

The Lost Matriarch: Supplement E

Midrash on the Handmaiden-Wives

And Laban gave to his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for a maidservant. (Gen. 29:24).

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And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his maidservant to be her maid. (Gen. 29:29)

Two weddings one week apart should be enough to sustain interest for any family story. However, the biblical text interjects an additional line in the midst of the descriptions of each of Jacob's weddings to Leah and Rachel. These strangely timed interpolations state that, at the time of the weddings, Laban gave one of his maidservants to each newly married daughter for a handmaiden—he gave Zilpah to Leah, and a week later gave Bilhah to Rachel. From the text alone it's not immediately apparent why these lines are inserted in the wedding night narratives for the sisters, rather than recited later when Zilpah and Bilhah begin their active roles in the family drama.

Some modern interpreters tend to dismiss such apparent text-order incongruities as simply evidence of awkward literary choices made during the redaction process that fused multiple literary source documents into the biblical text we read today. But the Rabbis who created the classical midrash believed that they knew the answer to “Who wrote the Bible?” and it did not involve multiple human authors and a Redactor. They read the Bible as they believe Moses received it, as Holy Writ.

Some contemporary literary analysis of the Bible likewise rejects any presumption that textual aspects should be attributed to a compromised editing process, but this new position comes from a far different literary approach to the origin of the Bible. Robert Alter proposes that we read such apparent breaks in the narrative as intentional, artful, stylistic elements of the biblical author/redactor.¹ Under such a view, no less than under the early concept of unitary, divine authorship, we can read the text with the expectation that even (or, perhaps, especially) the most incongruous lines convey special implicit meaning.

In reading the introductions of the two maidservants in the text, we have the advantage of familiarity with the remainder of the story, not yet revealed to Leah, Rachel, and their husband Jacob. Our foreknowledge attributes a strong ironic quality to this pair of lines about Zilpah and Bilhah. Jacob's first two marriages don't occur in isolation. Each marriage starts already accompanied by what will become another complication for Leah, Rachel, and Jacob. The handmaidens will soon become additional wives for Jacob and further rivals for Leah and Rachel's claims upon their joint husband.

And not only do we readers have the advantage of knowing what will be coming in the story, we also carry a ready association for the term “handmaiden” or “maidservant” (*shiph-chah*) that is used for Zilpah and Bilhah. That same term was used in the prior Bible story about Jacob's grandparents, Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 16:2). When Sarah could not become pregnant—a problem that plagues the Matriarchs—she volunteers her handmaiden, Hagar, to

bear a child (Ishmael) for Abraham. When Sarah herself finally bears a son (Isaac), great conflict arises between Sarah, her handmaiden, and their sons. Thus, when two “handmaidens” are now introduced into the Leah-Rachel-Jacob wedding stories, this signals readers to expect a parallel and presumably greater conflict.

A close reading of the lines describing Laban’s gift of his maidservants to the brides reveals that the order of the narrative is different for Leah and Rachel. For the second gift, to Rachel, the text order is what we would expect: the marriage, the wedding gift of the handmaiden (perhaps as part of the community wedding feast), and finally consummation of the marriage by marital intercourse (Gen 29:28-30). For Leah, however, the recited order is unnatural: first the marriage, then consummation of the marriage by marital intercourse, followed by the gift of the handmaiden, and finally Jacob’s realization of the wedding hoax on the next morning (Gen. 29:22-25). It is obvious that Laban did not actually make the gift to Leah after the bride and groom had marital relations but before they awoke in the morning. If we start with the presumption that nothing in the biblical text is accidental, then this unnatural phrasing should be telling us something interesting. Perhaps the Bible describes Laban making his gift to Leah after the text tells of the consummation of the marriage in order to suggest a special motivation for Laban’s gift—perhaps he knew that there might be a special need for Zilpah, due to some physical condition of Leah’s (which would become evident only after consummation) that could interfere with her ability to bear children. Such a physical condition could explain why Leah had remained unmarried until Laban tricked Jacob, and why the subsequent text will state that God had to intervene and “open her womb” in order for Leah to conceive (Gen. 29:31).

The Bible tells us little about Bilhah and Zilpah, but since they go on to become Jacob’s third and fourth wives and give birth to four of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, Midrash searches for some textual clue to their identities. The subtle hint comes later, in Laban’s farewell speech to Jacob when Jacob finally takes his family out of Haran to return to the Promised Land. When Laban charges Jacob to treat Laban’s daughters properly, he uses the term “my daughters” twice in the same sentence (rather than using the expected conversational pronoun “them” in the second reference). (Gen. 31:50) The Rabbis take Laban at his word—they conclude that the first reference is to his daughters Leah and Rachel, so the second reference must be to his other daughters, Zilpah and Bilhah.²

Midrash also explains why Laban would give one of his daughters to another daughter as her handmaiden. Zilpah and Bilhah were not Laban’s daughters by his wife, but by a concubine. They enjoyed a status superior to an ordinary bondswoman or servant, but were handmaidens because they were not daughters of a full wife. An alternative explanation is that Zilpah and Bilhah had been handmaidens of Laban’s wife (presumed now deceased since she isn’t mentioned anywhere in the story of Jacob in Haran) and had been given in the mother’s marriage settlement agreement (*ketubah*) to Laban subject to a condition. If any daughters (Leah and Rachel) were born to the mother, the handmaids would become part of their dowries when they were married. If this was the case, the gifts of the handmaidens had nothing to do with Laban’s generosity. He lacked any legal right to interfere with their transfer.³

Notes to Supplement E

- ¹ Biblical scenes that seem interpolated may be significant elements for understanding the main narrative line: Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 3-12.
- ² Laban's words indicate that the handmaidens are also his daughters: *Midrash Rabbah*, Gen. 74.13.
- ³ Why Laban gave the handmaidens to Leah and Rachel: Attar, *Or Hachayim*, 252-3; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., 287, and see n. #167; Tuchman, *Passions of the Matriarchs*, 214 [citing *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*].