

SWITCHING BRIDES: CONSPIRACY AND COVER-UP

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The text of Genesis 29:16-30 presents the picture of Jacob and Rachel on their wedding night, frustrated and victimized by Laban's trickery. He kept the couple apart so that his elder daughter, Leah, could cohabit with Jacob under cover of darkness.

In the morning light, Jacob complained bitterly to Laban: *'How could you do this to me? Didn't I work with you for Rachel? Why did you cheat me?'* (Gen. 29:25).

It seems extraordinary that Rachel did not utter a single word of protest at that outrage, and that Leah did not offer any excuse for her conduct.

To assuage Jacob's fury, Laban cited a local custom that a woman should defer her own marriage until after the marriage of her elder sister. To ignore such a custom would have subjected Laban and his family to the contempt of his neighbors and might bring bad luck.

A reader of the text might well wonder: Where was Rachel during her wedding night? She must have been aware that Jacob was not at her side. She would have looked for him in his tent and then in the nuptial tent and she could have observed that her sister, Leah, was missing from the women's tent. Is it believable that she would not have made an outcry and sought help to find her missing bridegroom?

Commentators have wrestled with this problem to explain the anomaly. This paper proposes yet one more theory to explain the strange silence of the two sisters. The substitution of Leah for Rachel could not have been successful unless both sisters played their respective parts in carrying out Laban's plot.

I envision a scenario that portrays a clandestine meeting of all three co-conspirators held the day before Rachel's wedding feast, while Jacob was in the field, tending to Laban's livestock. At the outset, Laban would have cautioned his daughters, and probably exacted their oath on their household gods,

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that neither of them would ever tell Jacob of this meeting. He would have pointed out that if Jacob were to learn that the sisters had advance information of the deception and had participated in the plot, his love for Rachel might turn to hate and he would regard Leah with contempt.

The following passages follow a pattern fashioned in part from facts found in the text and in part from reasonable inferences drawn from the text. Attributions to the three characters are in part probable utterances, in part their thoughts in weighing the pros and cons of Laban's scheme, in part reading between the lines.

LABAN LAYS THE GROUNDWORK

"In our family, the men don't decide the future for our women. You may have heard that my sister Rebekah was given the choice of whether or not to go with Abraham's servant to marry Isaac. She answered in one word: "*Aylech*" [I will go]. Now, I tell you that you don't have to accept my idea. I ask only that you consider the alternatives if we let matters take their own course.

"After the wedding guests leave for the day, Leah will enter the bridal tent and sleep at Jacob's side. Between the darkness and the strong drink at the feast, he will assume that he is with Rachel.

"In the morning, he will discover the deception, and he will lash out at me. I think he may remember his own exploit when he deceived his father and Esau, a story which he enjoys retelling, and he will be willing to accept some reasonable offer from me. At that point, both of you will remain silent and retire to the women's tent.

"It will be clear to everyone that since Jacob was intimate with Leah, an unmarried virgin, he must marry her. Since he has no money for the bride-price, I will agree to credit him with the seven-year service he has already given me so he may take Leah as his bride.

"I'll make one more concession: he can work for me another seven years and earn the right to marry Rachel, but he will have to stay with his wife, Leah, until the end of the wedding festivities. He won't refuse that offer."

RACHEL HESITATES

"I can't wait another seven years to marry him. I'll be old, wrinkled, unattractive, and nearing the end of my childbearing years."

LABAN SWEETENS THE DEAL

"I wouldn't keep you waiting that long. You have already waited seven years, so have the patience to wait only seven days more – until the end of the wedding festivities. Then you can have Jacob and share him with your sister.

"I'm going to give each of you your own handmaid, who will wait on you and tend to your children so that you could receive your husband's visits as a queen.

"Of course, Jacob may try to induce Rachel to flee with him to his old home in Canaan and refuse to marry Leah. Esau, his irate brother, would be waiting for him to do him harm and Rachel would be under the thumb of her domineering mother-in-law. Once in Canaan, Jacob might follow the example of Esau and take a Canaanite or Hittite woman as his second wife."

LEAH ACCEPTS

"I see advantages to everyone from Father's proposal. This way, we will be respecting the local custom. The family will have Jacob's services for at least another seven years. Rachel and I will be closer than ever. and I shall be married to a good man.

"I am sure Father will be pleased that under his plan he could dispense with a second week-long wedding feast where the local men would devour so many of his sheep, goats, and lambs, and deplete his stock of wine and strong drink."

At that point, both sisters approved the plan and got their final instructions.

One may speculate: What if Leah had refused to go along with the plot, or if Jacob had awakened and discovered Leah as she entered his tent and ordered her out? What if Rachel had refused to share her beloved Jacob? Suppose that Leah had not been married to Jacob, or that he had fled with Rachel, leaving Leah behind, or that Laban had retracted his offer of handmaids. It would then follow that the people of Israel would have consisted of only the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin, descendants of the children born to Jacob and Rachel.

The art of interpretation is to move from what the text relates sparsely to a complete understanding of the whole picture.