



In the beginning, God, you created humanity: male and female, in your image; **and you saw that this was very good.**

Yet over the years, we have fallen into the trap of ignoring one half of your creation, imagining that one group is of lesser value than the other. **We ask for forgiveness for the discrimination, oppression, violence, and murder that has been inflicted on women.**

As we reflect on the stories of Rachel and Leah, Zilpah and Bilhah, **may we remember that every human being is made in your image; we all deserve respect and equality. Amen.**

Please read Genesis 29 before the study, if you are able:

The questions we may discuss are listed on the following pages.

(for context) 29:1 Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. 2 As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, 3 and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well.

4 Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." 5 He said to them, "Do you know Laban son of Nahor?" They said, "We do." 6 He said to them, "Is it well with him?" "Yes," they replied, "and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep." 7 He said, "Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." 8 But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together, and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."

9 While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. 10 Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud. 12 And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

13 When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, 14 and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" 16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. 18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." 19 Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." 20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.

21 Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." 22 So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. 23 But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. 24 (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) 25 When morning came, it was Leah! And 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?" 26 Laban said, "This is not done in our country — giving the younger before the firstborn. 27 Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." 28 Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. 29 (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) 30 So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

1 "Biblical marriage"

This passage tells the story of two marriages: Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel. It also includes mention Zilpah, Leah's servant, and Bilhah, Rachel's servant, with whom Jacob later had relationships. Some people today talk loudly about "biblical marriage".

How would you define "biblical marriage"? What does this passage contribute to that understanding? What other marriages of biblical characters are relevant?

2 Leah

Jacob had been instructed by Isaac “not marry one of the Canaanite women” but rather to take a wife from “one of the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother” (28:2). Jacob he needs to work with Laban. On arrival at Haran, or Paddan-Aram, in “the land of the people of the east” (29:1), Jacob early on indicates his interest in Laban’s daughter Rachel. Laban manipulates matters so that Jacob marries Leah—but only after seven years have passed.

How might Leah have felt, being the one rejected? How might she have felt, being pressured by her father to take part in his scheme and hide her identity from Jacob?

3 Rachel

After seven years, Laban had craftily provided Leah as the woman with whom Jacob slept (29:21–22). Laban has always been intent on deceiving Jacob. So there is an ironic twist to the story: the deceiver is deceived, the supplanter has his desire supplanted by a more powerful one. Through all of this, Rachel is the powerless pawn who must obey her father.

*How might Rachel have felt, knowing that she was “the chosen one”?
How might she have felt when she learnt that she would not be able to marry,
as she wished, because of her father’s ruling?*

4 Bilhah and Zilpah

Zilpah and Bilhah; no more than names. Zilpah and Bilhah, slaves in another man’s household. Zilpah and Bilhah, given as possessions to Leah and Rachel. Zilpah and Bilhah, whose fate is determined solely by men.

*How might Zilpah and Bilhah have felt when they were handed over as servants?
when they became enmeshed in a complicated web of emotional relationships?
when they were unable to choose their own future?*

5 Jacob

The production of an heir was an important focus in ancient societies, and an heir for Jacob was necessary to fulfil “the promise that the Lord made on oath ... to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Deut 9:5; Exod 32:13). Jacob was under pressure to produce the heir. Over time, twelve boys—and one girl that we know of—are born.

How might Jacob have felt, having his marriage plans turned upside-down? How might he have felt, having his father-in-law trick him? How might he have felt as he worked for Laban for a second long period of seven years??

6 Laban

The older male protagonist in this story, Laban, appears to have very dubious ethical standards. He does not seem to act with the propriety that we, today, would expect.

*How might Laban have felt, tricking his potential son-in-law?
How might he have dealt with one daughter being chosen, one being rejected?
How might he have spoken to each daughter about his plan?*

7 People of faith in the 21st century

The behaviours and customs in this story are, at many points, alien to us in the 21st century. When we read it, it may well cause all sorts of objections and emotions to arise.

*How does this story feed into our contemporary understanding of marriage?
Does it have anything to say to us? If so, what? How would you preach on this story
so that it stands as “the word of God” to those gathered for worship?*

John’s blog on this passage is at

<https://johntsquires.com/2023/07/27/leahs-eyes-were-lovely-and-rachel-was-graceful-and-beautiful-gen-29-pentecost-9a/>