols in the saddle of her camel and sat on it so that Laban did not find them.
  - e. Jacob was then angry and reminded Laban that he had worked for twenty years for Laban with little appreciation. He said to Laban:
    - (1) Your flocks were blessed with high birth rates.
    - (2) I did not eat the rams of your flock.
    - (3) Those that were killed by predators, I did not charge to you; I bore the loss myself.



- (4) You charged me with every loss even of those that were stolen.
- (5) I was with your flock during the drought and during the freezing nights and went without sleep to protect YOUR flock.
- (6) You have changed my wages TEN times and except for the fact that God was with me, you would have sent me away with nothing.
- (7) God has seen how you have treated me and he has rebuked you.
- f. Laban replied: "These are MY daughters and these are MY children and this is MY flock. All that you see is MINE!"
  - (1) However, Laban understood that his daughters had left him voluntarily and taken their sons with them and that God has forbidden him from harming Jacob.
  - (2) Therefore, Laban offered to make a covenant with Jacob saying, "May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent one from another."
  - (3) Laban also warned Jacob that he should not abuse his daughters in any way, nor should he take any other wives, Laban would go against him with force.
  - (4) They set up a memorial pillar and agreed that neither would cross this boundary to do harm to the other.
  - (5) Then Laban blessed his daughters and grandchildren and returned home.

## VI. SETTLING IN CANAAN – Genesis 32-35

- A. Jacob feared meeting Esau even after twenty years of separation.
  - 1. Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau with gifts of cattle and flocks and servants, hoping this would soften Esau's attitude toward him. (**Genesis 32:1-5**)
  - 2. When the messengers returned, they said, "Your brother Esau is coming with 400 men. and Jacob was very afraid. (vs. 6-8)
  - 3. Jacob prayed to God saying, "Deliver me from the hand of my brother, Esau.", then he reminded God that he had promised to make his descendants as the sand of the sea. (vs. 11-12)
- B. Then Jacob arranged his company of animals and people in a caravan to go out to meet Esau.
  - 1. First he sent his servants each with a flock or a herd of goats, cows, donkeys and camels, one herd after another with a distance between each herd. (vs. 14-16)
    - a. Each servant was to explain to Esau that the herd was a gift from Joseph, who was coming behind.
    - b. Then in the night Jacob took his family and crossed the river and Jacob was left behind.
    - c. There he wrestled with the man of God all night until dawn and the man said, "*Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but **Israel**, for you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed.*" (**Genesis 32:28**)

2. When Esau was coming near, Jacob organized his family members:
  - a. First in line he placed Zilpah and her sons, Gad and Asher; and Bilhah and her sons Dan and Naphtali.
  - b. Second he placed Leah and sons Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and her daughter Dinah.
  - c. Last, Jacob accompanied Rachel and her son, Joseph.
  - d. As always, this confirms where Jacob's heart was. He still preferred Rachel and her son over Leah and his ten other sons.
  - e. This preference will prove to be a curse to him in later years, when his ten sons have their fill of his preference for Joseph and sell him to Ishmaelites headed for Egypt.
    - (1) Those ten sons continue the family heritage of deceit and trickery when they bring Jacob the coat he made for Joseph covered with animals blood to convince him that his "favorite" son was dead.
    - (2) However, even their evil plan could not interfere with God's plan to raise Joseph to a position that made it possible for him to save his whole family later.

## VII. GOD SENDS JACOB TO BETHEL Genesis 35

- A. God told Jacob to go to Bethel, where he first stopped to sleep when he ran from Esau so long ago.
  1. When Jacob left his parents, he had set a pillar to mark the place where God spoke to him and he called it "Bethel" as a holy place because God spoke to him there and promised to be with him and bring him back home to this land." (**Genesis 28:18-19**)
  2. When they arrived at Bethel, God reconfirmed that Jacob's name would be changed to Israel (which means "one who wrestles with God") because Jacob wrestled with the angel of God.
  3. God also renewed the promise to make a great nation of his descendants.
- B. Jacob's family then left Bethel on their way to Ephrath (also known as Jerusalem).
  1. Rachel was expecting her second child and he was born before they arrived.
  2. It was a very difficult birth for Rachel and she lived only long enough to name her son Ben-Oni (meaning "son of my sorrow"), however, Jacob changed his name to Benjamin (son of strength).
  3. Rachel was buried and Jacob set a pillar on her grave.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

- A. God had a plan for Jacob which would have been accomplished without the manipulation and deception which several people interjected.

- B. His mother, Rebekah, involved Joseph in the deception that cheated Esau out of the blessing from his father, instead of trusting God to raise him to the leader that God intended for him to be.
- C. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah and he used the fact that Jacob loved Rachel to get seven more years of work out of Jacob.
  - 1. Leah seems to be the innocent pawn in her father's plan, though we have to ask why she tricked Jacob. Perhaps she loved him from the beginning.
  - 2. Jacob loved Rachel at first sight – it was only Rachel he wanted to marry.
- D. Laban may have secured a husband for both of his daughters, but he also ensured that neither of them could be happy.
  - 1. The sisters competed for Jacob's love.
  - 2. The sisters were jealous of each other.
- E. Jacob made his love for Rachel obvious to Rachel and Leah.
  - 1. It seems that Jacob never made an effort to reduce the strife between the sisters.
  - 2. Just like his mother, he also preferred Rachel's children over the other 10 sons and one daughter.
- F. Rachel and Leah were bitter toward their father for what he did to them both.
  - 1. Both sisters had contempt for their father for "selling" them like slaves and using all of the profit of Jacob's work on himself.
  - 2. They were bitter that their father did not set aside a portion of his inheritance for them or their children. Only his sons would benefit.
- G. Leah was truly the sympathetic person in this family drama.
  - 1. Leah was the legitimate wife of Jacob, even if the marriage was accomplished by trickery.
  - 2. It was Leah's sons, Judah and Levi, who were chosen by God for extraordinary purposes.
    - a. Levi was chosen as the tribe of Priests for the nation of Israel and produced Moses and Aaron.
    - b. Judah was chosen to be the tribe that would produce the Messiah, Jesus Christ.
  - 3. Leah (not Rachel) was the one who was buried in the family burial cave at Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah were buried. **(Genesis 49:31)**
    - a. Jacob made his sons promise that he would be buried there as well.
    - b. This gave Leah status as Jacob's wife in death that she never enjoyed in life.

- H. Rachel and Leah introduce their maids into the situation.
  - 1. We know absolutely nothing about Zilpah and Bilhah other than the fact that they were used by their mistresses to produce children that would not even be counted as their own.
  - 2. Perhaps this was because they were never part of God's plan. They were injected into the situation by Rachel and Leah, in an effort to manipulate life for themselves.
- I. Even though Rachel had the love of Jacob, her life was not at all satisfying since she was barren for well over ten years.
  - 1. She envied Leah's ability to produce one child after another.
  - 2. Rachel is the one who first gave her maid to Jacob in order to provide her with children through Bilhah.
  - 3. Finally, when Rachel learned to trust in God, he blessed her with two sons; Joseph would later be the one to save his whole family from the famine consuming their land by moving them to Egypt.
- J. The fact is that God did not need anyone's help to accomplish His plans.
  - 1. God could very well have provided the twelve sons required to be the tribes of his chosen nation of Israel even if either Leah or Rachel had been the only wife of Jacob.
  - 2. When people try to "help" God bring about His plan, it only makes their own lives difficult. God's does not need their help to accomplish His plans, He simply takes the circumstances they create and make it work according to His original plan anyway.
  - 3. This is a lesson we can use in our own lives when things don't seem to be going our way.
  - 4. The phrase "Let go and let God..." is one we must try to adopt. It doesn't relieve us of our responsibility to serve God in every aspect of our lives, it simply reminds us that God's plan is also at work in our lives and we must be willing to accept His will, knowing that it will bring its reward in God's timing.