

February 16, 2003

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Lord looked out for Leah. He had to. Nobody else would.

Well, all right, I exaggerate. Leah's father Laban also looked out for her, at least in the sense of making sure she was married before her younger sister. Nor, let it be said, was this an easy thing to do. When Jacob arrived at Padan-Aram, he immediately fell in love with that younger sister, Rachel, whom the Bible describes as "beautiful of form and appearance." It was Rachel that Jacob had in mind to marry (Genesis 29:17-18).

With respect to Leah's physical appearance, Holy Scripture comments only on her eyes, which are said to be rakkoth. Although the root of this adjective means "weak" (hence "sickly" in the Septuagint, "bleary" in the Vulgate, and "delicate" in the New King James), the word more likely indicates that her eyes were tender or gentle. (The medieval Jewish commentator Rashi speculated that Leah's eyes were wasting away with continual weeping, at the thought that she might have to marry Jacob's older brother Esau!) Perhaps the Sacred Text mentions only Leah's eyes because these were her sole attractive aspect. Anyway, Jacob was not in love with her.

For Leah the impending marriage of her younger sister was something of a disadvantage, because, as Laban explained, "It must not be done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn" (29:26). On the other hand, this explanation may have been merely an excuse, and Laban definitely needed an excuse for what he did. Determined that his older daughter should not go unwed, he furtively substituted Leah into Jacob's bed on the wedding night. Jacob, discovering the substitution the next morning, remarked to his father-in-law at breakfast that the move had been a bit sneaky, a kind of thing not entirely acceptable among gentlemen (29:24-25). But the matter was settled, and not much could be done about it. Laban gave Rachel to Jacob as a second wife, and the young man would just have to make the best of it.

Leah, for her part, certainly felt the indignity of the

situation, always conscious of not being her husband's first choice. Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah," the Bible tells us (29:30); indeed, it literally says that Jacob hated Leah (29:31). He must not have hated her too much, though, because she was often pregnant. Moreover, that same verse goes on to say that Leah's frequent pregnancies demonstrated that the Lord Himself was looking out for her.

He was also looking out for Leah's husband. The Lord had promised Jacob a large progeny (28:14), but Jacob had gone and fallen in love with Rachel, a woman who would die in giving birth to her second son. Had the young man been permitted to follow his own plans, God's promise would not, humanly speaking, have been fulfilled.

Leah, on the other hand, gave Jacob six sons and a daughter. Although she had not been part of Jacob's plans, Leah was a most important component in God's plan, for from her body leapt the royal and priestly bloodlines of the realm. Leah's third son, Levi, became the primogenitor of Israel's priesthood, including Moses, Aaron, Zachary, and John the Baptist. Her fourth son, Judah, was the ancestor of the house of David, the kingly family, including "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). Indeed, the Lord was looking out for Leah.

We have here a biblical example of God's use of someone's deception as an instrument of His providence. Indeed, there is a special irony to Leah's story in this respect. If Jacob thought Laban's substitution of Leah for Rachel in the marriage bed had been a bit too undercover (so to speak), he should know. Jacob, intimately acquainted with all manner of underhanded activity, had barely removed the disguise by which he deceived his father Isaac and stole the blessing intended for Esau. Having pulled that little trick to the disadvantage of an older brother, there was some justice in Jacob's being tricked, in turn, to the advantage of an older sister. And the Lord was at work in it all. Just as God had used Jacob's deception of Isaac as a means to accomplish His salvific will, He used Laban's deception of Jacob for the same purpose.

Finally, it was Leah, not Rachel, who would lie buried beside Jacob her husband in the cave of the field of Machpelah, before Mamre, in the inheritance of Judah, her fourth-born.

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