

"By faith . . ."

Leah

Ray Walker

IT MUST BE a most hurtful experience to be unwanted. And it must for a girl be very hurtful indeed to be the plain (or blemished) sister of a beautiful younger sibling. Leah had had this experience all her early life.

We do not know exactly why she was unattractive, except that her eyes were involved. Was she sore-eyed? Did she have a bad squint? Whatever it was, Leah's younger sister was now eligible for marriage, and so far Leah remained unwanted. Laban had a problem, and was afraid Leah might never leave his household.

The devious Laban sought to unload his problem by cheating Jacob. This is entirely to be expected from a man such as he was. But why did Leah join in his scheme to pass herself off as Rachel, and trap Jacob into marriage with her? Was she desperate to marry? Was she an obedient daughter, accepting her father's word without question? Or, just possibly, had she fallen deeply in love with Jacob? All we know is that she gave Jacob no inkling of her identity until he had consummated the marriage.

What followed in the morning was Jacob's horror at finding her instead of Rachel. It was a dreadful thing for Jacob, but surely just as wounding for Leah, seeing the anger and disgust on Jacob's face.

It says much for Jacob's character that he accepted his lot, shouldering the burden of a second, unwanted, wife. Leah must have known that she was not wanted by him, as daily she would have seen Rachel and Jacob in company together, and herself outside.

But God had a purpose with Leah: "And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, He opened her womb: but Rachel was barren" (Gen. 29:31). Leah had the joy and comfort of children, and through them the hope that Jacob would treat her as his true, loved, wife. "Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have born him three sons" (v. 34), she said after the birth of Levi. After Leah had left bearing, Jacob must have spent little time with her, for she 'hired' him from Rachel for a night by giving her mandrakes gathered by young Reuben. And she began to bear children again.

Genesis 31:33 gives us an insight into the family arrangements. Jacob, Leah, Rachel and the handmaids would have had either individual rooms in Laban's house or individual tents. Jacob must thus have spent his nights in the different rooms or tents of the four wives, and it is clear that he spent most nights with his beloved Rachel.

At length Rachel conceived a son, Joseph. Six years later Jacob felt he must leave Padan-aram in haste. Leah and Rachel had the choice of following him or staying with their father. Both chose to go with Jacob, and by now their rivalry seems to have come to an end, for Rachel had a son, Leah had "a good dowry" of sons, and Jacob seems to have accepted her as his chief wife: "now will my husband dwell with me, because I have born him six sons" (30:20). When Jacob asked them to go with him to the land of his kindred, they made a joint decision, acting together instead of against each other: "whatsoever God hath said unto thee, do" (31:16).

So the encampment of Jacob moved into the Promised Land, and settled down near Shechem. Leah must have been very distressed when her youngest, Dinah (probably in her early teens), was raped by a prince's son (also called Shechem) and kept by him. It was Leah's older sons, Simeon and Levi, who took revenge on the Shechemites, after deceiving them into being circumcised. As a result the family had to move again, and in the travelling Rachel bore Benjamin and died.

At last Leah had her dominant place in the family, so long desired; but at what unwanted cost! But it was not all ashes; for Leah now became mother to Rachel's children as well as her own, for later, when Joseph recounted his dreams to his father, Jacob said, "Shall I and *thy mother* and thy brethren . . . ?" (37:10). The mother here must have been Leah, since Rachel had been dead some time. After the death of Rachel, Leah had therefore found it in her heart to be mother to the two small boys of her one-time rival.

Jacob buried Leah in the cave of Machpelah, and, later, Jacob himself was laid to rest beside her. So, when the final trumpet sounds, they will rise together, and Leah at last will stand by her husband in glory and in beauty.