

## General Comments on Genesis 29-30

The narrative spanning these two chapters is a cautionary tale of a family being put together in a problematic way. Laban's duplicity creates an unequal relationship between his two daughters in a complex marriage, and this spills over into childbearing. As the boys grow up, this is further manifested in sibling rivalry, with a seemingly disastrous outcome, which is only prevented by providence.

Sisters do not want to fight. No wife or mother wants to feel unwanted and unfit. No husband wants to deal with intrafamily conflict. No children want to be bullied and tormented by their siblings. When sisters are put into competition for their husband's affection, the outcome is very likely going to be messy. Hence the subsequent prohibition of marrying sisters in Lev. 18:18.

The warning to the reader is to avoid these things in marriage and in raising families, because the results will always be difficult and possibly disastrous, unless the Lord sees fit to step in and prevent the worst from happening.

Laban's deceit also sheds light on the kind of family environment Jacob's mother Rebekah grew up in. It is clear from the events in ch. 27 that Rebekah is willing to approach problem solving in a manner that is less than entirely forthright. She knows what the Lord's will is concerning her two sons (cf. 25:23), but the way she goes about fulfilling that is problematic. Here, we see hints of the environment she grew up in when we see her brother Laban behave in a similar manner. Again, this is a warning to the reader to not raise your children in this way, as it will only lead to more, and likely worse, problems later on.

Despite the conflict and misery in the family, the Lord's promise to expand the house and wealth of Jacob's family is being fulfilled. Theologically, the Lord is keeping up his part of the covenant, despite the lack of harmony and happiness in Jacob's family.

Unfortunately, the participants are blind to this because they are too focused on their own desires not being fulfilled. The rivalry over Jacob between Leah and Rachel is so irrational it changes from who is the more beloved to who is producing more sons, so much so they each give their handmaidens to Jacob, thereby depriving themselves of him, in order to outproduce the

other. The tactic is effective in producing sons, but ineffective in winning Jacob's affection, the initial source of conflict, which they have lost sight of after years of fighting.

All five of the adults suffer unnecessarily, but the Lord's promises are kept nonetheless. The problem is there are six in the narrative, not five. God is the one who gives the children to Leah (cf. 29:31-32) and Rachel (cf. 30:22-23), and Jacob is just the physical part of the story. Jacob even confesses to Rachel that it is God who gives the children (cf. 30:2). Leah receives children from God because she is unloved, she is humbled. It is not until Rachel is humbled that she has children, because God remembers her in her humility.

The act of Rachel giving Bilhah to Jacob and then going to Leah to ask for the mandrakes was humiliating. Bilhah's son is not hers, and the mandrakes are not magical, they do nothing. It is the fact that she is humbled in having to resort to concubinage and to go to her sister to ask for the mandrakes that shows she is humbled.

Jacob is obviously part of the process, but God has more control and influence over the fertility issue than does Jacob, and God's interest is in their humility. The relationship with God, the God of miracles, is as important as the relationship with Jacob, the husband who is there present in front of them. The women do not understand God has a compelling interest in keeping the covenant with Abraham, so He wants to bless them with sons, but His interest is in their humility as people, not in them being baby machines. Their relationship with Jacob is as important as their relationship with God, both of which suffered as they fought amongst themselves. Had they been like Hannah (cf. 1 Sam. 1), this could have been avoided.

The irony is that we, as modern readers, largely read the text as God being detached and see the description of God opening or closing the wombs of these women as being part of an ancient folk tradition. We today ignore the Lord's active hand in history as much as the five in the narrative did.

One underlying complexity in the text is whether Laban initially intended to adopt Jacob into his family and keep him there permanently as his heir, or simply to exploit him for as long as possible. Supporting the former over the latter is the fact that initially, Laban is exceptionally happy to meet Jacob, as happy as Jacob was to meet Rachel, both weeping with joy. Why would Laban be this happy, unless there was some reason for

it?

Next, there is no mention in the text of Laban having sons until some 15-20 years into the story (cf. 30:35, 31:1). Initially, Rachel is the one shepherding the sheep, suggesting there are no sons to do that work until much later. If this is the case and Laban was initially in the position as Abraham of not having a male heir, then the arrival of Jacob would have been auspicious and he would have treated him as the heir, and having him marry both his daughters would cement him into the family.

But, as time goes on, sons are born and come of age, and should supplant Jacob as Laban's heir, hence the conflict and change of attitude noted in 31:2. Initially, Laban would have wanted adoptive Jacob to run the family farm and own everything, but with the arrival of natural sons, then things change, and he now needs Jacob to divest and move on.

It is unclear if initially Laban wants Jacob to be his heir, but that would explain some of the obscurities in the text.

And, finally, a couple of tangential notes. Jacob places Leah and her sons before Rachel and Joseph during the impending invasion of Esau in 33:2, suggesting Rachel and Joseph were the most beloved. However, Jacob is buried with Leah, cf. Gen. 49:31. Rachel dies earlier in 35:16-20 and buried alone.

When Ruth marries Boaz, she is blessed to be like Leah and Rachel (cf. Ruth 4:11), presumably in the sense of bearing sons.

### **Comments on Genesis 29**

The traditional reading on this chapter is that it is a matter of justice, Biblical style. Jacob had purloined the blessing by deceit, and now he gets deceived by Laban into marrying both of his daughters and getting a total of 14 years of service out of him instead of just 7 (the time period of 7 years was a typical term of indenture at that time, cp. Deut. 15:1; at this point it appears the servitude is imposed in the place of bride-price which Jacob cannot produce, cp. 24:53). A case of "What comes around, goes around". By no means does this excuse Laban's behavior, but it does put Jacob into the uncomfortable situation where his own duplicity makes it difficult for him to argue against Laban's. At the present, Laban has only two daughters and possibly no sons (sons are mentioned until quite some time later, cf. 31:1), so obtaining

the service of an experienced pastoralist and an heir apparent was probably very important to Laban.

Of the encounter, Nahum Sarna in Understanding Genesis (pg. 195) states:

Retributive justice is not the only motif here. Just as Jacob's succession to the birthright was divinely ordained irrespective of human machinations, so it must be assumed that Jacob's unwanted marriage to Leah was understood by the narrator as part of God's scheme of things. For from this union issued the tribes of Levi and Judah which shared between them the spiritual and temporal hegemony of Israel, providing the two great and dominating institutions of the Biblical period, the priesthood and the Davidic Monarchy.

After marrying the two daughters, the matter of childbearing comes up in v. 31-35. The theme of progeny, and the Semitic concept and views of it, come through plainly in this account and that of the next chapter. As we saw with Sarah and Rebekah, to go without children was considered a direct curse from God and to bear children was considered a direct blessing from God (and among Jews today this is still a commonly held belief). In this story, Jacob is favoring Rachel over Leah because she is more physically beautiful. God sees this and reacts by favoring Leah over Rachel. Leah has produced four sons, and Rachel none. This becomes a point of contention between Jacob and Rachel in the next chapter, and we see that Jacob's desires shift away from the present material things to the eternal spiritual things.

<sup>1</sup>Then Jacob went on his journey, and came into the land of the people of the east. <sup>2</sup>And he looked, and behold a well in the field, and, lo, there were three flocks of sheep lying by it; for out of that well they watered the flocks: and a great stone was upon the well's mouth. <sup>3</sup>And thither were all the flocks gathered: and they rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the sheep, and put the stone again upon the well's mouth in his place. <sup>4</sup>And Jacob said unto them, My brethren, whence be ye? And they said, Of Haran are we. <sup>5</sup>And he said unto them, Know ye Laban the son of Nahor? And they said, We know him. <sup>6</sup>And he said unto them, Is he well? And they said, He is well: and, behold, Rachel his daughter cometh with the sheep. <sup>7</sup>And he said, Lo, it is yet high day, neither is it time that the cattle should be gathered together: water ye the sheep, and go and feed them. <sup>8</sup>And they said, we cannot, until all the flocks be

gathered together, and till they roll the stone from the well's mouth; then we water the sheep. <sup>9</sup>And while he yet spake with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. <sup>10</sup>And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. <sup>11</sup>And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice, and wept. <sup>12</sup>And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother, and that he was Rebekah's son: and she ran and told her father.

v1-12 After traveling significant distance, Jacob draws close to his destination (v. 1). He sees a well with sheep and shepherds gathered around (v. 2-3), whom he talks to about his uncle Laban (v. 4-6), and they point him to his approaching daughter Rachel (v. 6). He questions them as to why they aren't doing anything (v. 7), and they make excuse that they are waiting for everyone to show up so someone else can move the stone (v. 8). Rachel arrives with her flock (v. 9), and Jacob moves the stone and waters her sheep (v. 10). Jacob enthusiastically greets Rachel (v. 11), informs her he is family, and then Rachel runs home to tell her father (v. 12).

We would assume Jacob is tending Rachel's sheep in her absence.

v1 "Jacob went on his journey", literally, this passage should be translated to "Jacob lifted up his feet", suggesting he was on foot for his journey, not riding a mount.

v7 It is clear from this verse Jacob is an experienced shepherd, knowing when the sheep should be watered and put to pasture. He was not an idle hand at his father's house.

v8 It is unclear from the text why the shepherds present do not move the stone themselves. Are they lazy? Are they young boys who cannot physically move the stone? Are they all waiting for everyone to be present at the same time to share the water because there isn't enough for everyone to take as much as they need or want?

v10 Jacob single-handedly moves the stone and then waters the sheep for Rachel. He is clearly no weakling. Was he trying to show Rachel how strong he is, or was this an act of genuine service, or maybe some of both?

For comparison, recall when Abraham's servant first met Rebekah, she watered his camels as a sign that she was the wife of the Lord's choosing (cf. 24:15-27). For contrast, recall that Isaac was absent and detached during that process, where Jacob is present and involved.

V10-11 "watered the flock...kissed Rachel", the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis points out there is word play at work in watered (Hebr: va-yashk) and kissed (Hebr: va-yishak), which is connected to the events of 27:26-27 which use the same Hebrew terms. The kiss of deception in ch. 27 brought about the necessity of Jacob leaving his home, and he is now greeting his new family with a kiss of greeting here, and again in v. 13.

<sup>13</sup> And it came to pass, when Laban heard the tidings of Jacob his sister's son, that he ran to meet him, and embraced him, and kissed him, and brought him to his house. And he told Laban all these things. <sup>14</sup> And Laban said to him, Surely thou art my bone and my flesh. And he abode with him the space of a month. <sup>15</sup> And Laban said unto Jacob, Because thou art my brother, shouldest thou therefore serve me for nought? tell me, what shall thy wages be? <sup>16</sup> And Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. <sup>17</sup> Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured. <sup>18</sup> And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter. <sup>19</sup> And Laban said, It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me. <sup>20</sup> And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.

v13-20 Rachel tells Laban that Jacob is there at the well, and Laban runs to meet him, and greets him enthusiastically and welcomes him into his house (v. 13) as family (v. 14). Jacob is there for a month and Laban asks him what the wages for his service should be (v. 15). Jacob asks for Rachel's hand in marriage (v. 16-17), but having no money for dowry he offers to labor for seven years instead (v. 18). Laban agrees (v. 19), and the seven years pass quickly because of his love for her (v. 20).

v13 Why is Laban so happy that Jacob has come to his house? Laban is weeping for joy, the same a Jacob did in v. 11. We know that Jacob is happy, because it means he is no longer lost and without family in the world. Why then the same reaction in Laban? Probably because he has no heir. There is no mention of

any sons until 20 years later, and the complaining of the sons in 31:1 is what turns Laban against Jacob in 32:2.

v17 "tender eyed", Jewish translators alternate between "tender" (Sarna, Alter) and "delicate" (Fox), but all indicate it is a comment on her appearance and not her being nearsighted, as it is being held in contrast to Rachel's overall exceptional beauty. The consensus is Leah had pretty eyes, but that was it, where Rachel was overall exceptionally attractive. A modern paraphrase would be "Leah had pretty eyes, but Rachel could be a supermodel".

Physically, Leah and Rachel could not have been all that different, as Jacob spends the night with Leah after the wedding feast and doesn't realize it isn't Rachel until the morning, when he can see her face. If there were a significant difference in height, weight, hair length or type, or other physical characteristic, it seems likely Jacob would have detected that before sunrise. This suggests the only substantive difference between them was in their faces, as v. 17 suggests.

<sup>21</sup> And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her. <sup>22</sup> And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. <sup>23</sup> And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her. <sup>24</sup> And Laban gave unto his daughter Leah Zilpah his maid for an handmaid. <sup>25</sup> And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, what is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me? <sup>26</sup> And Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. <sup>27</sup> Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years. <sup>28</sup> And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also. <sup>29</sup> And Laban gave to Rachel his daughter Bilhah his handmaid to be her maid. <sup>30</sup> And he went in also unto Rachel, and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years.

v21-30 The agreed upon seven years of labor are completed, so Jacob approaches Laban and requests marriage (v. 21). Laban organizes the wedding (v. 22) and takes Leah into Jacob at night (v. 23). Zilpah is given to Leah as a servant (v. 24). In the morning Jacob realizes it is Leah, and not Rachel (v. 25), but it is too late because they have consummated the marriage. Jacob confronts Laban for violating the terms of the agreement (v.

26). Laban makes excuses (v. 27) and then offers him Rachel as well for another seven years of service (v. 28), and Jacob agrees. Bilhah is also given as a servant. Jacob prefers Rachel over Leah (v. 29-30).

Jacob doesn't reject Leah as wife after the wedding. Why? If Jacob is the adoptive son who is to inherit Laban's estate, then Jacob would have a responsibility to Leah as well. If he rejects her as wife, she would be unmarriageable to a good man, as she was no longer a virgin. So, if Jacob is to be the heir, he is trapped in the marriage.

v21-25 That Jacob could not tell it was Leah and not Rachel necessarily implies that she was wearing a veil, which was a common practice for brides at the time, cf. 24:65. This is highly ironic as Jacob dressed up like Esau in order to accomplish his act of deception, now Leah is presented in the guise of Rachel. The additional irony comes in when the Lord favors Leah over Rachel, just as He favored Jacob over Esau. In both cases the deceiver wins out in the long run.

Leah in a veil must have been otherwise indistinguishable from Rachel.

v25 "wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?", the passage suggests when we deceive others the Lord does not protect us from being deceived ourselves, perhaps as a lesson from experience.

v26 Laban is arguing Jacob should have known that marrying Rachel required him to marry Leah first, which is pretty dubious, but he is implying it is Jacob's fault for being culturally ignorant than for him to be deceitful.

<sup>31</sup> And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren. <sup>32</sup> And Leah conceived, and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben: for she said, Surely the LORD hath looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me. <sup>33</sup> And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Because the LORD hath heard I was hated, he hath therefore given me this son also: and she called his name Simeon. <sup>34</sup> And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have born him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi. <sup>35</sup> And she conceived again, and bare a son: and she said, Now will I praise the LORD: therefore she called his name Judah; and left bearing.

v31-35 Leah is blessed with four sons while Rachel has none.



The meanings for the names is explicitly given after each name, which is probably the wisest course of action, instead of parsing the Hebrew for other meanings.

v31 "when the Lord saw that Leah was hated", the Lord's interest in Jacob's marriages was stated clearly in 28:13-14 in producing descendants. The Lord has no interest in the superficial appearances or people, or in the local trends or customs of beauty, which are largely culturally dependent. The Lord's interest is in getting premortal spirits into mortal bodies, and Leah is capable of that where Rachel was apparently not.

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