

## **BILHAH AND ZILPAH**

### **Traditional Understanding of the Story**

The twelve tribes of Israel were conceived by four women. Two of them, Rachel and Leah, are lionized in history as the matriarchs of our people.

Lesser known are the other two, Bilhah and Zilpah, mothers to Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. Bilhah and Zilpah were originally Rachel and Leah's handmaids, but when Rachel and Leah struggled to conceive, they proposed that Jacob marry and have children with their handmaids.

### **Who Were They?**

In Biblical times, men often had many wives. Sometimes, the wives were of different social castes and would retain that social status after marriage. The woman of the higher caste was considered the man's primary wife and her children received preferential treatment.

When a man married into the slave's caste, on the other hand, the children of their union usually remained slaves. Social anthropologists have coined a rarely used term to describe the practice of a man marrying women from both higher and inferior castes: polycoity.

Our tradition tells us that Laban also had at least two wives. Most traditions assert that Laban's second, inferior wife was a concubine, while others posit that she was actually his maidservant. Leah and Rachel were sisters born of Laban's primary wife, and Bilhah and Zilpah were daughters of his second wife, making Bilhah and Zilpah the half-sisters of Rachel and Leah. Before they married,

Laban gifted Bilhah and Zilpah to Leah and Rachel as handmaidens (in Hebrew *amah* or *shifchah*).

Bilhah means “to become alarmed” (*lehibahel*). Bilhah was named so because of her *stunning* beauty. Zilpah means “to flow” (*lezalef*). This name proved to be prophetic, as when Zilpah was told—as a young girl—that she was destined to join Leah in her marriage to the Esau, tears would *flow* down her face.

### **The Story: Jacob Marries the Maidservants**

One could assume that a young bride would be opposed to having her husband marry her maid. What events led Jacob’s wives to offer their handmaids to him in marriage?

At the beginning of her marriage, Rachel could not conceive despite her desire to have Jacob’s children and be part of the future he was trying to build. The pain of her childlessness was exacerbated when she watched her sister, Leah, birth not one but four children one after the other. Rachel became jealous of her sister. Besides envying the children she had begotten, Rachel attributed Leah’s fertility to her righteousness, and envied the good deeds Leah must have done to merit offspring. “Give me children, Jacob!” she cried to her husband. “If not, I am as good as dead!” Rachel was so stricken that she thought she would die from grief.

Mirroring her grandmother Sarah who gave Abraham her maidservant Hagar, Rachel hoped that she would merit to have children if she did the same. At the very least, Rachel hoped to help raise Bilhah’s children as her own, mitigating some of the pain she was experiencing. Thus, Rachel set Bilhah

free and Jacob married her. In time, Bilhah bore two children and Rachel named them Dan (“judgment,”) and Naphtali (“contest” or “prayer”).

After Leah saw Rachel’s partial success, Nachmanides relates, she too desired more children. Rachel and Leah were prophetesses and knew that Jacob was only destined to have twelve sons. To ensure that the majority of those boys would be borne by her or her handmaid, even though she already had four children at the time (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah), Leah offered Zilpah to Jacob in marriage. It appears that she made the offer half-heartedly, almost hoping he would refuse. Zilpah gave birth to two children, and Leah named them Gad (“good luck”) and Asher (“fortune”).

Rachel eventually gave birth to two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. After her premature passing, Bilhah raised Rachel’s children as her own.<sup>23</sup>

### **Anthropological Understanding of the Story**

Bilhah and Zilpah were the handmaidens (servants) of the patriarch Jacob’s wives, Leah and Rachel. Rachel, who was Jacob’s favorite wife, had not been blessed with children. While Leah, Rachel’s older sister, had given birth to four sons. Genesis 30 records that

*“...when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, “Give me children, or else I die.”*

*And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?"*

*And she said, "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her."*

In her desperation for children Rachel followed the example of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and married her maid Bilhah to her husband so that she could have children through her. In Biblical times this was an acceptable way for a married woman who was barren to gain children. In an ancient Nuzi marriage contract it stipulated that a woman whose servant bore the children of her husband *"should have full authority over the offspring."*

This adoption ceremony was often conducted by placing the son or daughter on the knees of the mistress and declaring it her child. This may have been what Rachel meant when she said that Bilhah *"shall bear upon my knees."*

Alternatively she may have just been referring to the way in which ancient women commonly gave birth. Women in labor were surrounded by female companions who encouraged them to labor upright and dance and sway during contractions (*belly dancing is actually an ancient fertility dance that women were taught a young age to help with conception and labor*). During the final stage of labor, a woman would squat and be supported under the arms by one or two other women. Oftentimes, bricks were placed under her to give her more support and the midwife knelt in front of her. This image of a woman being supported in a squat by other women is the most common image of women giving birth

throughout history and around the world. So when Rachel meant that Bilhah would bear upon her knees she may have been referring to the actual position in



which she would give birth.

[Image Source](#)



Either way it is almost certain that Rachel would have been with Bilhah during the births of her two sons. Also, the scriptural text seems to indicate that the sons Bilhah bore were considered to be Rachel's and that she would have raised them as her own. This is reinforced by the fact that Rachel named both of the sons Bilhah bore. The first son Rachel named Dan saying, *"God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son."* The second son

Bilhah bore she named Naphtali and said, *“With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed.”*

After Bilhah bore Rachel two sons, Leah found that even though she already had four sons she was no longer able to have children. So, following the example of her sister, Leah gave her maid, Zilpah, to Jacob as a wife so that she could have more children. Zilpah bore Leah two sons. Leah named the first son Gad and declared, *“A troop cometh.”* The second son Zilpah bore Leah named Asher and said, *“Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed.”*

Like Rachel, the sons that Zilpah bore would have been considered to be Leah’s and she would have raised them as her own sons. Nonetheless Bilhah and Zilpah would have been able to see their sons every day and their sons would have known that they were their birth mothers.

In the official record given of Jacob’s children in Genesis 46, Dan and Naphtali are listed as the children of Bilhah and Asher and Gad are listed as the children of Zilpah. These women may not have had legal claim to their children, but they still played a large part in their upbringing and in their daily lives. As I’ve thought about these two great women and reflected on their sacrifices, I can’t help but marvel at what amazing women these two handmaidens must have been. It makes me wonder what sort of relationship Rachel and Leah had with them. What did it take for them to share their husband with two other women? What did it take for Bilhah and Zilpah to share their children with two other women? It must have been hard, really hard.

## Reuben and Bilhah

In Talmudic times, the Torah was read in Hebrew and then in the colloquial Aramaic so that the congregation could understand what was being said. The reader chanted a verse in Hebrew and the *meturgeman* (translator) would repeat it in Aramaic. The Mishnah lists four Biblical stories that should not be translated lest they be misinterpreted by the unlearned. One of them is the story of Reuben and Bilhah.

The verse simply states, **“And it came to pass when Israel sojourned in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father’s concubine, and Israel heard of it.”**

## Modern Understanding

A Power move to claim the rights of the first born.

To replace his father who is getting old.

### TALMUDIC EXPLANATION:

While one Talmudic tradition interprets the verse literally, the majority do not, prompting the Talmudic dictum, “Anyone who says that Reuben sinned [with Bilhah] is nothing other than mistaken, as it is stated: ‘Now the sons of Jacob were twelve.’ This teaches that all of the brothers were equal [in righteousness].”

So what does the verse mean? The Talmud (quoted in Rashi) explains that Reuben moved Jacob’s bed from Bilhah’s tent to the tent of his mother, Leah. Reuben knew that Jacob loved Rachel more than his mother, and that it was she who Jacob desired to marry at the outset. Indeed, Jacob kept his marriage bed in

Rachel's tent for the duration of her life. After Rachel's passing, Reuben assumed that Jacob would move into Leah's tent. In his mind, Bilhah and Zilpah were inferior to Rachel and Leah, their former masters. When Jacob chose to move into Bilhah's tent instead, he felt righteous indignation. "If my mother's sister was my mother's rival, should my mother's sister's handmaid be her rival as well?" He took Jacob's bed and moved it to Leah's tent.

Years later, when Jacob blessed his children before his passing, he chastised Reuben for this act. "[You have] the restlessness of water; [therefore,] you shall not have superiority, for you ascended upon your father's couch; then you profaned [Him Who] ascended upon my bed."

Jacob punished Reuben for his disrespectful act by declining to give him the usual firstborn rights. The Book of Chronicles records, "For he [Reuben] was the firstborn, but when he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel." Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, became two separate tribes, mirroring the double inheritance given to firstborn children.