

for Yahweh Himself was *personally* unable to do it, and so He achieved it through His Son. The service is explained in Isaiah 53:11: “by his knowledge shall My righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities”. God Who cannot look upon sin and is totally separate from sin was unable *personally* to identify with us and die for us, and therefore He sent His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.

The Apostle Paul describes this, and the extent to which the service went, in Philippians 2:7,8: “[Jesus] made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”. We

are talking of the greatest man who ever lived, without exception, and he submitted humbly to die for the ungodly that his Father might be glorified and we might be saved.

Shall we complain about our service? Is anything too menial for us? Would we wash the dirty feet of Judas Iscariot? Compared with the quality and extent of service that our Lord offered we are completely unworthy. Do we have the attitude that the Lord said we should have in Luke 17:10: “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do”? We too are called by God to be His servants; let us strive to be faithful, as was Christ.

(To be continued)

Exposition

The faithful of old— studied by the young

Rachel: a woman who received God’s grace

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WHAT DO YOU think of when you first think of Rachel? That she married Jacob? That Jacob loved her more than Leah? Or do we think of her being the mother of Joseph and Benjamin? Or even the one who stole the teraphim and lied to her father? What about the fact that she was always fighting with her sister? Before I started studying the life of Rachel, these were the things I brought to mind, and you may agree that this view is quite a negative one. However, I hope to show that there is very much more to the life of Rachel. She, like us, struggled at times both with her circumstances and with her faith, and we should draw comfort and encouragement from this knowledge.

We cannot separate Rachel from those around her in telling her story, because their actions affected her and elicited reactions from her. In the same way she would have had a profound effect on those around her. In a small way, then, her story is a cameo of ecclesial life.¹

Meeting and marriage

Rachel is first introduced to us at the well of Haran, where she slowly comes towards us in order to water her sheep. Jacob had made his way there from Beth-el, where the God of the Covenant, Yahweh, had revealed Himself to him, renewing and binding Jacob into the promises He had made to Abraham, reminding Jacob that God had a purpose both for him and for the Land which he was leaving. God had promised that He would return Jacob to the Land, and that He would not leave him until His purpose had been fulfilled. Jacob had arrived in Beth-el feeling depressed and dejected—on the run from his brother—and looking for solace and comfort with his mother’s family whom he had never met. The promise received directly from Yahweh persuaded Jacob that he was not alone in the world and that he would be looked after wherever he went. Thus,

1. See 1 Corinthians 12:12; 10:11.



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Jacob had risen up early in the morning, vowed that the Lord should be his God (Gen. 28:21), and, knowing that God was with him, enthusiastically continued his journey to Haran to find his uncle and a wife.

When Jacob arrived in this region of Babylonia he saw a well in a field, and, repeating the steps of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, approached it to seek intelligence about his family from the shepherds already gathered there. The shepherds told him that they came from Haran and knew Laban. Haran signifies 'roads', and Jacob would have realised that God had guided him there. When we look back on the circumstances of our life, we too can see our heavenly Father's hand guiding our path, and we can take comfort and strength from this knowledge. How excited Jacob must have been, knowing that, just a day after his encounter with the angel of the LORD, God was already keeping His promise!

As Jacob was talking with the shepherds, they saw Rachel approaching to water her sheep. Can you imagine his excitement, then, when he was told that this was the daughter of Laban, and therefore his mother's niece? Isaac, his father, had

told him to go and find a wife from Rebekah's family in Padam-aram (see v. 2) and Jacob had been guided to the exact spot where Eliezer had met Rebekah just at the time her niece arrived to water her sheep. In addition to this, we are told that Rachel was "beautiful and well favoured" (29:17), so we can understand Jacob's enthusiasm in the way he greeted her! The name Rachel means 'ewe lamb', which comes from a Hebrew root meaning 'journey'; their individual journeys unexpectedly converge at this point, and from now on they will begin to be moulded together to continue as one.

Once Jacob tells her of their family connection, Rachel immediately runs to tell her father of Jacob's arrival, and as soon as he hears the news Laban immediately sets off to meet Jacob. We can assume from the record that Laban is merely pleased to meet his nephew and hear news of his sister's family. However, perhaps his enthusiasm also stems from his memory of Eliezer's arrival and the gifts he brought for Rebekah at that time (see 24:22,29-31). Being satisfied of the family connection, Laban invites Jacob to stay with the family.

At the end of a month, Laban approaches Jacob to ask him to work for him. It is clear from the record that Jacob had been working for Laban ever since he arrived. We also know that Jacob was attracted to Rachel right from their very first meeting, and maybe he volunteered to help Rachel with the sheep. This would have allowed them plenty of time to get to know each other, and he would also have been utilising his skills for Laban's benefit. During this time Jacob had fallen deeply in love with Rachel, but, having left home with no material possessions (see 32:10), he was unable to offer the requisite bride-price for her. Jacob's feelings for Rachel must have been clear to all, and Laban saw an opportunity to gain from the situation, so he offered him work and asked what wages Jacob would request in return. Jacob immediately asked for Rachel's hand in marriage in return for seven years' labour.

The seven years passed and Jacob had fulfilled his time for Rachel; and, as Rotherham renders it, "these seemed unto him as single days". We are not told of Rachel's feelings here, but over this time period she would have had time to observe Jacob in all aspects of life: how he dealt with the flocks and herds and the people around him. She must have concluded that this godly man had a much greater character than her father, and also grown to have a deep affection and love for Jacob.

We do not know if she had been brought up with knowledge of the promises to Abraham. However, the literal translation of her description in Genesis 29:17 is that she was "beautiful of form and appearance", so we conclude that, as well as being externally beautiful, she was godly in internal character, and we see that she is like the Bride of Christ described in Song of Solomon 4:1-7 or the King's Bride in Psalm 45.

At the end of this period Jacob goes to Laban and requests his reward for his years of service. Laban agrees and prepares the wedding feast. However, Jacob is deceived and finds that he has married Leah! Again, we are not told of Rachel's feelings about this, but we can be reasonably sure that this incident was the root of some of the anger and jealousy the sisters felt towards each other later on, since Leah must have been complicit in the deception in order to be able to carry it out successfully.

A type of spiritual Israel

Jacob and Laban agreed that he would serve Laban another seven years for Rachel, but, based on the day-for-a-year-principle,² Rachel and Jacob

were allowed to be married a week later. Leah was immediately blessed with children, but the Scripture states clearly that "Rachel was barren" (Gen. 29:31). The first time we hear anything of Rachel's inner thoughts and feelings comes in Genesis 30:1, where we are told that "Rachel envied her sister". Leah had borne four children by this time, while Rachel remained childless.

Many women today yearn to have children and so will understand the strength of Rachel's feeling at this time. Then, as now, children were considered "an heritage of the LORD" (Ps. 127:3), but at that time Hebrew women were considered disgraced if they did not have children. The reason for this is founded in Eden, when Eve was deceived and thus brought sin into the world. God established a way through which the world would be saved: each mother in Israel wished to bear the One who was to be the true "seed" (Gen. 3:15) and thus be "saved" through "childbearing" (1 Tim. 2:15). Although, as we shall see, Rachel's barrenness was a reflection of her relationship with God, there is also a much deeper spiritual meaning that can be drawn from this period of Rachel's life.

Surely, Leah and Rachel are respectively representative of the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants—the one representative of the Law and the other of grace and faith (see Gal. 3:10-14). Furthermore, the prophet Isaiah likens the Abrahamic covenant to a barren woman who ultimately bears children, as compared with the Law, which is described as a fruitful woman who bears many children (Isa. 54:1-5). Leah is representative of the Law and Rachel representative of Grace. The Apostle Paul tells us that "before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed" (Gal. 3:23). Thus Leah bore children first and Rachel afterwards.

Rachel in her frustration turns to Jacob, demanding that he give her children or else she will die. We can imagine her screaming and crying, beating her fists against his chest in frustration and anger. One wonders how many times this scene had been played out, because Jacob responds angrily, asking, "Am I in the place of God, Who has kept you from having children?" (Gen. 30:2, NIV). She had blamed Jacob and vented her frustration on him, rather than remembering that Yahweh is the source of all blessings (see Ps. 127:1-3).

Nevertheless, Rachel evidently understood his meaning and took his advice on board, for

2. Set out as a Scriptural principle in Ezekiel 4:6.

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Picture: Mark Pennington

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we see in Genesis 30:6,8 that in the births of Dan and Naphtali Rachel believed that her “wrestlings”—meaning her committal of the matter to God in prayer—had resulted in the blessings of these two sons she could call her own. However, she still had doubts, and her desperation to have children made her feel that God was indifferent to her prayers, and she fell back on superstition. Mandrakes, or, in the Hebrew, ‘love plants’, were thought to aid conception, and so Rachel begs Leah to give her some when Reuben returns with them from the field.

This incident demonstrates Rachel’s lack of faith and leads to further argument with her sister. However, I am sure that we also recognise that we all fall short of the glory of God, and so cannot reproach Rachel too much for this. At such times, remembering that our Father will not test us any more than we are able to bear, and will make for us a way of escape, and that “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28; cf. 1 Cor. 10:13), may help.

Eventually, the time did come when “God remembered Rachel . . . And she conceived, and bare a son” (Gen. 30:22,23). We can well imagine her great joy at this long-awaited blessing, given to her by God. Rachel had had to learn patience and to be reliant only on God. She had turned to her husband and superstition for help and discovered that only God could provide.

The birth of this child removed Rachel’s reproach, and she could say, as Hannah also did, that “My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD: my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in Thy salvation. There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside Thee: neither is there any rock like our God” (1 Sam. 2:1,2). Rachel called him Joseph, confidently proclaiming that “The LORD [Yahweh] shall add to me another son” (Gen. 30:24). But how did Rachel know that she would bear another son? Brother H. P. Mansfield in his *Genesis Expositor* helpfully says, “. . . by the same means that we can anticipate the Lord’s future advent: by heeding the revelation of Yahweh. The

promise of a further son must have been told her by God".³

Rachel steals the teraphim

Soon after the birth of Joseph, Jacob decides that it is time for the family to leave Laban's household and live separately. Predictably, Laban is reluctant for the family to leave, so Jacob bargains with him again, agreeing that he should take all the speckled and spotted animals as his wages. As we know, with God's help Jacob greatly benefited from this clever arrangement, and it eventually became necessary for Jacob to remove the family from the area completely, deciding to return home to the Land of Promise after receiving a revelation from God. Tensions within the family were now running high; Laban and his sons were resentful of Jacob's wealth and felt that his herds still belonged to them. The sisters, on the other hand, recognised that Laban had treated Jacob badly, and also felt that they had been treated as strangers whom their father had used as bargaining chips to gain the most benefit for himself (see 31:14,15).

So they made their choice to go with Jacob back to Canaan, the Promised Land. They were to leave at night while Laban was away from home shearing sheep. Inexplicably, Rachel also used this opportunity to steal the family images, or teraphim. Opinion is divided on what the teraphim were. Some have suggested that they were family gods, while others have argued that they denoted the right to inherit property, or related to the headship of the family. Whatever they were, the stealing of them, and subsequent lying to Laban about her incapacity, does not place Rachel in a good light. Indeed, Scripture is silent about her motives; at best she had taken it upon herself to try and redress the balance in terms of what Laban owed Jacob materially. At worst she believed that these images had some power to protect the family on their journey. Surely the exhortation for us is to purge the everyday trappings of this world from our lives, placing our reliance completely on our heavenly Father, for He knows our needs and will provide. We should rather "seek . . . first the kingdom of God" (Mt. 6:33) and all these things will be provided.

So the family began their journey, seeking a new life away from Laban's tight control. They journeyed southward to Peniel, through Shechem. It was there that God appeared to Jacob, commanding him to go to Beth-el and build an

altar. By directing them to 'the house of strength' God was surely seeking to remind the family that He is the source of all strength. Jacob realises this, and so, before they leave to rededicate themselves to God, He commands them to put away all their strange gods—which Jacob then buried under the oak at Shechem. Surely Laban's teraphim must have been buried there too.

The birth of Benjamin

In the story of Benjamin's birth we again see how Rachel is a type of the nation of Israel. The family had travelled southward from Beth-el and come to the town of Bethlehem-Ephrath. The name means 'house of fruitfulness'. How appropriate that Rachel should be preparing to give birth when arriving in Bethlehem! It is significant that Benjamin was born so close to the place where our Lord Jesus was born. Significantly, Benjamin was also the only one of Jacob's sons to be born in the Promised Land.

Rachel had a hard labour. As she was dying she fittingly named her son Ben-oni, 'son of my sorrow'. Surely this points forward to the time of Jesus' birth, when the nation was eagerly expecting the birth of the Messiah but was disappointed that Jesus' birth did not usher in a new period of peace where the Roman oppressors were overthrown. However, in the Lord Jesus Christ a spiritual nation would be created by his death and glorious resurrection, through whom "we have received grace" (Rom. 1:5). As a beautiful type and shadow, Jacob changes the boy's name to Benjamin, meaning 'son of the right hand', pointing forward to the time when Jesus would sit at the right hand of our heavenly Father making "intercession for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:27).

Conclusion

We see in Rachel a woman of great faith and insight into the purpose of God, but also a woman who struggled at times and as a result tried to rely on the things of the world. However, we have seen that God never left her and ultimately blessed her according to His purpose. Rachel will at last find God's blessing when our Lord returns to the earth, and we pray that we will all be encouraged by her good example so that we likewise will find a place in the coming Kingdom of God.

3. H. P. Mansfield, *The Book of Genesis, A Verse by Verse Exposition*, p. 344.