

The Book of Genesis

Verses 29:1-30:24

March 3, 2019

Genesis 29:1 – *Then Jacob hurried on, finally arriving in the land of the east.*

Our story picks up from last week when Jacob had the dream where God had promised him all of the land where he slept. It states that he “hurried on” but this verse doesn’t reveal the fact that the trip from Bethel to Haran was a distance of 400 miles. That is one serious trip by foot!

Genesis 29:2-3 – ² *He saw a well in the distance. Three flocks of sheep and goats lay in an open field beside it, waiting to be watered. But a heavy stone covered the mouth of the well.*

³ *It was the custom there to wait for all the flocks to arrive before removing the stone and watering the animals. Afterward the stone would be placed back over the mouth of the well.*

Because of the shifting sands in Arabia and the evaporation rate in this arid region, wells were typically kept covered when not in use, especially when they were private property.

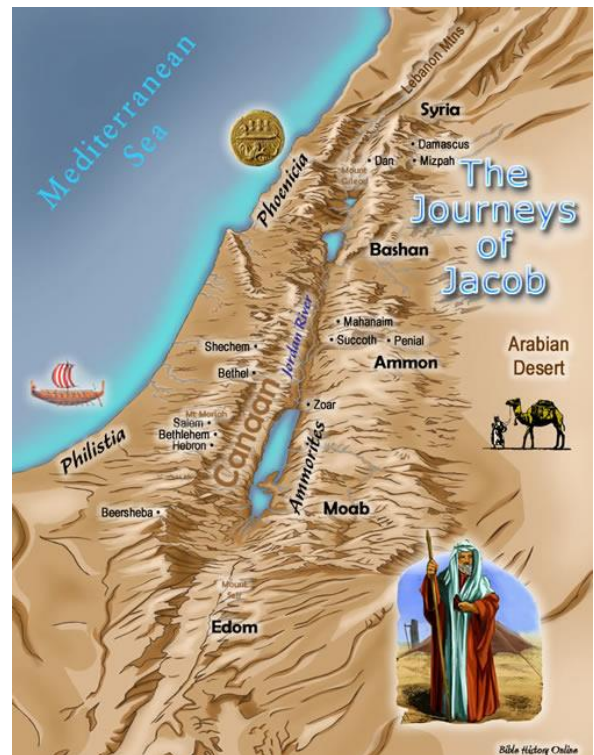
Many of the wells would have had laid over them a broad, thick, flat stone, with a round hole cut in the middle, forming the mouth of the well. This hole would then be covered with a heavy stone which would require two or three men to roll away. The well at Haran was like this.

Genesis 29:4-6 – ⁴ *Jacob went over to the shepherds and asked, “Where are you from, my friends?”*
“We are from Haran,” they answered.

⁵ *“Do you know a man there named Laban, the grandson of Nahor?” he asked.*

“Yes, we do,” they replied.

⁶ *“Is he doing well?” Jacob asked.*



“Yes, he’s well,” they answered. “Look, here comes his daughter Rachel with the flock now.”

It’s unclear whether it was “coincidence” that Jacob just happened to stumble upon a well owned by the very family he was there to seek or if he purposely showed up at that well and feigned ignorance so that he could gather background info on the status of his family. Knowing Jacob, it could have easily been either.

Genesis 29:7-8 – ⁷ *Jacob said, “Look, it’s still broad daylight—too early to round up the animals. Why don’t you water the sheep and goats so they can get back out to pasture?”*

⁸ *“We can’t water the animals until all the flocks have arrived,” they replied. “Then the shepherds move the stone from the mouth of the well, and we water all the sheep and goats.”*

Jacob confronts the shepherds and asks why they are standing around wasting time in the best part of the day. Normally, Jacob was prone to exhibit a manner that was sly and passive in nature. So, a bold, forward statement like this seems to be a bit out of character for Jacob. What could have been his motivation for doing this? Perhaps he was trying to impress Rachel? Or, maybe he was just trying to get rid of the shepherd boys so that he could talk with Rachel alone?

In any case, since this was a private well it was customary to have all the flocks collected around it before uncovering the well in the presence of the owner or one of his representatives. This was why they were standing around and waiting on Rachel.

Genesis 29:9-10 – ⁹ *Jacob was still talking with them when Rachel arrived with her father’s flock, for she was a shepherd. ¹⁰ And because Rachel was his cousin—the daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother—and because the sheep and goats belonged to his uncle Laban, Jacob went over to the well and moved the stone from its mouth and watered his uncle’s flock.*

One commentary states that among the pastoral tribes the young unmarried daughters of the greatest sheiks tended the flocks. If this were true then Jacob would surely be taking note that standing before him was his potential, future bride. So, he immediately did what every red-blooded man would do... he tried to impress her! He went over and moved the stone from the well’s mouth all by himself (which would normally require 2 or 3 men to do) and then watered his uncle’s sheep.

Genesis 29:11 – ¹¹ *Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and he wept aloud.*

After watering the sheep, Jacob kissed Rachel which we assume was not a romantic gesture but rather one offered to family as evidenced by Laban’s greeting to Jacob in the next set of verses. But then it reads he wept aloud. Why he did this, we’re not sure. I only know that in our current society when a young man wants to impress a girl he had just met, loud sobbing would be the last thing he would want to do!

Genesis 29:12-14a – ¹² *He explained to Rachel that he was her cousin on her father’s side—the son of her aunt Rebekah. So Rachel quickly ran and told her father, Laban. ¹³ As soon as Laban heard that his nephew Jacob had arrived, he ran out to meet him. He embraced and kissed him and brought him home. When Jacob had told him his story, ^{14a} Laban exclaimed, “You really are my own flesh and blood!”*

Now, Laban was really a piece of work as we've seen in the past and will also see later on in this story. We all know people like this one, don't we? You'll recall back in chapter 24 how when Abraham's servant, who was sent to find a bride for Isaac, came to town and Laban saw the rings and bracelets that were given to his sister, Rachel, he ran to fetch the servant and insisted he stay with them. It's pretty obvious what drives Laban's motivation.

Genesis 29:14b-18 – ^{14b} *After Jacob had stayed with Laban for about a month,* ¹⁵ *Laban said to him, "You shouldn't work for me without pay just because we are relatives. Tell me how much your wages should be."* ¹⁶ *Now Laban had two daughters. The older daughter was named Leah, and the younger one was Rachel.* ¹⁷ *There was no sparkle in Leah's eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face.* ¹⁸ *Since Jacob was in love with Rachel, he told her father, "I'll work for you for seven years if you'll give me Rachel, your younger daughter, as my wife."*

The custom among pastoral people at this time was that a stranger would be freely entertained for three days. On the fourth day they were expected to tell their name and errand. If their stay was prolonged after that time, they were to set their hand to work in some way, as agreed upon by both parties. Assuming that's what happened here then it appears that Laban let Jacob work for nearly a month before he finally offers to pay him!

Laban's offer opened the door for Jacob to make his pitch. Since Jacob had no other gifts to offer for Rachel's hand in marriage, as was the custom of the time, he offered to work for Laban for 7 years instead.

Genesis 29:19-25 – ¹⁹ *"Agreed!" Laban replied. "I'd rather give her to you than to anyone else. Stay and work with me."* ²⁰ *So Jacob worked seven years to pay for Rachel. But his love for her was so strong that it seemed to him but a few days.*

²¹ *Finally, the time came for him to marry her. "I have fulfilled my agreement," Jacob said to Laban. "Now give me my wife so I can sleep with her."*

²² *So Laban invited everyone in the neighborhood and prepared a wedding feast.* ²³ *But that night, when it was dark, Laban took Leah to Jacob, and he slept with her.* ²⁴ *(Laban had given Leah a servant, Zilpah, to be her maid.)*

²⁵ *But when Jacob woke up in the morning—it was Leah! "What have you done to me?" Jacob raged at Laban. "I worked seven years for Rachel! Why have you tricked me?"*

The deceiver has become the deceived! As the saying goes, what goes around, comes around!

If you'll recall, Jacob enticed Esau into selling his birthright. Then, under his mother's urging, he blatantly stole Esau's blessing as the firstborn by posing as Esau to their father. Considering that the plan was devised by his mother, Rebekah, who was also Laban's sister, it would appear that scheming, underhanded treachery was a defining family characteristic!

Now, you would think that growing up with Rebekah, Jacob would be wary of the kind of trick that Laban pulled. Then again, people are often unaware of negative or unacceptable traits when they've grown up with them and possess these traits themselves.

Genesis 29:26-27 – ²⁶ *“It’s not our custom here to marry off a younger daughter ahead of the firstborn,” Laban replied. ²⁷ “But wait until the bridal week is over; then we’ll give you Rachel, too—provided you promise to work another seven years for me.”*

Wow, just as we've observed earlier, Laban was quite the devious character. Rather than acknowledge his treachery directly, Laban evades it by providing the excuse that it's not their custom to marry off the younger daughter before the older one. “My hands were tied!”

Now, if this was truly the case then why didn't he mention this fact 7 years ago when the deal was first struck or at least mention it at some point since? I suppose it's possible he initially made the assumption that by the end of 7 years then surely his oldest daughter would be married off, but that still does not excuse the fact that he tricked Jacob into marrying the wrong girl.

In any case, Laban averts Jacob's wrath by offering to also give him Rachel at the end of the week... provided he works an additional seven years afterwards. Enter the concept of buying on credit!

Seriously though, Laban was very shrewd here. He dangled in front of Jacob the reward for which he had labored 7 long years in the hope of receiving only to be denied. But, he could go ahead and receive that reward, *right now*, if only he'd promise to work another 7 years. You'll notice that Laban didn't even give him a break on the price. He knew he had him.

To his credit, though, Jacob stuck to the new deal even though he had been betrayed by Laban. But, don't you worry about Jacob because in the end he will get the best of Laban. It's the family way!

Genesis 29:28-30 – ²⁸ *So Jacob agreed to work seven more years. A week after Jacob had married Leah, Laban gave him Rachel, too. ²⁹ (Laban gave Rachel a servant, Bilhah, to be her maid.) ³⁰ So Jacob slept with Rachel, too, and he loved her much more than Leah. He then stayed and worked for Laban the additional seven years.*

Jacob marries two sisters and that in the midst of a big controversy over them. How can that possibly go wrong, right?

An interesting sidenote is that later on when God gives Moses the laws for the Israelites to live by, the following command is included:

Leviticus 18:18 – ¹⁸ *“While your wife is living, do not marry her sister and have sexual relations with her, for they would be rivals.*

We can clearly see the wisdom in this future command as we read the following verses.

Genesis 29:31-32 – ³¹ *When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he enabled her to have children, but Rachel could not conceive. ³² So Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, “The LORD has noticed my misery, and now my husband will love me.”*

Reuben means “behold a son.” The first born son would normally be the logical one to inherit the promise God had made to Abraham and passed on to Isaac and then to Jacob. Leah thought that by giving Jacob his first born son that maybe then he would love her.

Genesis 29:33 – ³³ *She soon became pregnant again and gave birth to another son. She named him Simeon, for she said, “The LORD heard that I was unloved and has given me another son.”*

The name *Simeon* means “hearing.” Leah hopes that all will notice that God has heard her. But, apparently Jacob still did not love Leah.

Genesis 29:34 – ³⁴ *Then she became pregnant a third time and gave birth to another son. He was named Levi, for she said, “Surely this time my husband will feel affection for me, since I have given him three sons!”*

The name *Levi* means “attachment.” Leah still clings to the hope her husband Jacob will love her and become attached to her through the birth of these sons.

Genesis 29:35 – ³⁵ *Once again Leah became pregnant and gave birth to another son. She named him Judah, for she said, “Now I will praise the LORD!” And then she stopped having children.*

The fourth son’s name, *Judah*, means “praise.” Leah has stopped focusing on her pain and longing and has instead started focusing on God. There’s a good lesson for us to learn here. We can’t always change our circumstances but we can change how we react to them.

It was very sad for Leah to get married only to have her new husband also marry her younger, prettier sister just a week later. However, she was complicit in the plot to deceive Jacob into marrying her so she did share at least some of the blame. Although, I’m sure that Laban was pushing her very hard to comply and the culture of the time undoubtedly gave her little choice but to go along. In either case, she was obviously feeling great distress at being unloved.

Genesis 30:1-2 – *When Rachel saw that she wasn’t having any children for Jacob, she became jealous of her sister. She pleaded with Jacob, “Give me children, or I’ll die!”*

² *Then Jacob became furious with Rachel. “Am I God?” he asked. “He’s the one who has kept you from having children!”*

And just like Leviticus warns, the rivalry rises to the surface! Rachel responds like most of us would. Instead of going to the only One who could actually help fix this situation, she rails on her husband as if he could actually do something to help.

Genesis 30:3-8 – ³ *Then Rachel told him, “Take my maid, Bilhah, and sleep with her. She will bear children for me, and through her I can have a family, too.”*⁴ *So Rachel gave her servant, Bilhah, to Jacob as a wife, and he slept with her.* ⁵ *Bilhah became pregnant and presented him with a son.*⁶ *Rachel named him Dan, for she said, “God has vindicated me! He has heard my request and given me a son.”* ⁷ *Then Bilhah became pregnant again and gave Jacob a second son.* ⁸ *Rachel named him Naphtali, for she said, “I have struggled hard with my sister, and I’m winning!”*

Since Rachel could not have any kids, she took matters into her own hands and told Jacob to sleep with her maid so Bilhah could be her surrogate to compete with her sister. Throw yet another wife into the mix. I'm sure that will make things all better!

I suppose Rachel didn't recall the family history of how doing this very type of thing didn't work out so well for Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, with Hagar and Sarah.

Genesis 30:9-13 – ⁹ *Meanwhile, Leah realized that she wasn't getting pregnant anymore, so she took her servant, Zilpah, and gave her to Jacob as a wife. ¹⁰ Soon Zilpah presented him with a son. ¹¹ Leah named him Gad, for she said, "How fortunate I am!" ¹² Then Zilpah gave Jacob a second son. ¹³ And Leah named him Asher, for she said, "What joy is mine! Now the other women will celebrate with me."*

As if things were not complicated and messy enough, Leah gives her maid, Zilpah, to Jacob to have children for her. We don't seem to be hearing any complaints from Jacob, though. For all we know, Jacob could very well have been egging on the competition.

Genesis 30:14-15 – ¹⁴ *One day during the wheat harvest, Reuben found some mandrakes growing in a field and brought them to his mother, Leah. Rachel begged Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes."*

¹⁵ *But Leah angrily replied, "Wasn't it enough that you stole my husband? Now will you steal my son's mandrakes, too?"*

Rachel answered, "I will let Jacob sleep with you tonight if you give me some of the mandrakes."

Wow! You can cut the tension between these two here with a knife! The way Leah lashed out at Rachel reveals her frustration and anger with the situation. Ironically enough, Leah has conveniently forgotten the fact that she was actually the one that stole Rachel's husband first!



Now, let's read about some relevant trivia that helps to explain why the perceived value of the mandrake plant to these women was so high.

The mandrake is a Mediterranean plant with blue flowers in the winter and yellow, plum-like fruit in the summer with a root appearance that has an eerie similarity to the human form. The Hebrews called the mandrake fruit dudaim, or "love apple," on account of its perceived power to cause barren women to conceive, and this belief still survives in the folklore of Palestine today. Dried mandrake roots, especially those shaped like a woman holding a child in her arms, are still highly prized by women in Syria and Turkey, and are carried as a charm to promote fertility.

Oddly enough, the alkaloids present in the plant's roots and leaves make the plant poisonous, via anticholinergic,

hallucinogenic and hypnotic effects.

The supposed-fertility inducing qualities, coupled with the fact it was only rarely found in Paddan-aram where they lived, explains why both Leah and Rachel greatly desired the plant. Since Rachel herself had not borne any children and Leah had become temporarily infertile, they were both seeking a cure in the mandrake.

Genesis 30:16 – ¹⁶ *So that evening, as Jacob was coming home from the fields, Leah went out to meet him. “You must come and sleep with me tonight!” she said. “I have paid for you with some mandrakes that my son found.” So that night he slept with Leah.*

It’s a well-known fact that women in this period of time were treated like objects to be bought and sold but apparently this behavior could go both ways. They were treating Jacob like some type of regular home appliance!

One has to wonder what was going through Jacob’s head at this time, but he was apparently okay with the whole situation since we don’t hear him complaining any.

Genesis 30:17-20 – ¹⁷ *And God answered Leah’s prayers. She became pregnant again and gave birth to a fifth son for Jacob. ¹⁸ She named him Issachar, for she said, “God has rewarded me for giving my servant to my husband as a wife.” ¹⁹ Then Leah became pregnant again and gave birth to a sixth son for Jacob. ²⁰ She named him Zebulun, for she said, “God has given me a good reward. Now my husband will treat me with respect, for I have given him six sons.”*

It’s pointed out here that it was the one who prayed to God (Leah) and not the one who used her own methods through superstitious means (Rachel) who had additional children. We’re not privy to Leah’s prayers so we don’t know exactly how she prayed. Regardless, we should be mindful of the fact she did pray as we strive to fix problems in our lives through our own efforts rather than diligently seeking help from the only One who can truly help. And most important of all, when our prayers are answered we need to make sure that we recognize from where our help has come!

Genesis 30:21 – ²¹ *Later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah.*

The inferior value set on a daughter is displayed in the bare announcement of the birth of Dinah.

Genesis 30:22-24 – ²² *Then God remembered Rachel’s plight and answered her prayers by enabling her to have children. ²³ She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. “God has removed my disgrace,” she said. ²⁴ And she named him Joseph, for she said, “May the LORD add yet another son to my family.”*

God has finally blessed Rachel with her own children. We should note that Rachel was enabled to have children after many years of barrenness, once again, through the answering of prayer by God and not through some kind of human effort on her part. It would also be through this child that their whole family would be saved from the drought that strikes in the future.

Questions for Thought: *Just how much to God’s care do you trust the things you consider the most important things in your life? Of the priorities in your life, where does God fall on that list?*