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Leah and Rachel

The Apostle Paul's Letter to the Ephesians Chapter 5 includes the verses:

"Let all bitterness and wrath, anger, clamor and slander: be put away, along with all malice; Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Be imitators of God, as beloved children of God. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Here, I am paraphrasing "Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the LORD; Husbands be subject to your wives, as the church is subject to Christ. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother to cleave unto his wife, that the two become one.' This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; let each of you love the other as themselves, and let each respect the other."

After spending weeks on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, this week the book of Genesis focuses on sisters who are extremely misunderstood. Their story begins with a competition between men, which then shifts to the sisters (pitted against one another as possessions of their father, then in competition for their husband by being married to the same man) EVENTUALLY instead choose to make themselves subject to one another, lending their power to the needs of the other, to their spouse, and to the Will of God.

Jacob had been sent to his Mother's brother Laban, under the guise of securing a wife, but truthfully to protect Jacob from what he has done. After walking without a map for 85 miles, Jacob stops at a Well to ask directions of the local shepherds. At the Well, Jacob learns not only has he stumbled upon his destination, but his Uncle Laban is wealthy and powerful, and the father of Rachel, who is gorgeous. Introducing himself, Jacob explains the story of deceiving his brother for the Birthright and deceiving their father for Isaac's Blessing, to which Laban affirms "You are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," meaning Laban recognizes himself in Jacob. After being a guest in their home for a week, Laban asks Jacob what he wants to do. Jacob confessing his love for Rachel, volunteers to work as an indentured servant for 7 years in order to marry her. Laban agrees and in a beautiful love story the 7 years pass as if 7 days.

Over the years, I have married a great number of couples, some with very brief engagements, some living together for years before marriage, but a 7 year engagement sounds like a test of commitment. In American culture the climax of wedding planning is what Photographers call "The First Look" as the Groom and congregation witness the bride adorned in her gown for the wedding. However, being Middle-eastern, the Bride comes to this Wedding in a full Hijab Burka, heavily draped from head to foot. Not until the morning after, does Jacob ever realize Laban tricked Jacob to publicly marry, privately consummate the wedding, with Laban's first-born daughter Leah, not Rachel.

This practice of multiple wives is strange to us, but when I traveled in South Sudan, I was regularly offered wives to bring back to America. My reply was always "I did not think my wife Judy would approve." To which the potential wives would invariably reply "No one ever asked our permission!" The grammar of Biblical translation is at times difficult for us to understand. While Rachel is described as being beautiful, her older sister Leah is described as having "Weak or Soft Eyes." This could be a word-play, because with a full veil and headdress and Burka, the only part of the anatomy that is visible would be the eyes! For years I thought this meant Leah was nearsighted, had a lazy eye, or cried a great deal; but I have come to believe this has nothing to do with Leah's vision or appearance! Instead, Leah's description each time she

births a baby is how God has now witnessed her affliction, how God has seen, and how now her husband will see her devotion. The Weakness of Leah Eyes represents her desire for God and others to SEE her.

Among the hardest circumstances to forgive, are when we have been betrayed by those we have loved and given our lives to serve. A willing vulnerability of trust has been opened over years, that when violated betrayal becomes mixed with shame. Similar to the betrayal of Jacob by Laban, is the shame and rejection of Leah, that the one you have given yourself to, loves another; and the violation of Rachel, whose hopes and desires were ignored by their father. Laban so manipulates everyone that he then comes up with the solution that Jacob and Leah complete their week of honeymoon, then take Rachel as Jacob's 2nd-wife, BUT ONLY IF Jacob will make himself an indentured servant for yet another 7 years.

Somehow, when we are marrying, the wedding appears to be the biggest event in life. However, after the wedding, the birth of children often becomes a bigger issue. Where Rachel possesses ALL of Jacob's love, Rachel is unable to conceive. Her sister Leah is totally unloved but seems to become with-child simply by looking at him, bearing 4 sons: Rueben Simeon, Levi and Judah.

Demonstrating that these wives are as manipulative of others as their father had been; when each woman is unable to conceive, first Rachel then Leah give their servants Bilhah and Zilpah as concubines to Jacob, accepting Sarah's premise using Hagar, that if Rachel and Leah own these servants, then the children of Bilhah and Zilpah are the children of the women who own their birthmothers. Bilhah bares 2 sons: Dan and Naphtali; Zilpah bares 2 sons Gad and Asher.

Then because Rachel lends Jacob to Leah, Leah bares 2 more sons and a daughter, Issachar, Zebulun and Dinah. We routinely refer to the children as the Sons of Jacob, who become the various tribes of Israel, but in the text it is quite transparent, the Mothers are the ones who give each one their name, and while Jacob may be expert in breeding sheep his wives each use every gift at their disposal for bearing children. After all these things, the Bible says "God remembered Rachel and she bore her first-born son named Joseph, meaning 'God has taken away my reproach, may the LORD add to me yet another son'." Years later, just outside Bethlehem, Rachel conceived again, but in her childbirth of Benjamin, Rachel died.

Following the birth of Rachel's first-born Joseph, Jacob decides to return to his home and country. When Jacob first arrived, their father Laban used his daughters as a bribery payment for Jacob's servitude. Now 20 years later when Jacob wants to leave, Laban tries to say that Jacob came with no dowry, so everything Jacob claims to possess: his wives, his children, his flocks, ALL Belong to Laban. Suddenly, power in this story shifts. Jacob's wives choose to unite together to give their power to their husband, instead of their father. There is nothing in the text that says they held anything against their father, and presumably if Leah and Rachel had stayed with their father Laban, Jacob's children would have as well. Jacob then attempts to tell Rachel and Leah that God told him that all he had earned was rightfully his own, but they insist they are lending their power to Jacob. Even more striking, the first-born Leah subjects herself to Rachel as leader of the pair, Rachel taking the role of First-Wife, with Leah as Secondary.

Hundreds of years later, after Jacob and his family return to the Promised Land; after there is a famine in Israel Jacob takes his family to Egypt; after generations of Slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt; after 40 years wandering with Moses, after the generations coming into the land with Joshua and the Judges, there was a famine in Bethlehem. AND a man named Elimelech took his wife and their sons Northeast, where they were like Jacob = sojourners in a foreign land. The sons took wives of that place, Elimelech and the sons then died. The wife, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law to return to the homes of their fathers, while she went home to Bethlehem to live out her days. Yet the younger daughter Ruth gave her power to that of Naomi, saying "Wherever you go I shall go, your people shall be my people, your God will be my God."

Without companion, these two women made their way to Bethlehem, and made their way in the world. Naomi lending her power to the younger woman Ruth to become the Great Grandmother of David the King. And when Ruth was claimed by Boaz, "All of the people said 'We are Witnesses. May the Lord make Ruth, the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the House of Israel.'"