

Who was Bilhah in the Bible?

Bilhah was the female servant of Rachel. When Rachel married Jacob, Bilhah was given as a wedding gift to Rachel by her father Laban (Genesis 29:28-29). Bilhah became the mother of two of Jacob's twelve sons.

In the early days of her marriage, Rachel was unable to conceive a child, so she sent Bilhah to Jacob as a concubine: "Then she [Rachel] said, 'Here is Bilhah, my servant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and I too can build a family through her'" (Genesis 30:3).

A concubine was a female slave responsible mainly as a surrogate mother to secure the continuance of the family name. At this time in ancient history, infertility carried great shame for women. It was common practice for a barren wife to provide a concubine to guarantee children to her husband. A concubine such as Bilhah was treated as a member of the family and a legitimate channel for hereditary succession and inheritance.

Bilhah's children by Jacob were Dan and Naphtali (Genesis 35:25). Dan was Jacob's fifth son and Naphtali his sixth. Rachel considered Bilhah's boys to be her own children. Having authority as their mother, Rachel was the one to name them (Genesis 30:4-8).

Later, after Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob's oldest son, Reuben, slept with Bilhah; this was an incestuous act, since Bilhah was his father's concubine (Genesis 35:22). As a result of committing adultery with Bilhah, Reuben was cursed by his father and deprived of his birthright (Genesis 49:3-4), which Jacob gave to Joseph's sons.

Bilhah's grandsons were Hushim, the child of Dan; and Jahzeel, Guni, Jezer, and Shillem,

the children of Naphtali (Genesis 46:23-25).

Possible meanings for the Hebrew name Bilhah are “simplicity,” “modesty,” “timid,” or “faltering.”

Bilhah is also the name of a town in the south of Judah (1 Chronicles 4:29). Called Balah in Joshua 19:3, the town was allotted to the tribe of Simeon. While the exact location of Bilhah has never been pinpointed, it is thought to be part of the Judean Negev, as it appears in lists with other cities of the Negev, such as Beersheba and Ziklag.