

Rachel and Leah - Sarah Rossouw

As some of you may know, I embarked on the Foundations in Ministry course in August last year. I have learnt so much already and am eager to get started with the second semester next week. One thing that has really made an impression on me is that when we read the bible we are reading a book that was written about a time approximately 2000 years ago. It was a world very different from the one we know and is set in a culture that is far removed from anything most of us have experienced. I have found that keeping that in mind as I read the Bible and grapple with its meaning gives me a very different perspective and adds a kind of richness. I did not know much about Rachel and Leah until I settled down to prepare for tonight. And I found that this point about a different culture and a different time to be very relevant in what I learned.

Jacob, son of Isaac, has cheated his brother Esau out of his birth right and his blessing due to him as the elder son. Esau is now plotting to kill Jacob so Isaac and Rebekah send Jacob away to the house of Rebekah's brother Laban. Laban has two daughters, Leah, the eldest and Rachel. When Jacob reaches Haran where Laban lives, he meets Rachel at the well. The wells in those days were the social gathering spots and a great place to go and look for a wife! Jacob agrees with his uncle that he will work for him for 7 years if he can have Rachel as his wife. But when the time comes, Laban cheats and gives Jacob Leah instead, saying that as the eldest, she needs to be married first. But he agrees that Jacob can also have Rachel as his wife if he agrees to work for another 7 years. Jacob, however, loved Rachel far more than he loved Leah.

It was a life of tragedy and competition for Rachel from there. The two sisters constantly tussled to see who could give Jacob more children. But for many years, Rachel is barren. The only children she gives to Jacob is through her servant, Bilhah, as a surrogate. Even still, Rachel is known as a matriarch of the people of Israel. Eventually Rachel falls pregnant and gives birth to Joseph, and then again later, but dies in giving birth to Benjamin.

Now this is where it starts to get interesting. There are a number of matriarchs in Genesis and while their stories are important, what is more important is what they convey about the nuances of society in which they live. Between Leah and Rachel, they give Jacob 12 sons, and the 12 tribes of Israel are born. And so a completed web of how these tribes interact of the coming generations is started. Another theme is the prominence of marriage and childbearing. Unlike in our society now, not only does marriage and childbearing have a direct bearing on a woman's standing in the society then, it also has a far more important place because that culture is group oriented and not individual oriented. It was far more about 'we' and 'I', far more about the collective survival of both men and women. And in this case it was especially important in the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham to make a great nation out of his descendants. Infertility is a recurring pattern within this. Rachel's protracted period of infertility signals the special importance of the child she finally gives birth to: Joseph. And Joseph was a very central and important figure in those times. The story of his brothers selling him as a slave, the time Joseph spent as an advisor to Pharaoh in Egypt, making sense of his dreams, and the people he saved through is influence in that position. He was a man with a strong moral compass, doing the work of God.

But there is a little twist to this tale. Much is made of Rachel and then of Joseph. Rachel was the one most loved by Jacob and Joseph played a prominent role. But it was in fact Leah who was the mother of Judah. And Judah was ancestor to King David, and the blood line to Jesus Christ.

Amen.