



Genesis - Chapter Twenty Nine

II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

II.b Genesis 25:19-36:43 - Isaac's Descendants (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Nine

Jacob arrives at a well near to Haran and questions some of the shepherds as to whether they know his Uncle Laban. They confirm they know him and point out that his daughter Rachel is approaching with Laban's sheep. Jacob greets Rachel, informs her who he is and she fetches her father, who invites Jacob into their home.

Laban offered to employ Jacob for wages but Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel and so he offered to work without pay for seven years if he could marry Rachel at the end of that period. When the seven years were ended Laban provided a wedding feast to celebrate the occasion but he tricked Jacob by bringing him his other daughter Leah. Because she was veiled, Jacob did not realise who it was until after the marriage was consummated.

When Jacob challenged Laban, the latter told him it was the custom for the elder daughter to be married first but if Jacob continued in the marriage celebration for the customary seven days then he could also marry Rachel, providing he agreed to work for Laban for a further seven years.

Jacob agreed to this and when the week was over, he married Rachel aslo, and worked for Laban for a further seven years. Because Jacob loved Rachel and not Leah, and in his compassion the Lord allowed Leah to bear Jacob four sons, while Rachel was barren.

II.b.x Genesis 29:1-14 - Jacob Meets Rachel

Aspects of this episode parallel the earlier account of the journey of Abraham's servant to Paddan-aram in order to find a wife for Isaac (Chapter Twenty Four).

While both accounts involve providential encounters at a well, subtle differences exist. Whereas Abraham's servant prays for guidance, Jacob is not recorded as praying. In Chapter Twenty Four, Rebekah's willingness to water the camels proves decisive in establishing her identity as Isaac's future wife. On this occasion, Jacob's willingness to water Laban's herd establishes a special relationship between the two men.

¹ Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the people of the east.

Genesis 29:1

The people of the east. This is an unusual way of referring to the inhabitants of Paddan-aram in northwest Mesopotamia. In Genesis, however, the east is often associated with those who are expelled or move away from God's presence. This brief comment possibly signals that Jacob's relatives do not worship the Lord.

² As he looked, he saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it; for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large, ³ and 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 on the mouth of the well.

Genesis 29:2-3

He saw a well in the field and three flocks of sheep lying there beside it. These verses provide information about the process by which herds were normally watered at this well. In particular, attention is drawn to the large stone that covered the well's mouth. The stone was placed over the well to reduce the amount of water lost to evaporation during the heat of the day.

⁴ Jacob said to them, 'My brothers, where do you come from?' They said, 'We are from Haran.' ⁵ He said to them, 'Do you know Laban son of Nahor?' They said, 'We do.' ⁶ He said to them, 'Is it well with him?' 'Yes,' they replied, 'and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep.'

Genesis 29:4-6

My brothers, where do you come from? When Jacob discovers that the shepherds are from Haran, he inquires after his uncle, Laban son of Nahor. Strictly speaking, Laban is Nahor's grandson. The Hebrew term for son may denote any male

descendant. In the NT Jesus is described as the 'son of David' (Matthew 1:1), even though David lived about 1,000 years earlier.

Providentially, Laban's daughter Rachel, is spotted bringing her herd to the well. Rachel means 'ewe,' an appropriate name for a shepherdess (v.9). It was not uncommon for daughters as well as sons to look after the livestock: <<*The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock*>> (Exodus 2:16).

⁷ He said, 'Look, it is still broad daylight; it is not time for the animals to be gathered together. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them.'

⁸ But 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 29:7-8

Water the sheep, and go, pasture them. Jacob came from a line of shepherds and knew that in broad daylight the sheep should still be feeding. However, it seems that locally they started to gather early at the well so their sheep could be watered when all the flocks were finally gathered and then the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well. Jacob clearly saw this as an ineffective way of rearing sheep. His own methods reap great rewards later in the story.

⁹ While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep; for she kept them. ¹⁰ Now when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban, and the sheep of his mother's brother Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of his mother's brother Laban.

Genesis 29:9-10

Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth. Jacob demonstrates extraordinary strength in being able to move the stone. He also takes it upon himself to move the stone ahead of the arrival of other flocks as was the accepted protocol. By his action he would start to establish himself as a man whom others would take note of in the community.

¹¹ Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and wept aloud. ¹² And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father. ¹³ When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he ran to meet him; he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things,

¹⁴ and Laban said to him, ‘Surely you are my bone and my flesh!’ And he stayed with him for a month.

Genesis 29:11-14

Jacob kissed Rachel, probably as an act of family affection rather than of romance, as confirmed by Laban’s reaction: he embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. This is in line with Paul’s own teaching, when he writes: <<*Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you*>> (2 Corinthians 13:12), and: <<*Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:26). The familial affection for Paul is within the church of Jesus Christ.

Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s kinsman, and that he was Rebekah’s son. Jacob discloses his identity to Rachel, who in turn introduces him to her father Laban. The warmth of the family reunion is shown by the way Laban embraces and kisses his nephew Jacob.

Surely you are my bone and my flesh! There is no stronger bond than that of flesh and blood, whether in the direct family line or as the people of one nation: <<*Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken’*>> (Genesis 2:23), <<*Say in the hearing of all the lords of Shechem, “Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal rule over you, or that one rule over you?” Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh*>> (Judges 9:2), <<*Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, ‘Look, we are your bone and flesh*>> (2 Samuel 5:1), <<*Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others*>> (Nehemiah 5:5), and: <<*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*>> (Isaiah 58:7).

II.b.xi. Genesis 29:15-30:24 - Jacob marries Leah and Rachel

Jacob’s journey to Paddan-aram to find a wife results in his obtaining not one, but two. The episode is full of irony. Having deceived his father by pretending to be the firstborn, Jacob himself is now deceived by his uncle Laban into marrying his firstborn daughter Leah. Afterward, Laban permits Jacob to marry Rachel, but only on the understanding that Jacob will work for another seven years in order to pay the bride-price for her.

Genesis 29:31-30:24 reports the birth of eleven sons and one daughter to Jacob. Not surprisingly, given his unexpected marriage to Leah, Jacob’s domestic scene is

fraught with tension. Laban's deception and manipulation of Jacob creates years of discord between his two daughters.

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?'

¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' ¹⁹ Laban said, 'It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.' ²⁰ So 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

What shall your wages be? This might sound like a nice offer, but really Laban let Jacob know if he wanted to remain among them, he must stay as a hired servant. Jacob was the son of a man of tremendous wealth. Certainly he was not lazy, but he was not used to hard work and had preferred the indoor life. Servants did the hard work back home; now Jacob had the role of a servant.

Jacob's reaction in this situation would reveal much of his character. This demonstrates the principle that one never knows what kind of servant one is until others treat one like a servant.

Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful. This verse is one that is disputed among scholars and appears differently in other translations. For example: <<*Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance*>> (v.17 ESV), or: <<*There was no sparkle in Leah's eyes, but Rachel had a beautiful figure and a lovely face*>> (v.17 NLT). Both of these give a completely different perspective and are more in keeping with what follows. It is clear that Rachel had greater physical beauty than her elder sister.

These verses set the scene by providing information essential for the development of the story. The brief descriptions of Leah and Rachel are sufficient to explain why Jacob loves Rachel, and perhaps why Laban wanted to deceive Jacob into marrying Leah. Both women played a significant role in the history of Israel and were well thought of by those who came from them: <<*Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, 'We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem*>> (Ruth 4:11).

I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel. In the ancient Near East it was customary for a prospective husband to give the bride's father a substantial gift of money, known as the bride-price. Jacob indicates that he is prepared to work for Laban in order to give the equivalent of seven years' wages for Rachel. This period of work would be of far greater value than the usual accepted bride price showing just how much Jacob loved Rachel and that he was determined his offer would not be refused.

So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Many would perhaps think that being separated from his bride to be would make the time seem to pass slowly, especially as Jacob would never be alone with Rachel during their betrothal. Yet Jacob was able to absorb himself in his work, without pay except for board and lodgings, for seven years, making the period seem but a brief time. This shows that true love endures the passage of time.

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.'²² So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast.

Genesis 29:21-22

Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed. Although Jacob had been content to bide his time, now that he had fulfilled his part of the agreement, he wanted to be married as soon as the seven years had passed.

Made a feast. Feasting was an important element of ancient Near Eastern weddings. Such celebrations often lasted for days. Examples of great feasts include: <<*His father went down to the woman, and Samson made a feast there as the young men were accustomed to do*>> (Judges 14:10), and: <<*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear*>> (Isaiah 25:6). Another famous wedding banquet is recounted in John 2:1-12, where Jesus turned the water into wine.

²³ But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her.

Genesis 29:23

In the evening. It was dark or nearly dark when Leah was introduced to Jacob for the consummation of their marriage, and darkness in a world without artificial lighting can be pitch-black. At this stage, Jacob did not realise that Leah was the bride. She may also have come to him wearing a veil, the sign of a betrothed woman, as Rebekah had done when she first met Isaac (24:65).

It is not clear whether Leah was in agreement with her father's decision but this would have been of little consequence in that culture for a daughter would obey her father until she was married and then she would obey her husband.

It was quite common during such ceremonies for the two parties to be separated until after dark. This is reflected in one of Jesus' parables: <<*Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom*>> (Matthew 25:1), where the bridesmaids traditionally escorted the bridegroom into the presence of his bride. For Jesus, however, the symbolism was quite different and it was about believers being prepared for his Second Coming.

²⁴ (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.)

Genesis 29:24

The mention of Zilpah here anticipates later developments when she will become a substitute wife for Leah, as recorded in 30:9-13.

²⁵ When morning came, 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?'

Genesis 29:25

Only when morning came did Jacob realise that he has been deceived by Laban.

Why then have you deceived me? Whether this was said in astonishment or anger is not clear but it is remarkable just how similar was this deception to that of Jacob before Isaac when he received Esau's blessing.

When Jacob deceived his father and cheated his brother, God did not change his plan to choose Jacob to receive the birthright. Instead, God took Jacob to the school of difficult experiences in order to discipline him. This shows that individual disobedience may not derail God's plan for that life, but it will greatly affect how one ends up experiencing it. One might spend 20 years working for someone like Laban while God teaches a few things. Although it can be seen that this was God's correction upon Jacob, it in no way justified Laban's deception. The fact that God does work all things together for good never excuses the evil things that mankind does.

²⁶ Laban said, 'This is not done in our country — giving the younger before the firstborn.'

Genesis 29:26

Giving the younger before the firstborn. Laban's remarks are highly ironic in light of Jacob's earlier deception of his father, taking the firstborn son's blessing that was Esau's by birthright.

²⁷ Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me for another seven years.'

Genesis 29:27

Complete the week of this one. Either the wedding celebrations or the honeymoon period lasted for seven days. Laban persuades Jacob to complete this process with Leah on the understanding that he will then be able to marry Rachel: in return for serving me for another seven years. This would also give ample opportunity for Leah to conceive a child.

²⁸ Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. ²⁹ (Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

Genesis 29:28-30

Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife. At least Jacob did not have to wait another seven year to be with his beloved Rachel but he was pledged to working for Laban for at least that period of time.

The mention of Bilhah here anticipates later developments, for she will bear children on behalf of Rachel for Jacob, as recorded in 30:3-8.

³¹ When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, he opened her womb; but Rachel was barren.

Genesis 29:31

When the LORD saw that Leah was unloved or hated. From the outset, Jacob had loved Rachel (v.18). Undoubtedly, he found it difficult to love Leah, given the events that had brought them together, and Rachel probably also loathed her sister for the same reason. Yet their treatment of Leah causes the Lord to favour her over Rachel. While Leah is able to have children, Rachel is barren. As Genesis frequently highlights, the Lord is ultimately the one who creates human life: <<*Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward*>> (Psalm 127:3).

³² Leah conceived and bore a son, and she named him Reuben; for she said, 'Because the LORD has looked on my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.' ³³ She 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 named him Simeon. ³⁴ Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, 'Now this time my husband will be joined to me, because I have borne him three sons'; therefore he was named Levi. ³⁵ She conceived again and bore a son, and said, 'This time I will praise the LORD'; therefore she named him Judah; then she ceased bearing.

Genesis 29:32-35

Leah conceived and bore a son. Leah bears Jacob four sons, then she ceased bearing. Each son's name is associated with a wordplay involving a comment made by Leah: Reuben meaning 'behold, a son' - the LORD has looked on my affliction, Simeon meaning 'hear' - the LORD has heard that I am hated, Levi meaning 'attachment' - my husband will be joined to me, and Judah meaning 'praise' - I will praise the LORD.

Leah, although she was neglected by Jacob and despised by Rachel, had a great purpose in God's plan. The two greatest tribes came from Leah, not Rachel: Levi (the priestly tribe) and Judah (the royal tribe). And most importantly, the Messiah came from Leah, the less-attractive sister who was neglected and despised but learned to look to the Lord and praise him.

As the next chapter will reveal, Jacob would have more sons through his two wives' servants, Bilhah and Zilpah. However, Leah would again conceive and provide Jacob with two further sons and a daughter.