

Who was Reuben in the Bible?

Reuben was the firstborn son of Jacob by Leah and the forefather of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The story of Reuben in the Bible is told in Genesis chapters 29-50.

Reuben's mother Leah became the wife of Jacob by a cunning trick (Genesis 29:15-30). Jacob had gone to live with his uncle, Laban, in Paddan Aram. There he met and fell in love with Laban's beautiful daughter Rachel. Jacob agreed to work seven years for the right to marry Rachel, Leah's younger sister. On their wedding night, Laban substituted the heavily veiled Leah in Rachel's place. The next morning, Jacob was shocked to discover the deceit. So smitten was he with Rachel that he consented to work another seven years for her.

Leah's life turned out to be heartbreaking as she sought to win Jacob's love. But God blessed Leah with the honor of bearing many children, including Jacob's oldest son, Reuben.

Several meanings have been assigned to the name Reuben, but the most widely accepted is "behold a son." When Leah gave birth to Reuben, she explained her choice: "She named him Reuben, for she said, 'It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now'" (Genesis 29:32). This statement introduces the lifelong tension that existed between the two sisters in their marriage to Jacob.

As an adult, Reuben was one of the more honorable sons of Jacob. Reuben saved Joseph's life when his brothers plotted to kill him. He talked the brothers out of murdering Joseph and convinced them to leave him in a pit instead (Genesis 37:21-22). Reuben intended to return privately and rescue Joseph, but his plan failed when, in his

absence, the other brothers sold Joseph into slavery. Years later, as all the brothers faced misfortune in Egypt, Reuben called out his brothers for bringing disaster on their family: “Didn’t I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood” (Genesis 42:22).

An interesting episode involving Reuben in the Bible centers on his mother’s and aunt’s belief in folk medicine in Genesis 30:14-17. One day during the wheat harvest, Reuben came across mandrakes in the field. Mandrakes were herbaceous flowering plants known for their exotic fragrance and human-shaped roots. They were also believed to enhance a woman’s fertility. Reuben picked the mandrakes and brought them to his mother, Leah.

Rachel asked for some of the mandrakes Reuben had found, but Leah rebuked her: “Wasn’t it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son’s mandrakes too?” (Genesis 30:15). So, Rachel struck a deal with Leah. In return for some of the mandrakes, she let Leah sleep with Jacob. As a result, Leah became pregnant and gave Jacob a fifth son, Issachar.

Reuben demonstrated extreme love for his aging father when he offered his own two sons as a guarantee for the safety of Benjamin (Genesis 42:37). But, despite Reuben’s admirable qualities and good intentions, he lacked enduring strength of character.

Reuben’s great failure occurred when he slept with his father’s concubine Bilhah. This act, a serious crime punishable by death, revealed the loss of his earlier integrity. After Rachel died, Reuben was likely anxious because Jacob had shown favor to her sons over Leah’s. He may also have been worried for his mother. By sleeping with Bilhah, Reuben was likely challenging his father’s authority and grasping for power.

As the oldest son of Jacob, Reuben should have been granted the birthright, but he was denied this honor because of his act of disrespect: “Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, the first sign of my strength, excelling in honor, excelling in power. Turbulent as the waters, you will no longer excel, for you went up onto your father’s bed, onto my couch and defiled it” (Genesis 49:3-4).

The tribe of Reuben descended from Reuben and his four sons: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi. After helping the other tribes take possession of the Promised Land, the tribe of Reuben settled east of the Jordan River. Initially starting out strong, the tribe was always mentioned first—in the place of honor—in lists of the twelve tribes of Israel. However, because of Reuben’s incest with Bilhah, the tribe eventually lost its place of preeminence as Jacob had prophesied. No prominent judge, prophet, or ruler came from the tribe of Reuben, and no mention of the tribe, other than the listing in Revelation 7:5, is made in the New Testament.