

REUBEN – A SUITABLE CASE FOR TREATMENT OR JUST MISUNDERSTOOD?

“And it came to pass, while Israel dwelt in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, a concubine of his father, and Israel heard.....” [Genesis 35:22].

When you look at the Hebrew and the cantillation, this story and the paragraph end mid-sentence. It looks like the rest of the original text has been censored. Now, that is strange. It is even blasphemous, if you believe in a literal Torah Min HaShamayim, because a human being (e.g. Ezra) appears to have exercised his editorial prerogative and excised some of God’s dictation to Moses. Rabbi Hertz [1] explains “that the subject was abruptly dropped, it being too distasteful to continue so revolting a theme.” To reinforce the distastefulness of my topic, I commend the drasha by Rabbi Lia Bass [2] who questions whether Bilhah consented and concludes from examining the Hebrew that she was raped. The early rabbis were also squeamish. Rabbi Plaut [3] points us to the Mishnah [4], which says that the verse above was to be read in public without being interpreted. So, the audience would remain ignorant of what the Torah was trying to tell them! At that time, each verse was recited in Hebrew and translated into Aramaic, the vernacular, so that everyone could understand. The translator was a meturgeman [5] and was eventually replaced by a darshan or preacher. Some of you may recall that this ancient practice was revived at Jonathan Bash-Bensusan’s Barmitzvah.

So, why would Reuben behave in this way and why target Bilhah? First, let’s check out the players. Israel is Jacob, the third and last of the Patriarchs. He has returned to the Land of Canaan after 20 years of servitude with his uncle, Laban. Jacob has 13 children, 12 boys and one girl, by four women – Leah (six boys and one girl) and Rachel (two) who are Laban’s daughters, and Bilhah (two) and Zilpah (two) who are handmaidens to the sisters. Reuben is Jacob’s first-born by any of his consorts. Reuben’s mother is Leah.

For some reason, Reuben decides to encroach on his father’s property, by having intimate relations with Bilhah. Now, we know that Jacob did not value her life as much as that of his beloved Rachel [6], but nevertheless Bilhah was part of his harem. Jacob does not forget Reuben’s chutzpah and is unforgiving on his deathbed [7]: “...Unstable as water, **you will excel no longer**, because you went up to your father’s bed; you defiled it – he went up to my couch.” You will find only one place in the Tenach, and it is not in the Torah, where it is claimed that Reuben lost his birthright as a result of his rashness [8], but Jacob’s curse does seem to come true – i) the leadership of the family will transfer to the two brothers who receive the most copious blessings from their father – Judah [9] and Joseph [10]; ii) members of the tribe of Reuben, upset with their fall from grace, will back the wrong contender and be swallowed up with Korach [11]; and iii) the tribe will be roundly condemned by Deborah and Barak for failing to come to their aid in the battle against Sisera [12].

And what was Reuben’s motivation? Most of the commentators that I have consulted suggest a political agenda, because they see an obvious parallel with the story of Absalom. He was one of David’s sons, his most cherished, who repays his father’s love by staging a coup. David flees for his life and Absalom demonstrates his accession to the throne by publicly having his way with his father’s 10 concubines [13]. So, Reuben acted as he did, because he was asserting his right, albeit prematurely, to succeed his father as head of the family.

Sorry, I am not convinced, because nowhere else in Jacob’s story will you find any evidence of a play for power by Reuben. On the contrary, he knows like his siblings that his father only has time for Joseph [14] and yet, in next week’s sidrah, he will be the one who will step forward and save Joseph from being murdered [15]. Fascinatingly, that story offers us a direct comparison with my text; today, Reuben acts and his father “hears – vayishma”, but does nothing. Jacob is passive [16]. Next week, Reuben will “hear - vayishma” what his murderous brothers want to do to Joseph and will deliver him out of their hands. Coincidence? You decide.

Furthermore, the lust for power explanation tends to ignore Reuben's choice for illicit sex, Bilhah, and the context for this incident. Bilhah was Rachel's handmaiden and was given to Jacob in desperation so that a barren Rachel could have children through a surrogate [17]. Does this not remind you of Sarah's offer of Hagar to Abraham [18]? We are told that Jacob loved Rachel [19] and that her sister Leah was hated [20], presumably by Rachel and Jacob. Unfortunate but understandable; Jacob never wanted to marry Leah.

Today, we read that Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, and two verses after Jacob buried her Reuben struck. Another coincidence? In his crass way, Reuben was telling his father that, with Rachel's death, he should now be more attentive and loving towards Reuben's mother, Leah. By defiling Bilhah, Reuben had callously cut the final link to Rachel. His mother, Leah, had been ignored for long enough. Rashi explains that when Rachel died, Jacob had indeed moved to Bilhah's tent. So, Reuben was objecting to the slight inflicted on his mother [21].

I was gratified to find that this interpretation, which I have harboured for decades, was discussed by Rabbi Lia and by Professor Nahum Sarna [22]. Even more surprising was that their inspiration was one which I normally find impenetrable, the Talmud. There I found the following Aggadah [23]: "He (i.e. Reuben) resented his mother's humiliation. Said he, 'if my mother's sister was a rival to my mother, will the bondmaid of my mother's sister be a rival to my mother?' [Thereupon] he arose and transposed her couch. Others say, he transposed two couches, one of the Shechinah and the other of his father. Thus it is written, 'Then you defiled my couch on which [the Shechinah] went up.'" Unfortunately, the Talmud goes much further than I am prepared to go by exonerating Reuben; he did not lie with Bilhah, but merely moved the couches so that his father would sleep with his mother, Leah. Midrash [24] goes further and explains that Reuben realised that he had made a terrible mistake and was the first person to do teshuvah (repentance). For this act, he was rewarded with one of his descendants being the prophet Hosea, who was the first to call on the people to atone for their transgressions. We read some of Hosea's message in today's haftarah.

I was disappointed by the Talmud's position on Reuben. So imagine my reaction when the Talmud moved on to quote the same rabbi absolving the sons of Eli and Samuel, and Kings David, Solomon and Josiah with the stock introduction: "Whoever maintains that xxx sinned is merely making an error" I wonder if this is the source for the orthodox position that Sue and I encountered at a wedding meal in North Manchester? One of her good friends from university, B, who had abandoned the United Synagogue for the haredi community, observed that the Avot and Imahot (Patriarchs and Matriarchs) were saints without any imperfections. I could not let this perversion of the peshat (the simple text) go unchallenged. I claimed that they were flawed human beings, but were ideal role models for us. We should emulate their strengths and work hard to avoid their weaknesses. I was met with deafening silence. Not one of B's co-religionists, including her scholarly husband, came to her defence.

While doing my research for this dvar torah, I explored a modern orthodox website, The Torah.com, which I had been assured was refreshingly different, for example, by acknowledging the Documentary Hypothesis and its implications. So, imagine my reaction when I read this from Dr Shani Tzoref [25], an academic with impeccable credentials, who had taught at the modern orthodox London School of Jewish Studies: "... The Torah requires us to believe that Reuben slept with Bilhah. And yet, the dominant view in the Talmud seems to be that Reuben did not sleep with Bilhah. **As Orthodox rabbinic Jews, are we not committed to following talmudic interpretations over literal readings of the Biblical text?** My real point being-- I don't think we are obligated to have a particular belief about what really happened historically. I suppose if I had to choose a stance about what Orthodoxy would mandate, I guess it would be to say that **the Biblical text meant to convey what the rabbis say it meant**-- and so I must conclude that Reuben did not sleep with Bilhah, but it was considered in some ways as though he did.....".

Thankfully, one of her correspondents replied as follows: "I am surprised to read 'the rabbis say' when in fact the teaching that Reuben didn't sleep with Bilhah is given as one rabbi's opinion and seconded by another. The implication is that the rest go with the simple sense of the story. And even if a majority of rabbis had said that Reuben did not sleep with Bilhah, there is another rabbinic principle in the Talmud, namely, '**The text never loses its simple sense.**' (In Hebrew: Ein mikra yotzeh mi-dei peshuto.) So, at most, the rabbis are giving a drash, and the peshat is what it is. And, in any case, it is one or two voices, not 'the rabbis'.

Modern? Debatable. Orthodox? Definitely. Most Orthodox Jews, regardless of their affiliation, are shackled in what they may say by the fear that others in their community will accuse them of heresy and demand excommunication. Conformity ensures unity. Very few, e.g. Rabbi Louis Jacobs, refuse to be intimidated and stoutly defend their position. However, it is undeniable that they pay the price for their individualism. Most Jews in the Liberal, Reform and Masorti movements may not be as observant or as committed to learning important Jewish texts, but it is indisputable that they enjoy considerably more freedom of expression. To live in a society where you are encouraged to use and articulate your critical faculties is a priceless privilege. May we continue to study all traditions and interpretations, and remain fearless in our communal and individual quest for meaning.

Nahum Gordon
December 2016

References:

1. p. 131 in The Pentateuch and Haftorahs, Joseph H. Hertz, 2nd ed, London, Soncino Press, 1962.
2. "No Means No" - pp 85-88 in The Women's Torah Commentary, Woodstock, Jewish Lights, 2000.
3. p. 229 in The Torah – A Modern Commentary, W. Gunther Plaut, rev. ed, New York, URJ, 2005.
4. Mishnah Megillah 4:10.
5. Solomon Schechter and Caspar Leviaš - <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10742-meturgeman>
6. VaYishlach - Genesis 33: 1 and 2.
7. VaYechi - Genesis 49: 3 and 4.
8. I Chronicles 5:1.
9. Vayechi – Genesis 49: 9-12.
10. Vayechi – Genesis 49: 22-26.
11. Korach – Numbers 16: 1-3, 12-14 and 24-33.
12. Judges 5: 15-16.
13. II Samuel 16: 21 and 22.
14. VaYeshev – Genesis 37: 3 and 4.
15. VaYeshev – Genesis 37: 18-22.
16. pp 112-113 From Father to Son, Devora Steinmetz, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.
17. VaYetze – Genesis 30: 1-8.
18. Lech Lecha – Genesis 16:2.
19. VaYetze – Genesis 29: 18.
20. Vayetze – Genesis 29:31.
21. p. 172, The Pentateuch & Rashi's Commentary, Rosenbaum & Silberman, London, Shapiro Vallentine, 1946.
22. pp 244-245 in Genesis, The JPS Torah Commentary, Nahum M. Sarna, Philadelphia, JPS, 1989.
23. TB Shabbat 55b - <http://www.halakhah.com/rst/moed/12b%20-%20Shabbos%20-%2035a-65b.pdf>
24. Breishit Rabbah 84:19 [NB: I have not been able to verify this source].
25. Shani Tzoref - <http://thetorah.com/did-reuben-lie-with-bilhah/>