E Pluribus Unum

A Devotional Meditation on Vayetze (And He Went Out)

Genesis 28:10-32:2; Hosea 12:12-14:9;
Ezekiel 37:15-28; Matthew 13:1-14:13; Galatians 3:28-29

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The Latin phrase, “E pluribus unum” should sound familiar to Americans. It’s the motto of the United States. It means, “Out of many, one,” and it describes the process by which our many states chose to establish a Union that is far greater than the individual states could ever be on their own.


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The concept of unity is biblical. Paul writes about it in Galatians:

> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua].
>
> Galatians 3:28 ESV

Paul isn’t saying that our individual identities melt away into some formless uniformity. What he is saying is that our identities become part of and contribute to the covenant completeness that Messiah Yeshua bought with his atoning death and resurrection.

This work of Messiah is the next-level activation of the covenant God established millennia earlier, which is Paul’s next statement:

> And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.
>
> Galatians 3:29 ESV

One way to explain this link with Abraham is through the concept of Messiah as the Bridegroom and his people as the Bride. Christians are familiar with the church being the “Bride of Christ,” and of the Jews as God’s chosen people, but do we know how those two separate elements become one in Messiah?

The story of Jacob and his wives provides the illustration. Jacob, whom God renamed Israel, was sent by his father Isaac to find a wife from among his kinfolk. By an unusual set of circumstances, he ended up with four wives: the two sisters, Leah and Rachel, and their servants, Zilpah and Bilhah. The sisters were Jacob’s cousins, but the servants were strangers to the family. They were concubines and therefore had a lesser status, but the four sons they bore to Jacob became fathers of tribes in the nation of Israel along with the eight sons of Leah and Rachel.

After twenty years of serving his father-in-law Laban, Jacob had a dream in which God told him to return home to Isaac in the Promised Land of Canaan. It was a risky proposition because Jacob’s relationship with Laban had become strained. That’s why Jacob called his wives together for a conference. It’s reasonable to conclude that Zilpah

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and Bilhah were present, but the Bible records only the words of Rachel and Leah. When Jacob shared what God had told him, they answered:

> "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do."
>
> Genesis 31:14-16 ESV

Those are the words of people who realize their identity has changed from what it was in their father's house to the new identity they share in Jacob. The four women are separate individuals, two of whom could be called foreigners, yet in Jacob they share a single, united identity. When God changes Jacob's name, they and their sons all take on the identity of Israel.

If Jacob is a type, or foreshadow, of Messiah, then these four women are types of the Bride of Messiah. With that in mind, we see a deeper meaning behind Ezekiel's prophecy of the Two Sticks, which begins like this:

> The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, take a stick and write on it, 'For Judah, and the people of Israel associated with him'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with him.' And join them one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand.
>
> Ezekiel 37:15-17 ESV

Jacob's wives are the forerunners of those named in Ezekiel's prophecy. Leah became the mother of Judah, the chief tribe of the House of Judah, from whom come both the Jewish people and Israel's Messiah. God has preserved them to this day as the visible remnant of Israel and as proof to the world that he exists and keeps his promises. Rachel became the mother of Joseph and grandmother to Joseph's son Ephraim. Jacob passed on his name, Israel, to Joseph, which is why Ephraim became the chief tribe of the House of Israel. Those tribes were scattered into all the nations of the world because of their rebellion against God and disregard of his covenant. In that dispersion, they became mixed with the Gentiles, or nations. That's who Zilpah and Bilhah represent. They are the peoples of the world who have joined Israel by virtue of their union with Israel's Messiah.

Union with Israel and Israel's Messiah is a choice. As Yeshua explains in his parables of the Kingdom, God sowed good seed into the world, but some of the crop turned out to be weeds rather than wheat. He sends his messengers throughout the world to gather them all, because all have been called, but only those who are willing to leave everything and take on his identity are chosen. Those who understand that the world holds nothing for them respond to the Bridegroom and enter the Kingdom.

If this sounds strange to our ears, perhaps it's because our idea of Israel is too small and exclusive. Israel's God has a much bigger idea—an idea in which the Bride is formed of many who become one.

This meditation was inspired in part by *The Echoes Bible*, vol. I, *Genesis & Matthew*. *The Echoes Bible* is available at https://www.echoesbible.com/.