

## Comments on Genesis 30

The conflict in marriage and childbearing continues from the previous chapter and pulls the handmaids in as concubines, which prolongs the conflict. Curiously, none of the women are pregnant at the same time, suggesting Jacob is practicing selective serial monogamy within the polygamous marriage.

The second half of the chapter shows conflict between Jacob and Laban over the herds, with Jacob being blessed again, despite the conflict and Laban's duplicity.

<sup>1</sup>And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. <sup>2</sup>And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? <sup>3</sup>And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. <sup>4</sup>And she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her. <sup>5</sup>And Bilhah conceived, and bare Jacob a son. <sup>6</sup>And Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan. <sup>7</sup>And Bilhah Rachel's maid conceived again, and bare Jacob a second son. <sup>8</sup>And Rachel said, with great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed: and she called his name Naphtali.

v1-8 Rachel is jealous of Leah, and angry with Jacob, whom she blames (v. 1). Jacob is angered and rejects her accusation (v. 2). Rachel gives Bilhah to Jacob (v. 3-4), who conceives a son (v. 5), whom Rachel claims as her own (v. 6). Bilhah conceives again with a second son (v. 7) and considers it a victory over Leah.

v1 "Give me children, or else I die", this is the first time we have heard from Rachel, and her words clearly convey her frustration. It is impossible to tell if Rachel is depressed, angry or acutely frustrated. It is clear from her actions in the text that she remains unhappy until she bears a son in v. 23. Could Rachel be suicidal here?

v2 Rachel was formerly the favored wife, but this conflict over childbearing has resulted in hostility and blame between her and Jacob. Curiously, the text never explicitly states Leah becomes the favored wife. Instead, it appears both relationships languish in conflict and none of them end up happy.

v8 "I have prevailed", a hollow victory. The sons of the handmaid fall in line after the firstborn sons of the full wife, so this isn't a victory in any sense. It is a bitter confession of what she really wants, and yet lacks, as we see in her next confession in v. 23.

<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had left bearing, she took Zilpah her maid, and gave her Jacob to wife. <sup>10</sup> And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a son. <sup>11</sup> And Leah said, A troop cometh: and she called his name Gad. <sup>12</sup> And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a second son. <sup>13</sup> And Leah said, Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed: and she called his name Asher.

v9-13 Following Rachel's lead, Leah gives Zilpah to Jacob (v. 9) and she has two sons (v. 10-13).

v9 "Leah...left bearing", it is possible Jacob was not laying with Leah, as v. 15-16 suggest Jacob was not with her before then, and she conceives after lying with him again in v. 18-20.

<sup>14</sup> And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them unto his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes. <sup>15</sup> And she said unto her, Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee to night for thy son's mandrakes. <sup>16</sup> And Jacob came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, Thou must come in unto me; for surely I have hired thee with my son's mandrakes. And he lay with her that night. <sup>17</sup> And God hearkened unto Leah, and she conceived, and bare Jacob the fifth son. <sup>18</sup> And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband: and she called his name Issachar. <sup>19</sup> And Leah conceived again, and bare Jacob the sixth son. <sup>20</sup> And Leah said, God hath endued me with a good dowry; now will my husband dwell with me, because I have born him six sons: and she called his name Zebulun. <sup>21</sup> And afterwards she bare a daughter, and called her name Dinah.

v14-21 Leah's son finds mandrakes in the field, which Rachel believes might resolve her infertility, so they negotiate over them and Rachel gets the mandrakes in exchange for Leah apparently getting Rachel's turn with Jacob (v. 14-16). Leah conceives again and bears two sons and then a daughter (v. 17-21).

v16 "I have hired thee", a curious statement for a husband and wife. The Hebrew term translated to "hire" literally means just that, wages paid. This is not an affectionate exchange, it is a business meeting. The relationship between the five of them has deteriorated to the point of things becoming transactional and detached, with the end goal being the humiliation of the others.

<sup>22</sup> And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup> And she conceived, and bare a son; and said, God hath taken away my reproach: <sup>24</sup> And she called his name Joseph; and said, The LORD shall add to me another son.

v22-24 After Leah's turn with Jacob, Rachel gets him and she finally conceives a son, which takes away her shame by making her a mother and providing an heir to Jacob.

<sup>25</sup> And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban, Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country. <sup>26</sup> Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served thee, and let me go: for thou knowest my service which I have done thee. <sup>27</sup> And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favour in thine eyes, tarry: for I have learned by experience that the LORD hath blessed me for thy sake. <sup>28</sup> And he said, Appoint me thy wages, and I will give it.

<sup>29</sup> And he said unto him, Thou knowest how I have served thee, and how thy cattle was with me. <sup>30</sup> For it was little which thou hadst before I came, and it is now increased unto a multitude; and the LORD hath blessed thee since my coming: and now when shall I provide for mine own house also?

<sup>31</sup> And he said, what shall I give thee? And Jacob said, Thou shalt not give me any thing: if thou wilt do this thing for me, I will again feed and keep thy flock. <sup>32</sup> I will pass through all thy flock to day, removing from thence all the speckled and spotted cattle, and all the brown cattle among the sheep, and the spotted and speckled among the goats: and of such shall be my hire. <sup>33</sup> So shall my righteousness answer for me in time to come, when it shall come for my hire before thy face: every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats, and brown among the sheep, that shall be counted stolen with me.

<sup>34</sup> And Laban said, Behold, I would it might be according to thy word. <sup>35</sup> And he removed that day the he goats that were ring-straked and spotted, and all the she goats that were speckled and spotted, and every one that had some white in it, and all the brown among the sheep, and gave them into the hand of his sons. <sup>36</sup> And he set three days' journey betwixt himself and Jacob: and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flocks.

v25-36 Jacob and Laban negotiate payment for services rendered, but Laban's goal is to persuade Jacob to stay with him permanently (v. 27). They agree to clear terms of payment and then separate the animals accordingly, and Jacob agrees to work for Laban under these conditions.

Ephraim Speiser explains in the Anchor Bible Commentary on Genesis (pages 238-239) what is happening here:

The bargain between Jacob and Laban is limited to new births among Laban's droves, and specifically to lambs and kids with rare markings and pigmentation. Mesopotamian economy always paid very close attention to the distinctive breeds of sheep and goats, as is amply attested in countless business and lexical documents. More significant still is that country's preoccupation with biological sports among those species, to judge from the omen texts. Many such abnormalities, both real and theoretical, are minutely described. Of particular relevance to the present context is the following entry: "If a sheep has the appearance of a goat, its wool being black, the position of the country will be secure" (CT 31, pl. 31, l. 19). In other words, not only does the omen make note of this particular coloring, but it regards its occurrence as a favorable sign. Such local beliefs and practices could have been reason enough for Jacob's seemingly peculiar request—if it is granted Laban was temporarily thrown off by his own greed. What matters, however, is not so much the application of the scheme as the reasoning behind it.

Here, both Laban and Jacob are negotiating in good faith. Jacob proposes any unusually marked sheep born among the main herd from this day on are his property. Laban agrees. So, they separate out all of the unusually marked sheep from the main herd that very day and move them three days journey away to be kept by Laban's sons, so there is no confusion or argument over which sheep are Jacob's and which are Laban's.

Any unusually marked sheep born among the main herd, which now contains no unusually marked sheep, are Jacob's. Now, reading Speiser's comment above, Jacob's selection of the unusually marked sheep would have been interpreted by both himself and Laban as a sign from God that these are to be Jacob's sheep, and therefore be seen as an act of Providence, since both parties acknowledge as much.

v26 Slaves to do not own their wives and children, as they are property of the owner, cf. Exod. 21:4. Jacob is insinuating he has been treated like a slave, and if Laban doesn't release him and his children then he is in fact treating family like slaves.

v27 "learned by experience", a poor translation. A better translation would be "I have determined by divination that the LORD has blessed me on your account" (NASB) or "I have learned by divination that [יָהוָה](#) has blessed me on your account" (JPS). The same [Hebrew term](#) in question is used in Gen. 44:5, 15. It is likely Laban used the household idols for this, hence Rachel's theft of them to prevent it, cf. 31:30.

v31 "Thou shalt not give me anything", at that specific moment in time Jacob is not asking for anything that is Laban's property. Instead, he is asking for the subset of the future increase of the flocks. Jacob's starting position is that Laban owes him nothing, so how could Laban refuse?

<sup>37</sup> And Jacob took him rods of green poplar, and of the hazel and chesnut tree; and pilled white strakes in them, and made the white appear which was in the rods. <sup>38</sup> And he set the rods which he had pilled before the flocks in the gutters in the watering troughs when the flocks came to drink, that they should conceive when they came to drink. <sup>39</sup> And the flocks conceived before the rods, and brought forth cattle ringstraked, speckled, and spotted. <sup>40</sup> And Jacob did separate the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the ringstraked, and all the brown in the flock of Laban; and he put his own flocks by themselves, and put them not unto Laban's cattle. <sup>41</sup> And it came to pass, whensoever the stronger cattle did conceive, that Jacob laid the rods before the eyes of the cattle in the gutters, that they might conceive among the rods. <sup>42</sup> But when the cattle were feeble, he put them not in: so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. <sup>43</sup> And the man increased exceedingly, and had much cattle, and maidservants, and menservants, and camels, and asses.

v37-43 Jacob shepherds the main flock, and manages them deliberately so the best sheep are in his flock.

Most commentators interpret the actions in these verses to be traditional folk practices that would increase the likelihood of unusually colored sheep. However, one could simply read the text as Jacob placing forage for his sheep at the watering trough whenever his sheep were being watered, thereby encouraging his sheep to linger and mate. And when Laban's

sheep were being watered, he removed the forage, discouraging them from lingering and mating. He was separating the sheep based on color and health then encouraging reproduction among the unusually colored healthy sheep by placing the fodder next to the water, so they wouldn't graze the field, they would congregate at a central feeding location while the brown and weaker sheep were spread out grazing in the field.

Copyright © 2022 by S. Kurt Neumiller <kurt.neumiller@gmail.com>. All rights reserved. No part of this text may be reproduced in any form or by any means for commercial gain without the express written consent of the author. Digital or printed copies may be freely made and distributed for personal and public non-commercial use.