

Who was Zilpah in the Bible?

Zilpah was Leah's handmaiden or servant whom Leah gave to her husband, Jacob, as a concubine. Zilpah bore Jacob two sons: Gad and Asher.

Zilpah's background is unknown, other than the fact that Zilpah had been one of Laban's servants before Leah's marriage to Jacob. When Jacob married Leah, "Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant" (Genesis 29:24). A week later, when Jacob married Leah's sister, Rachel, Laban gave Bilhah to Rachel as her attendant (Genesis 29:29). Some Jewish scholars have suggested that Zilpah and Bilhah were Laban's daughters by a concubine (and therefore half-sisters of Leah and Rachel), but this is nowhere stated in the Bible.

Leah and Rachel were soon involved in a child-bearing war with each other. Their fight for prominence in their husband's eyes prompted them to bring their servants into the battle. Once Rachel realized she was not able to bear children, she gave her servant, Bilhah, to Jacob to produce children through a surrogate (Genesis 30:3-4). In doing so, Rachel followed a then-common practice for a barren wife to give her servant to her husband as a concubine. The offspring born to that concubine would be considered children of her mistress.

Leah had four sons, but then she stopped bearing children. Jacob's next two sons were through Rachel's servant, and Leah, wanting more children in her name, followed the lead of her younger sister and offered Zilpah to her husband (Genesis 30:9-10). Zilpah's two sons, Gad and Asher, became forebears of two of the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 35:26).

Nothing is said in Scripture about how Zilpah viewed this arrangement, but, as a servant, she would have had no recourse even if she had objected to it. In the patriarchal, pre-Mosaic Law society in which she lived, Zilpah did not have any rights. She didn't even get to name the children she bore to Jacob. Instead, Leah named both Gad and Asher (Genesis 30:10-13). The Bible indicates that Zilpah and Bilhah were Jacob's "wives" (Genesis 37:2), but they were not wives in the same sense that Leah and Rachel were. A more specific term today would be concubine or handmaid. The Amplified Bible provides wording to make the arrangement clearer, saying that Bilhah and Zilpah were "[secondary] wives." Zilpah was not given a choice of whether to become Jacob's concubine, and she and Bilhah were manipulated as pawns in a power struggle between two sisters. Despite Zilpah's exploitation, God still used the situation to make a nation of chosen people for Himself.

Zilpah is a silent character in the Bible; we have no recorded words from her. Like other women used as child-bearers in that era, Zilpah would have been viewed as insignificant and unimportant to society. To Jacob, Zilpah's two sons were counted among Leah's, but we know that Zilpah was recognized by the Lord. Two generations earlier, the servant Hagar had found herself in a similar situation, as she was given to Abraham as a concubine (Genesis 16:1-4). But God was with Hagar. He appeared to her and saved her life twice, gave her hope and direction, and blessed her son (Genesis 21). Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah, exploited in this world, still mattered to God.