

Who was Rachel in the Bible?

Rachel is a major character in the early Old Testament; she was a daughter of Laban, sister of Leah, favored wife of Jacob, and mother of two of Jacob's children.

Rachel lived in Harran, or Paddan Aram, and that's where she met her cousin Jacob. Jacob was fleeing for his life after tricking his brother, Esau, out of his birthright (Genesis 27:1-29). At his mother's behest, Jacob headed for his uncle Laban in Paddan Aram (verse 43).

Once Jacob reached Harran, he met some shepherds watering their sheep at a well. When he inquired after Laban, the men replied, "Here comes his daughter Rachel with the sheep" (Genesis 29:6). Jacob rolled the stone from the well and watered Laban's sheep for Rachel. He introduced himself as Laban's nephew, and Rachel ran to tell her father of Jacob's arrival. Laban was overjoyed to see Jacob and invited him to live with his family.

After Jacob had lived with and worked for Laban for a month, Laban offered to give Jacob some sort of payment for his work. Over the course of the month, Jacob had fallen in love with the beautiful Rachel, choosing her over her older sister, Leah. So Jacob offered to work for Laban seven years in order to win Rachel's hand in marriage (Genesis 29:17-18). Laban agreed, and Jacob worked the seven years, "but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for [Rachel]" (verse 20).

At the end of the seven years, Jacob asked Laban to give him Rachel (Genesis 29:21). Laban threw a wedding feast, but, when evening came, he tricked Jacob and gave him Leah instead (verses 22-23). The Bible does not say how Jacob was unaware that he was with

Leah—perhaps Jacob was drunk from the feast—but he slept with Leah that night and was shocked to see that it was she, not Rachel, who lay next to him in the morning (verse 25). He confronted Laban, who gave a feeble excuse: “It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one” (verse 26). Laban offered to give Rachel to Jacob as well at the end of Leah’s bridal week, with the stipulation that Jacob work for him another seven years (verse 27). Laban did not want to give up having Jacob work for him essentially for free.

In spite of the unfairness of the situation, Jacob agreed to Laban’s offer due to his love for Rachel. At the end of the week, Jacob took Rachel as his wife, then began working for Laban another seven years to complete the bargain. Jacob loved Rachel very much, more than he loved Leah (Genesis 29:30). The Lord saw this, and He was gracious to Leah by giving her four sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. God blessed her even further, although she didn’t know it at the time—Jesus Himself would come from the line of her son Judah (Revelation 5:5; see also Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew 1).

When Rachel saw how Leah had been blessed with children when she herself was barren, she became jealous and demanded that Jacob give her children. As Jacob had no control over this, he became angry with Rachel (Genesis 30:2). So Rachel gave Jacob Bilhah, her servant, as a wife. In that culture, any children Bilhah had would legally belong to Rachel. Jacob had two sons with Bilhah, whom Rachel named Dan and Naphtali. Leah, who had by then stopped having children, emulated Rachel and gave her servant, Zilpah, to Jacob as a fourth wife. Zilpah eventually gave birth to two boys, and Leah named them Gad and Asher.

Rachel and Leah’s rivalry did not end here, however. When young Reuben brought some

mandrakes to his mother, Leah, one day, Rachel asked Leah to give her the mandrakes (Genesis 30:14), in the belief that eating mandrake roots would help her have children. When Leah balked, Rachel traded a night with Jacob for the mandrakes (verse 15). Leah handed Rachel the mandrakes and slept with her husband that night; she became pregnant that night and later bore another son, whom she named Issachar. She would later give Jacob another son, Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. In spite of Rachel's petty attitude, God had compassion on Rachel and allowed her to have a son: Joseph.

Jacob left Laban after a time and took his family to find a home of their own back in Canaan. Laban pursued him with a band of men and accused him of stealing his household idols. Jacob, unaware that Rachel had stolen the idols, said, "Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it" (Genesis 31:32). The Bible does not explain why Rachel stole the household idols. Perhaps she had a nostalgic desire to bring with her some items from her family home. Another possibility is that the idols were made of valuable materials, and Rachel wanted them for their monetary value. Perhaps Rachel believed in the power of the images. She may have stolen the idols out of superstition, believing they were like a good-luck charm. Rachel avoided detection of her theft by hiding them in the saddle she was sitting on. When her father came to search for the idols, she said, "'Don't be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I'm having my period.' So [Laban] searched but could not find the household gods" (verse 35).

Years later, Rachel became pregnant again. The birth was a difficult one, and, soon after her son was born, Rachel died. Before she passed away, she named him Ben-Oni, which meant "son of my trouble"; Jacob, however, changed the boy's name to Benjamin, meaning "son of my right hand" (Genesis 35:18). Rachel was buried near Bethlehem (known

at that time as Ephrath), and Jacob marked her grave with a large pillar (verse 20). Rachel is mentioned later in a passage of lament: “This is what the LORD says: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more’” (Jeremiah 31:15). Ramah was a city in the territory of Benjamin, Rachel’s son. The prophet pictures Rachel as weeping over the fate of the Hebrew exiles. In the New Testament, Matthew applies Jeremiah’s words to the weeping in Bethlehem when Herod massacred the children there after the birth of Christ (Matthew 2:17-18).

Rachel and Jacob’s tale is one of the great love stories of the Bible. Jacob preferred her sons, Joseph and Benjamin, over his other children. He loved Joseph particularly (Genesis 37:3), and, although his preferential treatment of Joseph was wrong, it eventually led to the Hebrews’ move to Egypt. All of this was part of God’s plan for His people to prepare them for the coming of the promised Messiah, Jesus.