

Jacob's Ladder and the Story of Rachel and Leah

Before we investigate the tumultuous relationships between Jacob, Rachel and Leah a few words should be said about a short passage that occurs in Genesis 28:10-15. When Jacob is fleeing from his brother's anger and seeking a wife for himself (Genesis 28:1-5) he stops for a rest in the land of Haran and has a dream. In this dream the promises that form the central idea of the Patriarchal history in Genesis come to the fore yet again, this time before Jacob:

“Jacob departed from Beer-sheba, and proceeded toward Haran. When he came upon a certain shrine, as the sun had already set, he stopped there for the night. Taking one of the stones at the shrine, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep at that spot. Then he had a dream: a stairway rested on the ground, with its top reaching to the heavens; and God's messengers were going up and down on it. And there was the LORD standing beside him and saying: ‘I, the LORD, am the God of your forefather Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants. These shall be as plentiful as the dust of the earth, and through them you shall spread out east and west, north and south. In you and your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing. Know that I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I have done what I promised you.’” Genesis 28:10-15

This is one of the first times in sacred scripture the Divine Author gives us a glimpse, however fleeting, of heaven. The Church Father's made much of the ladder in Jacob's dream. St. Bede saw the ladder as an allegory for the Church, i.e., the means by which we can get to heaven. Those of us well versed in the doctrine of Heaven and Hell might skip over this casual allusion to heaven, yet for the Jews, talk of Heaven, the “abode of God,” (Genesis 28:17) was something extremely new. The Lord is opening up not only a new way of dwelling in the world, (i.e., in a covenantal relationship with Him alone) but also showing His people that there is a place beyond the world as well. For the Jews of this time the idea of another world (the idea of Heaven as we have come to know it) was a very novel idea. The Jews believed that death brought them to the land of *Sheol* - to a land where there was no rejoicing and souls wandered aimlessly. This belief was very similar to the way the Greeks and later the Romans viewed the afterlife.

This glimpse of the abode of God again solidifies for the Israelites the promises of land, numerous descendants and, most importantly the promise that God would be with them throughout their journeys.

From the vision of Heaven we now journey along with Jacob further into the land Haran. There he comes upon a well, much like the one encountered by Abraham's servant as he searched for Isaac's bride. By this time in the narrative we should know what to expect when someone approaches a well in the Bible. There one will find not only a beautiful young woman, but also one who will be an integral part of the story. Like the earlier story of Rebekah, the meeting with Rachel will have tremendous import for the remainder of the story of Jacob. Through her the promises made to Abraham of many descendants will be carried out.

There are, however, a few things that differ from the previous incident. First, unlike the story of Rebekah, it is Jacob himself and not a servant who ventures into a foreign land to find a wife. Secondly, unlike the servant, Jacob takes charge and plunges into the situation, even kissing the young woman on their first encounter. Lastly, (and we will presently investigate this) Jacob will not have as easy a time taking his bride (or in this case brides) home, as the servant had with his mother, Rebekah.

In yet another example of what we have to call at this point "traditional biblical cunning", Jacob's Uncle Laban secures fourteen years of servitude from the young man in exchange for his brides. Laban accomplishes this by promising Rachel to Jacob after seven years of service. When the time is up, Laban tricked Jacob and replaces Rachel with his older daughter Leah. He then requires another seven years of labor from Jacob for him to obtain the true object of his affections, Rachel.

It is somewhat surprising that someone as clever as Jacob could be bested by Laban, but bested he was. More important than this romantic story of bait and switch, is the future progeny that will result. Leah, although hated by her husband ([Genesis 29:31](#)), gave birth to four sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. Because Rachel remained barren her maidservant was given to Jacob (as was the custom of the time) and she in turn bore two sons, Dan and Naphtali ([Genesis 30:1-8](#)). If those names look familiar to you they should, as many of them went on to become the founding fathers of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Through these offspring the family history of the Jews will be fulfilled.

For Christian readers the story of the births and naming of Jacob's children seems to be of little import. These sons became the heads of families that evolved into tribes carrying their names. What the tribes of nomadic Jews call themselves in the centuries before Christ does not appear to be all that significant for the average Christian reader. For the Jews, however, these stories were crucial. Remember, two of the fundamental questions the Jews were asking of their sacred texts are "Who are we?" and "Why are we here?"

The stories in Genesis about the progeny of Jacob solidify the belief that the Jewish people are descendants of the sons of Jacob. These men would become the fathers of the tribal confederation by which the Jews would organize themselves throughout much of their history. The names mentioned here will be extremely important not only in the rest of the Book of Genesis but beyond.

These names will appear again in the Book of Exodus as well as in the Book of Joshua (with all its wonderful stories about the conquering Israelite tribes) and throughout the Old Testament. Some will appear more frequently than others and some will have greater import, but for now we are witnessing (in a literary way) the beginnings of the organizational structure of the Israelites.