

## RACHEL AND LEAH

Genesis 29:1-3, 9b-30

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on July 30, 2017, the Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled "In the Beginning."*

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*Then [following his dream of the ladder,] Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east. As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well...*

*Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.*

*When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, and Laban said to him, 'Surely you are my bone and my flesh!' And he stayed with him for a month.*

*Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?'*

*Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were lovely,\* and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.' So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.*

*Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.' So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, 'What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?'*

*Laban said, 'This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me for another seven years.' Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.*

## I.

This past week I read separate articles about the role of humanities in our culture and reading in our lives.

In the first column, Paula Cohen, an English professor at Drexel University, says that

- The purpose of literary study is to be concerned with the search for *meaning* and *value* in life.
- The humanities teach *wisdom* [she writes], or at least *exercise the faculty* that leads to that elusive end.
- The unique role of the humanities [she says] is to recognize *genius*, revere *complexity*, and be *deliberative* in judging character and action, in *life* as in art.<sup>1</sup>

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The second article is by noted Christian writer Philip Yancey. It is entitled “The Death of Reading is Threatening the Soul.” Yancey writes:

Books help define who I am. They have ushered me on a *journey of faith*, have introduced me to *the wonders of science and the natural world*, have informed me about issues such as *justice* and *race*. More importantly, they have been a source of *delight* and *adventure* and *beauty*, opening windows to a reality I would not otherwise know.

But Yancey then says:

... I am describing my past, not my present. I used to read three books a week. One year I devoted an evening each week to read all of Shakespeare’s plays (Okay, due to interruptions it actually took me two years). Another year I read the major works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. But I am reading many fewer books these days, and even fewer of the kinds of books that require hard work.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, Yancey’s title: “The Death of Reading is Threatening the Soul.”

These articles captured my attention because together they describe what I think is the *blessing* and *bane* of the Genesis texts on which I have been preaching this summer.

(a)

The *blessing* is this:

- The Book of Genesis, indeed the entire Bible, is as *fine a literature* as has been produced in history. The Bible ranks with Shakespeare and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy as classic literature.
- In addition, the Bible is the *literature of our faith*, literature that sifted its way through centuries of study, teaching and worship, first by Jews and later by Christians, to be blessed by synagogue and church as “sacred literature,” “holy scripture.”
- In reality, the literature of scripture is all the church has, all a minister has, all an individual Christian ultimately has in order to know God.

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<sup>1</sup> Paula Marantz Cohen, “The Danger of Progressives’ Inhumanity to the Humanities,” *The Wall Street Journal* 7/28/2017.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, “The Death of Reading is Threatening the Soul,” *The Washington Post* 7/21/2017.

- It is through scripture that we test our experiences of prayer or worship, nature or human relationships to discern it is God we are coming to know through these experiences.

I sometimes tell the story of a professor at Ohio Wesleyan who, nearing retirement in the early 1970s, told his class that if he were allowed to take only two books into retirement, they would be Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (an American classic) and the Bible. The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are both *classic* and *sacred literature*. These books which come together to make up the Bible are the greatest gift that the church has received and has the responsibility of passing on century after century.

(b)

That is the *blessing* of the scriptures. The *bane* the Bible presents is similar to that of classical literature. The Bible is hard to read. It is hard to study. It takes time. It takes reflection. Our brain can hurt. Our understanding of life can be challenged. We can be offended, hurt, or disconsolate over some of what we read. Often we come away without any direct guidance concerning questions we face: whether or not we should enter the military or college, apply to law school or graduate school, marry or remain single, enter a retirement home, vote Republican or Democratic, socialist or libertarian. We can spend considerable time reading and studying and thinking and attending classes and listening to sermons and still not have a direct answer as to what we are to do in a situation immediately before us. For the most part, the Bible is not a book which yields daily advice easily or readily. Benjamin Franklin is better in that regard.

## II.

This *blessing* and *bane* of scripture are evident throughout the story of Jacob, which occupies eleven chapters in the central section of Genesis.

- Two weeks ago, we saw the impact of the conflict between Jacob and his twin brother Esau.<sup>3</sup>
- Last week we saw Jacob become the first human being to pray in the dark, learn the importance of place, and learn that he had to leave his parents' home in order to find the house of God.<sup>4</sup>
- This week, we see an epic struggle on Jacob's part to marry Rachel the woman he loves, after being tricked into marrying her older sister Leah. Through the hope and heartache Jacob experiences, we see Jacob find love, receive poetic justice, and catch a glimpse of his role and responsibility in a large, extended family.

Let's look at each briefly.

### *Love*

In the story Whitney read, we see that Jacob is the first patriarch who loves his wife *before* marrying her. Despite a world in which arranged marriages are common, the producing of children is needed for economic security and sufficient labor in farming and shepherding families, and heirs are needed to make sure that the people of Israel would be sufficiently numerous to receive God's promise of land, descendants, and blessings – despite all historical pressures that rendered marriage and childrearing more important than any love that happened to exist between husband and wife, the narrator dares to tell us – three times – that “Jacob loves Rachel.”

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 25:19-34.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 28:10-22.

It is poignant to see how that love bursts upon the scene.

- Jacob is journeying from his dream of the ladder.
- He comes to a well in a field and sees three flocks of sheep lying beside the well, waiting to receive water.
- The narrator explains that shepherds wait until all sheep have gathered and then join forces to roll the stone from the mouth of the well, water the sheep, and then put the stone back, because the stone is so large and heavy it takes several shepherds to move it.
- While Jacob is talking with these shepherds, he discovers they belong to his mother's brother Laban.
- Then, suddenly Rachel bursts onto the scene. The narrator tells us:

Rachel [comes to the well] with her father's sheep;  
For she [keeps] them.  
Now when Jacob [sees] Rachel,  
The daughter of his mother's brother Laban,  
And the sheep of his mother's brother Laban,  
Jacob [goes] up  
And [single-handedly] rolls the stone  
From the well's mouth,  
And [waters] the [entire] flock  
Of his mother's brother Laban.  
Then Jacob [kisses] Rachel,  
And [weeps] aloud  
[In front of the mystified  
And perhaps snickering shepherds].  
And Jacob [tells] Rachel  
That he [is] her father's kinsman,  
And that he [is] Rebekah's son;  
And she [runs] and [tells] her father.

Now remember: Jacob has been described as “a quiet man, living in tents”<sup>5</sup>; but after his dream of the ladder, upon seeing Rachel at the well, he is overcome with energy and filled with a surge of strength sufficient to remove the entire stone from the well by himself, water an entire flock of sheep, kiss Rachel, and weep.

William Blake wrote: “Energy is eternal delight.”<sup>6</sup> *Do you remember the energy you had when first you fell in love?*

Later, when Rachel's father Laban sees in Jacob's love for his daughter an opportunity to make some money, he tricks Jacob into working for Laban seven years before receiving Rachel's hand, seven years after receiving her hand, and six more years<sup>7</sup> before being freed from Laban's power. Yet the narrator tells us these first seven years seem to Jacob “but a few days for the love he [has] for her.” Jacob's love even constricts years into months, days into hours, hours into minutes.

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 25:27.

<sup>6</sup>This saying serves as the introduction to this chapter on Jacob in Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 180.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 31:38 refers to Jacob serving Laban twenty years.

*Do you remember when you first fell in love and time moved so quickly, if you paid attention to the clock at all?*

In a dark and dreary world, in physical conditions under which we would hardly bear up, with roles for women – and often men – that we would utterly reject, “Jacob loves Rachel.” The first person in scripture to love before marriage.

### *Poetic Justice*

Up to this point we have developed a certain sympathy for Jacob, but in his story we also encounter what we call “poetic justice” exercised toward him.

- You will recall that Jacob is a twin to his brother Esau.<sup>8</sup>
- At birth, Esau emerges from the birth canal first, followed by Jacob, clutching his heel.<sup>9</sup> Esau therefore is the oldest.
- You may remember that in Hebrew society the law of primogeniture prevails – i.e. the “first born” (*primo-genesis*) receives both birthright and the blessing.<sup>10</sup>
- You may remember that despite being “a quiet man and living in tents,”<sup>11</sup> Jacob outfoxes his brother and steals Esau’s birthright<sup>12</sup> and outfoxes their father Isaac and steal Esau’s blessing.
- You may recall that this stealing of blessing occurs when Jacob dons hairy animal skins, approaches his father Isaac, who is aging and blind and therefore lives in darkness, lets his father to touch the animal skins on his arms, and leads his father to conclude that Jacob is the more hairy Esau and irrevocably bless him.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, it is through a sense of *touch in darkness* that Jacob steals Esau’s blessing.

Fast-forward to what we read today:

- Laban senses Jacob’s intense love for Rachel.
- Rachel is his second born.
- It is law to take care of Leah, the first born.
- Laban could use Jacob’s labor around the farm.
- Jacob doesn’t have money to provide a dowry.
- So Laban plots to require Jacob to work seven years for Rachel’s hand.
- When the wedding night arrives, Laban slips his oldest daughter Leah into the wedding bed.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 25:19-28.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 25:25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 21:15-17.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 25:27.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 25:29-34.

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 27:1-40. Isaac also blesses Jacob in Genesis 28:1. There seems to be no turning back.

- By touch – at night – Jacob is fooled, just as by touch, in darkness, he had fooled his father Isaac.
- When Jacob awakens, as the King James says, “Behold, it is Leah.”<sup>14</sup>
- Jacob is given Rachel a week later, but only after he agrees to seven more years of labor under Laban.

The larger point in this: In this story where human love bursts upon the scene, poetic justice is also meted out, even to the one who loves so poignantly. The deceiver is deceived. The trickster is tricked. The one who uses a sense of touch to fool a father in darkness is fooled through a sense of touch by a father-in-law in darkness. Justice visits Jacob in the most intimate bed he knows.

### *Marriage and Family*

Even though the norms and laws in Jacob’s day differ widely from ours, we can see Jacob’s life become complicated as his family grows. Over the course of twenty years living in Laban’s household:

- Jacob fathers thirteen children through Rachel and Leah or their respective maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah – each of whom is called a wife.<sup>15</sup>
- These marriages will see fertility and infertility, jealousy and anger, rivalry between children with different mothers
- A favored son Joseph will be born to Rachel after nearly all other children are born<sup>16</sup>
- The one daughter and sister will die a violent death, and both parental weakness on Jacob’s part and retaliation on the part of her brothers will follow.<sup>17</sup>
- Rachel will die tragically giving birth to Benjamin, the youngest<sup>18</sup> of the lot, and the memory of her inconsolable grief will echo through Jeremiah during the Exile and Matthew following the slaughter of the innocents:

Rachel is weeping for her children;  
She refuses to be comforted for her children,  
Because they are no more.<sup>19</sup>

- Finally, into this long and complicated family lineage Jesus will be born, the Messiah, through the line of Judah, one of Leah’s sons.<sup>20</sup>

Families are large and complex entities. They never fail to bring adequate doses of the “plenty and want, joy and sorrow, sickness and health” those who create them vow to face when they marry. The quiet man who lived in tents grew to see it all once he removed the stone from the well and expressed his newfound and energetic love for Rachel.

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<sup>14</sup> Genesis 29:25.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 29:31-30:24.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 30:22-24.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 34.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 35:16-21.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah 31:15 and Matthew 2:16-18.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 1:2-3.

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My friends,  
When we read or hear these Biblical stories,  
Really read them,  
They “teach us wisdom”  
And they “exercise the faculty that leads  
To that elusive end.”

They “open windows to a reality  
We might not otherwise know.”

And as hard and sometimes offensive  
As these stories sometimes are,  
They “keep our souls alive.”

Amen.