



Bible-study: 2020/07/26 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Genesis 29:15-28

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

Personally, I think that the passage, today, uses some clumsy phrasing, which makes the narrative a little hard to understand. Allow me to restate it: Jacob was among his kin – extended family, distant relatives – in 'Paddan-aram' [Gen. 28:2a], the area around the city of Haran [29:4] in what today we'd call the Syrian-Turkish border-region. And he was trying to secure himself a wife. This takes place about 1923 B.C.¹

His uncle, Laban, had two daughters, but they are withheld until Jacob had fulfilled a contract of seven years of work as a shepherd. Then, on the wedding night, the one that Jacob had met first and fallen in love with – Rachel – is swapped out for her older sister. Jacob doesn't realize the exchange until it was too late and he had consummated marriage to the wrong one: Leah. After he had 'completed her week' – that is, when the traditional matrimonial festivities which lasted seven days had ended, *then* Laban gives Rachel over too, but, in return, Jacob agrees to stay on in his father-in-law's employment for *another* seven years.²

What we see, then, is that, in this remote (early Bronze Age) period, marriage was 'a commercial event'.³ Thus, one of the uncomfortable but unavoidable truths that emerges from this morning's text is that women were commodities in the Ancient Near East; *property*. The possessions of their fathers in the most exact sense of the word. And indeed, the Old Testament actually specifies what they were worth: no more than fifty shekels of silver: [Deut. 22:29]. This was one hundred shekels *less* than a good warhorse, bred and bought from Egypt: [1 Kgs. 10:29]. And, approximately, the same price and value as a small bar of gold: [2 Sa. 24:24]. What do you make of that?

Furthermore, notice too, regrettably, in what one-dimensional terms the women – Rachel and Leah – are described: we hear just about their beauty – or lack of it in Leah's case. ← Yes, the N. R. S. V. says about her eyes that they were 'lovely' [Gen. 29:17a], which is no bad thing; but it is clear that this detail is meant to "damn by faint praise." Are you familiar with that expression? Or is it an English thing? It's one of my favorites! It refers to a compliment extended only for the sake of politeness, when really, in all honesty, you didn't have anything nice to say at all. For example, imagine someone were to ask you: "What's your vicar like?" And you said, after an awkward, thoughtful pause: "Well, he's very tall!" *That* would be to "damn (me) by faint praise." (Faint means, minor; *trivial*.) And anyway, a *better* translation of the adjective (about

¹ See: Steinmann, Andrew (2019), *Genesis (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 191.

² For this interpretation, see: Zucker, David J. (2015), *The Matriarchs of Genesis: Seven Women, Five Views*, Eugene, O. R.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 197.

³ Stol, Marten (2016), *Women in the Ancient Near East*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 127.

her eyes) might be, in fact, that they were “weak.”⁴ (That she was short-sighted.)

Nothing is said, then, about the character or virtue of these women; about them as God-fearers; as *saints*. In fact, of course, they weren't: when Jacob departs for home with his wives, Rachel smuggles with her 'her father's household gods': [Gen. 31:19]. *Idols*, in other words. Small, probably baked clay statuettes that were supposed to depict the local, *fictional* deities. Now, the reason for stealing them is debated among commentators: that Rachel was angry with her father at having been sold off like livestock, and so on. But what their mere existence exposes is that these women that Jacob was bringing into the sacred land of Canaan, a land set apart for Jews, for the creation of a holy nation dedicated to Yahweh, were pagans; *polytheists*. And the fact isn't worthy of comment! Not by the author and not by Jacob, who, patently, was only interested in one thing: that Rachel 'was graceful and beautiful': [29:17b]. Specifically, in fact, what interested him was – if we turn to a more literal translation like the E. S. V.'s – her – and I quote – 'form'; her 'figure'[N. I. V.]. In other words, Jacob's criteria for a suitable life-partner would have been met by the waitresses in any Hooter's restaurant. *So I am given to understand by hearsay*: I couldn't possibly say whether this is true myself.

This incident – the theft of Laban's “gods,” ‘one of the most curious stories of the patriarchal accounts’,⁵ omitted in the Lectionary schematic of Sunday readings, demonstrates, of course, that there was more to Rachel than just her...shapeliness: She conceals them by a clever ruse during a search of the camel-train for them, by pretending she was menstruating and unable to rise from her saddle without embarrassment; and by so doing proves that she was a trickster and a schemer of comparable prowess to her husband.⁶ (Just think back to how he obtained his brother's birth-right, in particular.) *And yet*, uncharitably, mischievously, one might say that her stealing and dishonesty play into a negative characterization of woman in the Bible.

Whether this is true or not, certainly none of the characters – and the historian (behind *Genesis*) recording these things – seem especially interested in Rachel and Leah *as people*. At most they 'are silent bystanders'.⁷ Do they love Jacob in return? Was *he* attractive to them? Were they happy to marry this stranger from faraway? At face value, these questions aren't important, and that they don't seem to occur to anyone to ask may lead us to think poorly of the men under discussion, *and even of God*. Why isn't this 'savage reality' not challenged?⁸ – Why doesn't the divinely-favored “hero” – Jacob, or our Lord (Himself), not rebuke this misogyny that seems *to us* to underly what takes place?

Well, we should be careful too to picture the situation of male-female relations among the earliest Hebrews as it's presented and not import *into* the Book ideas or impressions from our own knowledge of places like Saudi Arabia,

⁴ See: Bellis, Alice Ogden (2007), *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, Second Edition, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 72.

⁵ See: *The Chronological Study Bible: N. I. V.* (2014), Nashville, T. N.: Thomas Nelson, 46.

⁶ Bellis (2007), 72.

⁷ Cotter, David W. (2003), *Genesis (Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry)*, Collegeville, M. N.: The Liturgical Press, 223.

⁸ Antonelli, Judith S. (2004), *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah*, Lanham, M. D.: Rowman & Littlefield, 80.

Iran or Afghanistan. Yes, there may be some similarity – “similarity” that gives us (westerners) disquiet, but what, I ask you, do we *actually* see in *Genesis* [chapter] twenty-nine? One thing I notice is that when Jacob initially encounters Rachel she is among a crowd of men ‘*in the field*’ with the ‘flocks of sheep’: [v.2a]. These men are called ‘brothers’ by Jacob, but it is for the sake of friendliness. And when he asks if they ‘know’ Laban, their response is “We do....and here is *his* daughter”: [4-6a]. What’s my point? They *don’t* claim her as *their* sister. She wasn’t. They aren’t, then, *her* chaperones, which would be required in seemingly “similar” (strict) Islamic tradition. Rather, Jacob finds her intermingling with shepherds. *She* herself, we’re told, *explicitly*, is a shepherd [v.9]; not, therefore, a pitiful prisoner in her father’s tent. And this is no cause for scandal or concern; her life, then, wasn’t quite so closeted as we might *prejudicially* presume.

Indeed, though the dynamics we see in the passage are often disparaged as “patriarchy” by feminists,⁹ ‘a critical mass of leading evangelical and non-evangelical scholarship concurs that patriarchy in the modern sense of the term does not adequately reflect the [reality revealed]’, but *caricatures* it.¹⁰ Yes: ‘In short, male dominance was real; but it was fragmentary, not hegemonic.’¹¹ We need, in other words, to make room for nuance; *complexity*.

I want to say too, that though the world we’re glimpsing in our text is, *in a sense*, indisputably a *patriarchal* one, we mustn’t confuse this *for* misogyny; that is, a *contempt* or low opinion of the female. The truth is, patriarchy – although imagined as ‘a nightmare of oppression for women’,¹² and certainly possessing an abusive potentiality – protected them in an anarchic political system. That “protection” seems to us to be *domineering* or *illegitimate* because we enjoy a *very* different status quo – a *statist* one, in which tax-funded organizations separate from and more powerful than “the father” or “the husband” can be, more-or-less, relied upon to guard and care for us *as individuals*. Furthermore, in the (affluent) “Global North,” in Europe and so on, there is a “thick” civil-society, which, to some degree, complements the government’s role by, such as, church-run food-pantries, human-rights “watches,” night-shelters, and so on. This system is far from comprehensive and we can talk about its shortcomings, but my point is that there was *nothing* like these things; these *structures* in the period in which the events of *Genesis* [chapter] twenty-nine transpired.

And, I suggest to you, it is in large part because of our unusual contemporary cultural climate that we are readily predisposed to regarding the father – Laban’s – control over his daughters as suspect, yet are more comfortable with the thought of politicians, federal agents and unformed

⁹ See: Meyers, Carol L. (2014), ‘Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Volume 133, No. 1, pp. 8-27, 8.

¹⁰ Köstenberger, Andreas J. and Köstenberger, Margaret (8th of August, 2014), ‘Does the Bible Reflect a Patriarchal Bias?’, *Crossway Articles*, available at <https://www.crossway.org/articles/does-the-bible-reflect-a-patriarchal-bias/>, (accessed July 24, 2020).

¹¹ Meyers (2014), 27.

¹² See: Newbell, Trillia (15th of October, 2012), ‘Biblical Womanhood and the Problem of the Old Testament’, available at <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/biblical-womanhood-and-the-problem-of-the-old-testament>, (accessed July 23, 2020).

soldiers exercising similar. After 9/11, for instance, there was a great storm of debate about balancing “security” and “freedom,” but fundamentally *most* accepted that “Dubya” (or Tony Blair in the U. K.) *should* take *some* steps against Jihadis even if that meant more inconvenient intrusions by them into our daily lives in terms of surveillance, more stop-and-search, longer periods of detention of suspects without bringing charges, and so forth. That is their *role*. Well, it was Laban’s “back then.” And then Jacob’s.

Also, we must acknowledge that our own ideas about what is right and wrong in regard to these matters aren’t *the* (perfect) moral “plumbline” against which other cultures and historical moments must “measure up.” But are shaped and influenced by what Saint Paul calls ‘a crooked and perverse generation’: [Phil. 2:15]. And as I attempted to lay aside my particular opinion for the sake of preparing this script, I found myself wondering: “To what extent did the need for suitors to *purchase* wives from prospective fathers-in-law act as way to encourage; *to incentivise* men to become reliable, hard-working, good providers?” I sympathise that this proposal may “stick in your throat.” But *fifty* shekels – though I made much of it as being less than the value of a good horse(!) – wasn’t, actually, a small sum. (Horses were *rare* in Canaan; *precious*.) And to have had to raise any kind of capital would have guarded against “shotgun weddings” to feckless, lazy men looking for cheap, easy sex, and that’s no bad thing, right? In fact, I wonder if the commonly-held expectation of a *diamond* engagement ring in The West “springs” from a similar calculus: it *demonstrates* a modicum of seriousness; of (genuine) *commitment* by the hopeful bachelor.

(If you’re curious to explore this topic further, I suggest the work of the sociologist, Mark Regnerus, professor at the University of Texas at Austin. In an article published in *Slate* magazine, for instance, he argued that the growth of “hook-up” culture – the normalization of (pre-marital) promiscuity – has direct bearing on the declining success of American males versus that of their sisters: higher rates of unemployment; less likely to go to university, etcetera. ‘[I]t’s all thanks to supply and demand.’ He argues.¹³)

We should also be careful not to, perhaps, misread Rachel and Leah’s passivity: It may be neither cowardice – *timidity* – on their part *nor* callous, bullying disregard by the other characters. Rather, Rachel and Leah may have *willingly* submitted to events because they had *truly* internalized Christ’s (later) command to put the needs of those around them before their own: [Mk. 12:31]. After all, as Hans Urs von Balthasar, a Swiss theologian and priest, perhaps the most important Roman Catholic theologian of the twentieth-century, said that the Christian calling – modelled on the Savior’s – is ‘for man to love his neighbor...[so] infinitely and limitlessly, [that he can be said to be truly] at the disposal of the work of God’.¹⁴ And this is what Rachel and Leah do. They fully and completely submit to their father’s *disposing* of them to be Jacob’s wives. Which is to say, you and I can *choose* to focus on what appears to be Laban’s

¹³ ‘Sex Is Cheap’ (25th of February, 2011), available at <https://slate.com/human-interest/2011/02/sex-is-cheap-why-young-men-have-the-upper-hand-in-bed-even-when-they-re-failing-in-life.html>, (accessed July 23, 2020).

¹⁴ As quoted in Walatka, Todd (2017), *Von Balthasar and the Option for the Poor: Theodramatics in the Light of Liberation Theology*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 152-153.

reprehensible behavior/attitude toward his precious girls, *or* we can focus instead on what might be their *remarkable* example of discipleship.