



Sister Rivals

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The Bible is filled with good stories. Here we focus on the rival sisters, Rachel and Leah. So, a young man goes to his doctor. His symptoms are ominous: shortness of breath, irregular heartbeat, hyperventilation, inability to concentrate and more. After taking some initial readings, the doctor shrugs and tells him he's in love. It's the story of a country music hit, but most of us don't need song lyrics to remind us of the incapacitating nature of *falling in love*. Such was the case with Jacob, son of Rebekah and Isaac, thousands of years ago.

A bit of background. Rachel is beautiful—pure loveliness. She is the only woman in the scriptural text whose beauty and seductive powers elicited head-over-heals, heart-pounding passion, love-at-first-sight. Poor sister Leah, the ugly duckling. Actually, the only obvious defect is her apparent weak eye. A pair of stylish glasses might have done the trick.

But perhaps the text fails to tell us about Leah's stringy hair and crooked teeth. At any rate, most of us identify more with Leah than Rachel. But Rachel is the star of this show.

The Wedding Day

Her father has arranged the marriage. Alas, the day finally comes. The servants have been up all night preparing for the grand wedding feast. Everyone is invited. There's music and dancing, feasting on tasty hors d'oeuvres, steaming bowls of mutton stew, and prime rib

on the spit, medium rare. The guests linger over their aged wine and tasty sweets as the sun sets in the west.

Then everything falls apart. Sad stories featuring a flight of the groom (or bride) abound in literature and in real life. There is no chance of this, however. Jacob surely is not going to do hard labor, as he had for seven years, without the promise of his beautiful bride. What happens next, however, is mind-boggling. It is the most stunning bride-switching story in all history. Think of it. What a shock to Jacob on discovering that he's consummated a marriage with the wrong sister. But this story is not about Jacob.

Imagine having your heart set on a good-looking young guy who absolutely adores you only to discover that your father has gone behind your back and surreptitiously arranged for your sister to be veiled and sent to the marriage bed. What a bummer.

But then one week later, with no fanfare, Rachel becomes Jacob's second wife. She's waited seven years and seven days. We would not blame her for utter disillusionment with this whole patriarchal system in which she is embedded. And, for all she has endured, we can't help but wish her well. But anyone who is familiar with the story of Rachel and Jacob knows that this is hardly a *happily-ever-after scenario*.

Marriage brings Rachel not only a new husband but also a servant, Bilhah. Now she's a lady of the house. Gone are the carefree days of

herding sheep. Her most important role will be that of mother. Apart from her inherent maternal instincts, she is duty bound to bear children. So also, sister Leah.

Wives and Mothers

The sport of polygamy in the Bible has at least one common thread: it is fraught with anger, resentment and fierce competition. In this instance, Jacob is no help. The hyperventilation of falling in love has worn off. Married life can sometimes get more than a little bit prickly. How well he knows, son of Isaac and Rebekah.

Rachel is the one Jacob loves, but what does it matter if her sister has babies and she does not? In fact, the text reveals that the matter of conceiving and being loved by Jacob are directly related: "*When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.*"

Leah, it seems, is scoring a goal every time she competes in this cutthroat baby-making game. Finally, Rachel is down 4-0, and she's furious. *Babies or bust* is her motto. "Give me children, or I'll die," she rages at Jacob. He comes right back at her. He places the matter squarely with God (and her, indirectly). Does she pray for forgiveness and plead with God to open her womb? No. This is not Rachel's way. Like her mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law, she takes matters into her own hands. She sends in a substitute, her servant Bilhah.

One might wonder at this point how poor Bilhah feels about being a pawn in this polygamous sport. Is she aware of the behind-the-scenes maneuvers? Is she young, only fourteen or fifteen years old? She obviously has no say in the matter, but she might have been pleased by the thought of having a baby of her own—maybe thinking it would be like having a doll to diaper and cuddle, not fully aware that she is essentially a disposable surrogate.

A son is born, and Rachel names him Dan; then a second son, whom Rachel names Naphtali. By now Bilhah surely knows that she is more than a mere baby-making machine for Rachel. She is Rachel's servant and as such has primary care for these boys. Likewise, she knows that these very sons of hers are Jacob's own sons, thus enjoying far greater status than any child fathered, for example, by a manservant.

Two Sisters—Two Servants—Two Cousins

As for Rachel, bottom line, she's still barren, and the sisterly rivalry continues. The score now 4-2, Leah gets back into the game by sending in her own sub, her servant Zilpah, who scores twice more with Gad and Asher. Again, Rachel is down by four. Now the game is 6-2 There are no screaming crowds, but the winning team is smug. True, the game is not over. Rachel is yet to score, Joseph first and then Benjamin, a goal that takes her life.

Before that happens, however, there is more drama and dishonesty. Two sisters and two servants caught up in a man's world of patriarchy and polygamy.

How very different are the two cousins we read about in Luke's gospel—one married and too old to have a baby, the other unmarried and too young. Elizabeth and Zachariah are "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Also childless. But suddenly, while Zachariah is serving in the temple of the Lord, the angel Gabriel pays a visit. Seriously. Standing right there on the right side of the altar.

No surprise, Zachariah is "startled and gripped with fear." Gabriel calms him down by telling him he has "good news." He will soon become a dad, even though Elizabeth is "well along in years."

We all know where this story is going. How very different from the story of the rival sisters. Elizabeth and her cousin Mary get together and praise God for the good news—the good news of the gospel. When her time is fulfilled Elizabeth gives birth to John, Mary to Jesus. John the Baptist, that crazy soap-box preacher, who paves the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus. Since known as "the Baptist," he baptizes his second cousin, Jesus.

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." □

Adapted from Dynamic Women of the Bible by Ruth Tucker (available through Amazon and other online sellers). Ruth Tucker is a regular columnist for Plain Truth magazine.

