

Genesis 29.1-30.24 - Jacob's Wives and Children

Review

Last time, we looked at the well-known story of Jacob's overnight stay at Luz where he dreamed of a ladder ascending into Heaven. From the top of the stairway, God reminded Jacob of His promise to Jacob's grandfather Abraham and father Isaac that through their offspring – Jesus the מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* – all the families of the Earth would be blessed. When he awoke the next morning, Jacob set up the stone he had used for a pillow, as a memorial of this remarkable dream, and renamed the place Bethel – the House of God.

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Jacob's Marries Leah and Rachel

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¹Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east. ²As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, ³and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well. ⁴Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran." ⁵He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him." ⁶He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!" ⁷He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them." ⁸But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep." Genesis 29:1-8 (ESV)

We can only speculate why the local shepherds followed this complex procedure for watering their sheep. Perhaps the well was subject to inundation and pollution by rainwater runoff, or perhaps they kept the well covered to mitigate wasting the well water through evaporation. Clearly, the stone cover couldn't have been an effective security measure, since Jacob was able to roll the cover away without help as we shall soon see.

Jacob himself seems to have been confused by the tradition as well. He wondered why the shepherds didn't simply water the sheep already gathered at the well and afterward turn them back out to pasture. But the local shepherds no doubt had their own reasons for waiting until all the flocks were gathered before rolling away the stone from the mouth of the well.

It is clear from the text that these shepherds were not part of Rebekah's family, although they came from her hometown and did know her brother Laban. Here in Genesis 29:6 we find the first mention of Jacob's cousin and future wife Rachel.

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⁹While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. ¹⁰Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. ¹¹Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. ¹²And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

¹³As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things, ¹⁴and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month. Genesis 29:9-14 (ESV)

At this point, Jacob's uncle Laban's enthusiastic hospitality toward his nephew seems innocent enough. In fact, such hospitality was expected not only for family but for sojourning strangers in accordance with Middle Eastern tradition. Admittedly, I have a certain prejudice against Laban because I'm already familiar with the rest of his story. Laban was a conniver – always looking for an opportunity to enrich himself, and little concerned with how his actions might harm those around him.

Laban was certainly aware that Jacob's family, since the days of his grandfather Abraham, had been very rich in terms of the flocks and herds which were the measure of prosperity back then and in gold and silver. Recall that Abraham's servant who was sent by his master to Paddan-aram to acquire a wife for his son Isaac (Genesis 24) brought with him extravagant gifts as the bride price for Laban's sister Rebekah. No doubt Laban assumed that Jacob had also come to Paddan-aram in search of a wife and Laban anticipated a similar lavish bride price from Jacob for one (or both) of his own daughters.

It seems to me that Jacob, the selfish manipulator who had cheated his twin brother Esau out of his inheritance, richly deserved the treatment he was about to receive from his uncle, and Laban in-turn deserved the swindle he would eventually suffer from his nephew. But we're getting ahead of ourselves again. Let's read on.

¹⁵Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah [לֵאָה /l'e'á - weary], and the name of the younger was Rachel [רָחֵל /rā'hēl - ewe]. ¹⁷Leah's eyes were weak, [רַק - rak - tender, soft, delicate, weak] but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. ¹⁸Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." ²⁰So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Genesis 29:15-20 (ESV)

One of the great mysteries of human existence is the question why particular men and women fall in love with one another. Sadly, for many men, physical attraction is the primary motivation. We are often particularly attracted to younger women over their elders. Clearly Rachel was the younger sister,

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but we have no way of knowing how much younger than Leah she was. But the fact that we most often miss in this story is that Jacob didn't really know the character of either of these sisters. If he had set aside for a moment his physical attraction and got to know them both better first, he might well have chosen Leah over Rachel.

As for the two daughters of Laban, they had no choice in the matter. In ancient Middle Eastern tradition (and continuing even until today) daughters were given in marriage to whomever their father might choose – often for political or economic reasons with no regard to the daughters' own wishes. Oddly, Leah and Rachel's aunt Rebekah was an exception – having been given the opportunity by her father Nahor to choose for herself whether she would go with Abraham's servant to marry Isaac (Genesis 24:54-58).

Before we move on let's consider for a moment the description of Leah's eyes. Here in the ESV and many of the other modern translations of Genesis 29:17 we find the Hebrew word רַךְ **raḵ** rendered as "weak." The NLT even goes so far as to say that *"There was no sparkle in Leah's eyes."* But רַךְ **raḵ** can also mean tender, soft, or gentle. In fact, the KJV translates it as "tender" and the NKJV as "delicate." What could be so wrong with a girl having tender or delicate eyes? But as I said, the sources of attraction between men and women remain quite a profound mystery.

Notice also that it was Jacob's idea to serve Laban seven years for Rachel, not the other way around. Nevertheless, Laban took full advantage of Jacob's offer as we shall soon see.

²¹Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²²So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. ²³But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. ²⁴(Laban gave [had given] his female servant Zilpah [זִלְפָּה zilpâ - a trickling] to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) ²⁵And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" ²⁶Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷Complete the week [זִמְנוֹת זֶמַן šāḥûa' - seven, period of seven (days or years), heptad, week] of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." ²⁸Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. ²⁹(Laban gave his female servant Bilhah [בִּלְהָה bilhâ - troubled] to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) ³⁰So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. Genesis 29:21-30 (ESV)

Now Laban's true colors are coming out. If there had been *truth in lending* regulations in Paddan-aram in those days, Laban would have been required to reveal up front that he intended to marry Leah off first before entering into the agreement with Jacob. Yet Jacob was only getting some of his own back after his previous shady dealings with his father and brother regarding Esau's rightful position as first born. How ironic that Laban "honored" Leah's position as first born. But I suspect that if Jacob had offered Laban more for Rachel, Laban would have thrown Leah under the bus too.

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Notice that the total time Jacob was in Paddan-aram was at least 21 years – seven for Leah, seven for Rachel, and seven more afterward. The Hebrew word זָבַח *šāḇûa* translated as “week” by the ESV here in Genesis 29:27 is the root word from which the Hebrew שָׁבַת *šabāt* - sabbath is derived. The word זָבַח *šāḇûa* can be used to mean a period of seven days or seven years. It can also be used simply as the number 7, which is used throughout God’s word to represent fulness or completeness. Perhaps the best-known instance of the use of this word to represent seven years is found in the so-called “seventy weeks” prophecy given by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Daniel:

24“Seventy weeks [זָבַח šāḇûa] are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. 25Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one [מָשִׁיחַ māšîaḥ], a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again [the restored temple that stood in Jerusalem during Jesus’ earthly ministry] with squares and moat, but in a troubled time. 26And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. 27And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator.” Daniel 9:24-27 (ESV)

Over the several thousand years since this prophecy was given, many thousands of words have been written and spoken speculating on their meaning. Clearly the prophecy is messianic – referring to Jesus the מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ*. But to speculate about the exact meaning of the 70 weeks is slippery ground at best, so we won’t indulge any further in it at this time.

Meanwhile, back in Genesis 29:30, notice that we are told, “...**he [Jacob] loved Rachel more than Leah...**” Woe indeed to the family thus founded. All manner of evil can arise from the jealousies planted in the family by such unequal love. Small wonder then that God’s original plan for marriage that we find in Adam and Eve included exactly one man and one woman. When Jesus was asked about divorce by the Jewish leadership of His day, He reminded them of God’s perfect design for marriage in the beginning.

3And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” 4He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” 7They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. Matthew 19:3-8 (ESV)

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Plural marriage is an invention of fallen man – not part of God’s design for marriage. The examples of it we read about in God’s Word are frequently fraught with woe. Nevertheless, we must still remember that Jacob’s marriages and the birth of his children were all part of God’s perfect plan of salvation to bring forth Jesus the **מָשִׁיחַ** *māšîaḥ* through Jacob’s line – specifically through Leah’s fourth son Judah.

Jacob’s Children Born in Paddan-aram

Look at the [Patriarchs of Israel diagram](#). Jacob sojourned with his uncle Laban in Paddan-aram for over 20 years. During that time, his wives Leah and Rachel and their maid servants Zilpah and Bilhah bore for him 11 of his 12 sons and at least one daughter. When Jacob eventually left Paddan-aram, Rachel was pregnant with Jacob’s youngest son Benjamin. Like many names in God’s Word, the names of Jacob’s children have significant meanings as we shall see. As we’ve previously noted, Jacob’s 12 sons became the progenitors of the 12 tribes of Israel. They are listed here in this diagram under their four mothers’ names. The numbers in parentheses show the order of their birth.

NOTE – Jacob may well have fathered other daughters not mentioned in the Genesis narrative. The single exception is his daughter Dinah whose significance will become apparent when we study the return of Jacob’s family to Canaan and their unsavory encounter with the men of Shechem (Genesis 34).

³¹When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. ³²And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben [רְאוּבֵן *r’ûbēn* - behold a son], for she said, “Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me.” ³³She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon [שִׁמְעוֹן *šim’ôn* - heard]. ³⁴Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, “Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” Therefore his name was called Levi [לֵוִי *lěvî* - joined to]. ³⁵And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, “This time I will praise the LORD.” Therefore she called his name Judah [יְהוּדָה *y’hûdâ* - praised]. Then she ceased bearing. Genesis 29:31-35 (ESV)

We have no way to determine how long it was between Jacob and Leah’s wedding and the birth of her fourth son Judah. Most likely these births took place during the seven years that Jacob served Laban for Rachel. However, some or all these first four patriarchs of Israel may have been born after Jacob married Rachel. We see in Genesis 29:31 that Rachel was barren, but it is difficult to say whether the family was aware of that, or the writer of Genesis simply mentions it here for the reader’s information.

¹When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” ²Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” ³Then she said, “Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children [be built up] through her.” ⁴So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. ⁵And Bilhah conceived

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and bore Jacob a son. ⁶Then Rachel said, “God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son.” Therefore she called his name Dan [דָּן dān - a judge]. ⁷Rachel’s servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. ⁸Then Rachel said, “With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed.” So she called his name Naphtali [נַפְתָּלִי nāṭāṭī - wrestling]• Genesis 30:1-8 (ESV)

We have to feel for Jacob here just a little. After all, he had by this time a proven “track record” of his ability to sire children through Leah. Clearly Rachel’s (temporary) infertility wasn’t any fault of Jacob’s – assuming of course that he and Rachel had been enjoying sexual intimacy throughout their marriage. In the Bible, we frequently find infertility among married couples right alongside pregnancy of unmarried women. Usually, these stories carry some theological lesson. In Rachel’s case, we might assume that God temporarily prevented Rachel from conceiving children to give His favor to Leah whose husband did *not* favor her.

Rachel’s use of her servant Bilhah as a surrogate mother for her sons is not the first such instance we find in God’s Word. Recall that Jacob’s grandmother Sarah had been infertile even until the age of 98, and despite God’s promise that she would bear a son (Isaac) in her old age, Sarah gave her Egyptian maid servant Hagar to Abraham so that Hagar could bear “Sarah’s” son Ishmael (Genesis 16).

What is most interesting to me in all these stories is that the sons of the surrogates were considered the sons of the wives, not the sons of the concubines. This begs the intriguing question – who were considered the “rightful” mothers of any daughters that the surrogates conceived? Presumably there must have been both daughters and sons. Did the surrogate mothers have to give their sons away but get to keep the daughters? Enquiring minds want to know!

⁹When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. ¹⁰Then Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹And Leah said, “Good fortune has come!” [KJV and NKJV translate as “a troop comes”] so she called his name Gad [גָּד gāḏ - troop]. ¹²Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. ¹³And Leah said, “Happy am I! For women have called me happy.” So she called his name Asher [אָשֵׁר ’āšēr - happy]• Genesis 30:9-13 (ESV)

Not to be outdone by her rival for Jacob’s affections, Leah too offered up her maid servant as a surrogate mother for Jacob’s seventh and eighth sons. Once again, we find that the sons of the concubines were all given meaningful names. Take note however that the boys were named by Jacob’s wives, not by the sons’ actual mothers.

¹⁴In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” ¹⁵But she said to her, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” Rachel said, “Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son’s mandrakes.” ¹⁶When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, “You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” So he lay

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with her that night. ¹⁷And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. ¹⁸Leah said, “God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband.” So she called his name Issachar [יִשָּׂשכָר] *yissāškār - there is recompense].*

¹⁹And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. ²⁰Then Leah said, “God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons.” So she called his name Zebulun [זְבוּלֹן] *z’būlān - exalted]. ²¹Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah* [דִּנָּה] *dînâ - judgment]. Genesis 30:14-21 (ESV)*

Mandrake root contains alkaloid compounds which have hallucinogenic and narcotic properties. Mandrake has therefore been used as a medicinal since ancient times for pain relief and as an anesthetic. In larger doses, mandrake can cause unconsciousness, delirium, or even death. Because of its chemical properties and because of the resemblance of the root to a human form, mandrake has also been used in magic spells and potions – especially in witchcraft rituals of medieval and modern times. We have no way of knowing from the Biblical narrative why Jacob’s wives considered the mandrake valuable enough for use in bartering for Jacob’s affections, but most likely it was due to its medicinal properties and applications.

I find it somewhat humorous that Jacob made no objection that his sexual attentions had been bartered for by the two women. Certainly Leah’s “reward” for Reuben’s mandrakes wasn’t a one-night-stand. Jacob clearly continued to “lie” with Leah at least occasionally for 18 months or longer after the mandrake bargain was struck because she conceived at least two sons and one daughter by it.

²²Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. ²³She conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” ²⁴And she called his name Joseph [יֹסֵף] *yôsēp̄ - Jehovah has added], saying, “May the LORD add to me another son!”* Genesis 30:22-24 (ESV)

Joseph was the last of Jacob’s sons born to him in Paddan-aram. Indeed as we shall see, God did add another son to Rachel – Jacob’s youngest son Benjamin. Sadly, giving birth to this second son was to cost Rachel her own life.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we’ll read about Jacob’s great prosperity during the years of his stay with his uncle Laban in Paddan-aram. Afterward, we’ll learn about Jacob’s return journey to Canaan with his family.