

Reuben Went In and Slept with His Father's Concubine Bilhah

35: 21-22a

Israel moved on again and pitched his tent beyond Migdal Eder, which is outside of Bethlehem (35:21). Once again, this shows that Rachel could not have died outside of Beit-Lechem because Isra'el had moved on after burying her. While Isra'el was living in that region, Reuben, who was now probably thirty years old, went in and slept with his father's concubine Bilhah (35:22a). No details are given, but Bilhah was much older than Reuben, being the maidservant of Rachel, and the mother of Reuben's two half-brothers Dan and Naphtali. This was not a rape and on the surface it seems to be an odd match, but each had their own reasons for getting involved.

As far as Reuben was concerned, it ensured that Bilhah could never ascend to the position of chief wife. After Rachel's death, Bilhah was clearly the only threat to that position belonging to Leah, Reuben's mother. Secondly, Reuben may have been challenging his father's authority. It was a well-known and widely adopted practice in the ancient Near East that the eldest son should inherit the concubines of his father (Second Samuel 16:22). Reuben may have been asserting himself as the true heir of Jacob, but it backfired.

Bilhah had her own reasons for getting involved. After Rachel's death, she probably wanted to take Rachel's place as Ya'akov's main wife. When he failed to respond to her, she may have tried to bypass Jacob's authority and go directly to the eventual heir, which would have been Reuben. In the last analysis, they were both using each other for family positioning. The loss of the birthright could occur if a grave offense was committed and for Reuben, the attempt to seize his father's position ended up destroying his own position because it would cost him his birthright.

In addition, this section serves a literary purpose, providing a foreshadowing to the conflict between Reuben and the sons of the concubines in Chapter 37. Reuben wants to have compassion on Joseph, whereas the other brothers want to have him murdered.⁵⁴⁰

The rabbis teach that Reuben did not actually do this, but removed her couch from his tent, and Scripture stigmatized his action as evil as though he had lain with her. For during Rachel's lifetime Jacob's couch was always in her tent; on her deathbed he removed it to Bilhah's, Rachel's handmaid. Reuben resented this, saying, "If my mother, Leah, was subordinate to Rachel, must she also be subordinate to Rachel's handmaid?" Therefore, he removed Bilhah's couch and substituted Leah's.

Isra'el heard of it. That is to say, **he heard** the terrible news in quiet strength of the new name and power implied and guaranteed by **his** recent revelation from **God**. **He** wouldn't say anything at the time, but **he** would never forget it (**49:3-4**). This is the only real way to meet sorrow and pain: **In the strength of ADONAI (Micah 5:4)**. Whatever emergency, we may rest on the divine assurance: **My grace is sufficient for you (2 Corinthians 12:9)**.⁵⁴¹