

# **BIBLE CHARACTERS**

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## **The Woman at the Well The Wise Virgins B- Leah and Rachel**

(For Part 2, [click here](#))

### **The Woman at the Well:**

“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise...” (Matt. 25:1-2).

“For I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband” (2Co. 11:2).

In the books of Genesis and Exodus, Isaac, Jacob and Moses are considered among the clear symbols of the Lord Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Each one of them is a living image that clearly portrays the Lord in some phase of His life, or reflects one of His attributes or His acts of salvation, written as depicted with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit more than twelve centuries before His advent. Therefore, the wives of those patriarchs and prophets (Rebekah, Leah, Rachel and Zipporah) represent the Church—the bride of Christ, and stand for each and every member of the Church betrothed by Christ to Himself (2Co. 11:2).

This study focuses on the first meeting of each one of these brides with her bridegroom, with a brief survey of her personal life. By applying the spiritual interpretation we inherited from our early Fathers of the Church, each faithful soul can find his (her) place and stance relative to the heavenly bridegroom.

### **B- Leah and Rachel (part 1 of 2)**

**“Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud” (Gen. 29:11)**

**“ Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for your love is better than wine”  
(Song of Solomon 1:2)**

#### **Biblical References**

Gen. 29:6-33, 30:1-25, 31:4-34, 33:1-7, 35:16-20, 48:7 – Ruth 4:11 – Jer. 31:15 –  
Mat. 2:18

#### **Questions:**

1. From the story of Leah and Rachel, how do you explain the differences in human talent among people?
2. Who was the first of the saintly ‘Fathers of the Church’ who said that Rachel “represents the Church”? What do you know about him?
3. Among the ‘Fathers’ mentioned in this article, whose writings came down to us in Coptic? Who wrote in Assyrian? And in Latin?
4. There are two levels of spiritual interpretation. How can they be applied to the story of Leah and Rachel?
5. Was Rachel ‘right’ in stealing her father’s household gods?

The story of Rachel is a sorrowful one although it is one of the most beautiful stories of marital love in the Bible. For seven years Rachel waited to be married to her bridegroom, only to see that he ultimately married her sister because of the hardness of her father's (Leban) heart. Even after getting married to Jacob, and being the preferred wife, Rachel's life was a chain of tragedies and sorrows, as if her life carried over to her that curse which befell the earth as a result of the first man's sin (Gen. 3:16-19), but did not receive the blessings which God granted man even after his fall, as in Gen. 9:1, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth".

Even after God blessed her with children, such grace was the reason of her death. When she delivered her second son, she called him 'son of my sorrow' (Gen. 35:16-20). Rachel thus became the first woman in the Bible to bear to the utmost God's punishment of Eve, "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception, in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16).

As if this was not enough, Rachel's death occurred during the family's journey to Ephrath (Bethlehem), and she was buried in strange land. She probably died in the evening and so it was impossible to carry her to the family's grave in Hebron. This troubled Jacob frequently until his last breath (Gen. 48:7). However, it did not change the historical fact that after his death his body was laid beside Leah and not Rachel.

Rachel's grave happened to be in the area that was given to the tribe of Benjamin when (the son of Nun) Joshua distributed the land after the Jews occupied Canaan. The prophets and the writers of God's word considered this as a continuation of her pain and suffering - the Benjaminites were almost annihilated in civil war during the reign of the Judges (Judges 20 and 21). Perhaps Rachel's children in later generations passed by her grave on their way to captivity in Babylon as portrayed by Jeremiah the prophet (Jerm. 31:15). This prophecy was quoted by St. Matthew the apostle in describing the massacre of Bethlehem, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more" (Matt. 2:18).

### **The Spiritual Meaning**

On the study of God's word, the Orthodox theologian P. Evdokimov says, "If description enhances historical facts (i.e. *literal study*), contemplation (i.e. *spiritual meaning*) reaches their silent depths. Every sincere reading begins with history so as to be able to contemplate the icon of the kingdom of God".

Despite the shortcomings of Jacob's life, his life represents the life of our Lord Jesus in whom every righteousness is made perfect. Based on this premise, Jacob's wives are symbols of the Church. In a dialogue with Trypho, a Jewish rabbi, St. Justin (2<sup>nd</sup> century philosopher and martyr) was the first person to advocate this interpretation. In this dialogue, St. Justin says to Trypho: "Leah represents your people whereas Rachel stands for the Church. Leah had weak eyes, representing the weakness of your inner souls. Rachel stole the statues of Leban her father and hid them until the present time, and we have deserted the material god-idols of our fathers. Jacob was hated by Esau, so we – and even our Lord Himself – are hated by you and by all gentiles, although we are natural brothers. Jacob was called 'Israel', but it is now clear that Israel is the Christ who is called Jesus".<sup>(1)</sup>

At the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, St. Irenaeus the martyr, bishop of Lyon wrote, “It was imperative that Jacob beget children from the two sisters as the Lord Jesus did with the two covenants that had one father. Jacob, however, endured everything for the sake of the younger sister; Rachel was the symbol of the Church for whose sake Jesus Christ patiently endured all suffering.”<sup>(2)</sup>

St. Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers (4<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>(3)</sup> considers Rachel a symbol of the Church and her calamities, as Rachel was barren, but now the children the Church are countless.

In his exposition of the Gospel according to St. Matthew (English translation, recently released in Rome), Bishop Rufus of Shutp elucidates, “Look at this woman loudly crying until her voice was heard (Matt. 2:18). The voice was that of Rachel whose name means the lamb”. The lamb was weeping and wailing for the wolf killed her children ... And who is the lamb? Rachel is the Church, Leah’s sister (who represents the synagogue). Her womb was closed and she bore no children for a long time (Gen. 29:31). She was weeping for her children whom Herod killed; that is the shed blood of martyrs. Indeed, her voice was heard in the highest.”<sup>(4)</sup>

### **Homily *in verse* (Memra) by St Jacob of Serug**

St. Jacob bishop of Serug (5<sup>th</sup> century) wrote a long memra entitled, “The Lord and Jacob – the Church and Rachel - Leah and the Jewish synagogue”.<sup>(5)</sup> In this homily, he explains in an elegant poetic style how Jacob was a symbol of the Lord, as did Rachel stand for the Church, and Leah her sister represented the synagogue, as he vividly contemplates the verses of the Book of Genesis (Chapters 29-31).

St. Jacob stresses that the mission of the Son in his incarnation and his act of salvation was predetermined since the beginning of creation. This was evident in the depiction of the Lord by the righteous people (of the Old Testament) in their actions and deeds, and also by the various symbolic references. Therefore, there is no page in the Holy Bible that does not reveal Him or proclaim His advent.

The Bishop likens Jacob’s journey to, and his return from, Haran (Gen. 29), to the Lord’s descent in the form of man as He came down from heaven to betroth His Church, and His return to the heavenly Father (John 7:23; Phil. 2:7).

Upon Jacob’s arrival at the well (St. Jacob calls it the well of mysteries), he found it surrounded by shepherds and flocks of sheep. But there was a large stone on top of the well’s mouth. When Rachel arrived, things changed:

“Jacob was moved when he saw Rachel;  
he was invigorated by her beauty.  
So, he lifted up the great stone for the flock of sheep to drink.  
The mystery of the Church was shining on her face like a precious stone”.

St. Jacob, the Bishop, sees that Jacob’s weeping aloud as he kissed Rachel attests to his pure love to her; a love pure of any physical lust. He was thus an example of the Lord.

“Who kissed his fiance while weeping other than Jacob?  
He realized the mystery of the Church in Rachel at the time of her betrothal.  
He had to cry and grieve as he kissed her;

Therefore, that betrothal denotes the labor of the Son.  
With his tears, (Jacob) portrayed the image of the agonizing Son;  
When Jacob betrothed Rachel, he shed his tears  
But our Lord washed up the Church with his blood when  
*He* redeemed her ...  
Righteous Jacob's weeping was a shadow of those great pains  
that redeemed the Church of the Gentiles".

Bishop Jacob, once again reflects on the '*well*' recognizing its basic references to God's work of salvation. The great stone on the mouth of the well stands for sin; the flock that is suffering from great thirst represents the Gentiles; it was the Lord who rolled the stone (evil) and by so doing, he opened the way of baptism for His fiance to have the grace of the new birth.

Even the deception of Jacob by Laban at the time of the wedding party, it was seen by St. Jacob of Serug as accomplishing the will of God:

"Considering the two sisters who were given to one man, we see Jacob as an example of the way of the Son of God, as the two sisters represent the synagogue and the church". Here, the homily sheds light on the two covenants through the word of God:

"The Synagogue preceded the Church unto the faith in the Lord,  
laying the veil of Moses upon her face (Ex. 34:33-35; 2Co. 3:13-16)  
The daughter of the Hebrews stood veiled before the Lord.  
Moses laid the veil on her face so that no one would see that she was blind.  
When it was daylight, Jacob saw that Leah was ugly.  
The radiance of the Son revealed that the Synagogue was blind  
Whereas the face of the Church was illuminated as she stood upright  
Before the truth".

### **The mystical link between the life of *action* and that of *contemplation***

(For Part 2, [click here](#))

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#### **Endnotes:**

<sup>(1)</sup> Justin: Dialogue with Trypho, 134:2 (Ante-Nicene Fathers).

<sup>(2)</sup> Irenaeus: Against heretics, 4:21:3 (Ante-Nicene Fathers).

<sup>(3)</sup> St. Hilarius was one of the great defenders of the faith at the time of Athanasius' struggle against the Arians. He was banished from his see during the reign of Constantius.

<sup>(4)</sup> Rufus of Shutp: Homilies on Matthew and Luke. Introduction and Translation by J. M. Sheridan, Rome.

<sup>(5)</sup> See the full English translation in "The True Vine, Vol. 4, Number 4, 1993, pages 50-64, (P.O. Box 120, Rosalindale, MA 02131).

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