

attempting to settle down. It was a reprehensible act. Jacob's silence on this was broken on his death bed, and interestingly, whilst offering a small degree of blessing to Reuben, his firstborn, he cursed him for his actions. He then cursed the two next sons of Leah, Simeon and Levi for their slaughter of Shechem and the citizens of Saleem (34:25f.), and this meant that the next son of Leah received the full blessing of Jacob, and this was Judah (see 49:3-12). This was no small matter, for Judah became the tribe which produced the great leader David (and eventually Jesus) and was associated with Jerusalem, eventually becoming a nation of God's people in its own right.

The passage ends with the now complete list of Jacob's sons, and the death and burial of Isaac, which we assume happens in Hebron, close to where he could be buried in the field of Machpelah, where his father and mother, Abraham and Sarah were buried (48:29f.).

Application

There are many fascinating aspects to this last part of the Jacob cycle of stories, but it is hard to find some direct form of 'application' of the text from which we can learn today. The birth of children is for most people something not nearly as risky as it was for Rachel, and the idea of sleeping with one's father's wife (though not necessarily your mother) sounds like something from a late night movie and not a source of Scriptural significance. One thing is worth returning to, and it is the transformation that had taken place in Jacob. Earlier in his life, Jacob was the 'quiet one' (25:27), but then, because of the deception of his father and brother, he was exiled from the family home and had to become a much stronger character, competing with his scheming and greedy father-in-law Laban and eventually overcoming him. In the process He followed God's will, learning the lessons of faith required before he could become the man of God who led his family, the infant 'people of Israel' back into Canaan, the Promised Land.

Whilst scholars have puzzled over why Jacob remained so quiet and did not comment on the dreadful things happening around him, particularly after the incident at Peniel, he was a quiet person by character, and he ended up exhibiting the same 'quiet' characteristics he previously showed in his youth. The youthful quiet Jacob had turned into a man with a mature faith that stood firm through the tragedies which happened around him; indeed, there would be more to come in the final great story of Genesis, the story of Joseph. Despite the criticism of this great man for his silence, perhaps we should see in it a profound faith and trust in God in the midst of everything. For us, it is tough to stick closely to God's call when all manner of difficult things happen, particularly family ones, but Jacob's security in God is something from which we can all learn.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How important are 'birth' and 'death' to our celebration of the Christian faith? Should they figure more prominently?
2. Which theory about Reuben's actions in this text do you think is right?
3. What do you believe you have learned about faith and the Christian life from the story of Jacob?

Discipleship

How easy do you find it to remain calm when everything around you seems to be collapsing? In many ways, this is an unfair question, for we all 'panic' in different ways, some more quietly than others! It is nevertheless the toughest test of faith for someone you love to die relatively young, as Rachel did in this story, and the actions of Reuben were an appalling thing for a father to have to deal with. Could you or I remain calm before God in the face of such troubles? It is worth thinking about, because one day, most of us will face something like this. It can help us if we are mentally and spiritually prepared.

Final Prayer

Great and mighty Lord, show Your extraordinary power in us not simply by giving us strength to do great things or power to perform wonderful miracles, but by helping us to stand firm in the midst of trouble and distress, knowing that You have a greater plan for us all and have a time for us deal with everything that we experience. Thank You Lord; AMEN

Prayer

Show us Your majesty and power, O Lord, break through the troubles and strife we experience in this life and reveal the love, compassion and heart You have for all of us, Your fallen people. Raise us up and establish our faith, and give us eyes to see Your great revelation we pray; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Immigration

Please pray for all those people who have been forced to flee their homes because of natural disaster, and may never be able to return to them; from the citizens of New Orleans to those displaced by wars throughout the world. Pray that governments will meet their moral obligations to help people in distress.

Meditation

Where can you find love in a world dominated by self interest?
Where can you find honesty and integrity in a place of work?
Where can you find a government that is not bought by the rich?
Where can you find workmanship in a workplace driven by targets?
Where can you find true justice when you can pay for a result?
Where can you find real trust amongst those who handle money?
Where can you find a place where you do not need to be worried
About the standards of integrity shown by those around you?
If you cannot find security of morality within the church of God,
Then the Gospel we preach is compromised.
Let God's people let the Gospel loose within their whole lives,
And may the Glory of God be revealed on earth; now!

Bible Study - Genesis 35:16-29

¹⁶ Then they travelled on from Bethel; and when they were still some way from Ephrath, Rachel went into labour, which became extremely stressful. ¹⁷ As she gave birth with great difficulty, the midwife said to her, 'Don't be afraid; you have another son!' ¹⁸ But as she passed away (for she died), she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. ¹⁹ So Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), ²⁰ and Jacob set up a memorial stone at her grave; the monument of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. ²¹ Israel travelled on, and pitched his tent beyond Migdal-Eder.

²² While Israel was living in that region, Reuben went and slept with Bilhah his father's concubine, and Israel came to know about it.

The sons of Jacob were now twelve. ²³ The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. ²⁴ The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. ²⁵ The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali. ²⁶ The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

²⁷ Jacob came home to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had stayed. ²⁸ Now Isaac was one hundred eighty years old.

²⁹ Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days. His sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Review

Arrival in the Promised Land was for Jacob, an event full of the extremes of emotion. On the one hand, he had successfully arrived back from Paddan-Aram in Mesopotamia under the Lord's guidance, and he was careful to do so only as the Lord led him after his meeting with Esau (33:18). Yet the very first thing recorded about this momentous event was the appalling rape of his daughter Dinah, and the even more appalling vengeance that his sons wreaked on the local inhabitants who they tricked and slaughtered. In chapter 35, the pendulum briefly but powerfully swung the other way, as Jacob and his whole family moved on to Bethel under the protection of God (35:1-8), and the Lord then revealed Himself powerfully to confirm the Covenant promises in a special and distinct way. Jacob then worshipped the Lord at Bethel before moving on his way to go and meet his father Isaac, further in the south of Canaan, near Hebron (south of what we now know to be Jerusalem).

Jacob was the forefather whose family now bore the signs of the great Covenant promises of God, particularly in terms of fruitfulness. Eleven sons had been born within the family, and all these would become clan leaders within Israel. One son remained to be born, and our passage today begins with the birth of the last son of Jacob, Benjamin. Tragedy struck Jacob and his family once again, for Rachel died in childbirth as the family journeyed from Bethel. She named her son 'Ben-oni', meaning 'child of my sorrow' as he was born and as she died, but Jacob could not bear such a name as a remembrance of his beloved Rachel and exercised his paternal prerogative to apply his name of 'Benjamin', meaning 'son of my right hand' (see below).

The tragedy continued as Scripture records but briefly what must have been a deeply painful episode in the life of Jacob. For a reason we are not told, and which we can only guess at (see study below) Reuben, Jacob's eldest son, slept with Bilhah, Rachel's maid. Whatever reasons he had for doing this, it was an insult to his father and to the memory of Rachel, and the unhappiness and division between Jacob and Reuben was reflected in Jacob's final blessing of his sons in Genesis 49, where although Jacob blesses his eldest son, he cannot complete the blessing without mentioning the terrible incest he committed; he said '... you even went up into my bed!' (49:4).

The tragedy of these events is never really resolved, and the chapter then concludes with two important passages. The first lists the sons of Israel, and it is interesting to see that this list of his twelve sons is the first place that Jacob is directly called Israel. The name itself towers over the first formal listing of these great tribes in the Bible. Then at the very end, there is a formal description of the death of Isaac and the touching information that he was buried by both his sons, now restored to acceptance of each other after their God-inspired reconciliation (ch.33). The story of Jacob in Genesis is therefore concluded, but it is not the last we shall hear of him. His young son Joseph is the bright star of the final story of Genesis, which brings both hope and a warning to the newly established people of God, Israel.

Going Deeper

The birth of Benjamin completes the twelve sons of Jacob and the number of tribes of the people of Israel. It is a significant moment. Having explored these verses, we will try to fathom the reasons for, and the consequences of, Reuben's sleeping with Bilhah. This, together with the list of Jacob's twelve sons and the death of Isaac, both concludes this part of Genesis and sets us up for the story of Joseph to follow.

The birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel.

When Rachel had been barren and irked by her sister's fertility, she had called out to Jacob in distress 'give me children or I die!' (30:1). Her subsequent history of bearing children was troubled, and during the birth of her second child, she did indeed die. Her first child was Joseph who was born successfully and happily (30:24) but Rachel was not content with this and cried out after her labour 'may the Lord add to me another (son)' and the word for 'add' was the basis of Joseph's name.

At some time just before the journey from Mesopotamia, Rachel must have become pregnant with her second child, and the story we have in our text today tragically includes the birth of this child and her own death. On reflection, it cannot have been an easy time for Rachel, for she would have endured months of living 'on the road' which cannot have been easy for someone used to a stable life in Mesopotamia, and although we have no way of knowing why she had difficulty

conceiving, now she had difficulty in childbirth as well. We know today of many different reasons why a woman would have difficulty in childbirth, but over the centuries, theories have multiplied about why Rachel died. Some have suggested that this was because she was the one who stole the household gods of her father Laban (31:33f.), even deceiving her father about the matter and saying she was having her monthly period, when in fact, she may have known she was pregnant! The truth is that we have no real means of knowing the exact timescale of these events, and any reasoning about Rachel's death should account for the fact that Scripture records her death and burial with great honour (here, Gen 48:7, Ruth 4:11).

As Rachel died, she called her son 'ben-oni' meaning 'child of my sorrow', but what is not immediately obvious to us is that the first of Jacob's sons, Reuben, also had a name with a connection to this Hebrew word for 'sorrow', or 'suffering'. When Leah gave birth to Reuben, she said 'the Lord has seen my suffering' (29:32), and the Hebrew word 'oni', although it is not easy to see this in English, is part of the last syllable of Reuben's name. It seems that Jacob's family was surrounded by sorrow, which may seem a trite comment except that this becomes a recurring theme in the great story of Joseph which comes next in Genesis.

There is some debate about the site of Rachel's tomb and its connections with both Bethlehem and Ephrath which are both mentioned in this text. These places are important in the Bible, for Jesus was born in Bethlehem and at a place identified in the famous Messianic prophecy of Micah (Micah 5:2), also quoted by Matthew (Matt 2:6) 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.' The only thing we can say for certain is that Jacob was traveling from Bethel to Hebron when Rachel gave birth and died. Some make out a case for this happening at Ephrata, a small town just to the north of Jerusalem, and others identify it as a site further south, just outside Bethlehem; both of which claim to have the original 'tomb of Rachel'. Both of these sites are within a few miles of what we now know as Jerusalem and are on the route that ran from Bethel to Hebron in the Judean Hills. Rachel's monument was clearly an important feature of the landscape, however, even in Jeremiah's day (Jer 31:15), and if you look up this quote you will find that this too is connected, like the Micah quote above, with the birth of Jesus.

It is not easy to make sense of all this, but it is likely that early Christians at least saw a connection between the sacrifice of Rachel's life for her child and the sacrifice of Jesus' life for ours, and they made this connection because in their own understanding of Jewish history, Rachel was a figure closely associated with the birth of Jesus. Celebrating both birth (new birth) and death (the death of Jesus) were both very much a part of the preaching and worship life of early Christians, as they are in different ways today.

Reuben

The brief verse which describes Reuben's sleeping with Bilhah is a further distressing episode in Jacob's life, but it is probably included to explain why Jacob said what he did about his eldest son when blessing all his sons before his death 'unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up on to your father's bed!' (49:4). This would be a complete puzzle to us without the explanation provided by this brief verse, but it is something the writer records with no pleasure. Certainly, Jacob did not respond to this provocation, but bade his time before making his response.

We should now be careful to look at exactly what has happened here. Reuben may well have slept with Bilhah in order to dishonour her in his father's eyes, for after he had done this, she would never again be allowed into her father's tent. It meant that Bilhah, as Rachel's maid, could not elevate herself to the position of senior wife after her mistress died. Reuben was the firstborn of Jacob and Leah, and fiercely protected his mother's role in the family. His actions may have been a misguided attempt to make sure that his father paid more attention to his mother, the 'unloved' wife Leah; but it was not his place to do this.

One other possibility exists for Reuben's actions. There are at least a couple of other places in Scripture where someone sleeps with a concubine associated with a leader in order to try and usurp the authority of that leader, notably the time when Absalom 'went in' to the concubines of his father David in Jerusalem, when he attempted to throw him off the throne of Israel (2 Sam 16:21,22; see also 2 Sam 3:7-8). If this was the case, then Reuben was attempting to take control of his aging father's extended family, just as they were reaching their destiny and