



Genesis - Chapter Thirty

- II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)
- II.b Genesis 25:19-36:43 - Isaac's Descendants (continues)
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Summary of Chapter Thirty

Rachel, in her desperation to have children for her husband Jacob, resorts to giving him her maid Bilhah to have children on her behalf. This is in much the same way as Sarah had given Hagar to Abraham. Bilhah subsequently presented Jacob with two more sons.

Not to be outdone by her sister and because she thought she too had become barren, Leah then gave her maid Zilpah to Jacob and she bore him two additional sons as well. However, she was wrong and subsequently had two more boys and a girl by her husband. Then, by the grace of God and despite her barren state, Rachel became pregnant and had her first son.

Many years had passed as Jacob's family grew in number and he wanted to return to the land of Canaan so he requested that Laban release him from service. However, Laban had prospered greatly through Jacob's skill as a shepherd and offered him any payment if he agreed to stay. The agreement was that Jacob could have any sheep or goats bred from Laban's flock that were marked in some way.

Laban agreed to this but tried to deceive Jacob by first removing all the marked sheep from the flock and putting them under the charge of his sons. Thus it was likely that only unmarked lambs would be born in the flock tended by Jacob.

Jacob had an ingenious plan to make the animals breed and produce marked lambs, although it was almost certainly the Lord's doing that ensured so many of the sheep and goats. Eventually, Jacob was the owner of a vast herd of his own and was very wealthy in his own right, with many servants to help tend his flock and look after his household.

¹ When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or I shall die!' ² Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'

Genesis 30:1-2

Give me children, or I shall die! Despite the fact that her husband loves her, Rachel is becoming desperate as her barrenness causes further tensions to surface within Jacob's household, i.e. she envied her sister and Jacob became very angry with Rachel. When Rachel demands children from Jacob, he places the blame on God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb.

Am I in the place of God. While recognising God's role in this situation, however, Jacob does not pray for Rachel, as his father Isaac had done for Rebekah (25:21-22). In the story of the healing of Naaman, the king of Israel responded in a similar way to a letter from the king of Aram: <<*When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, 'Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me'>> (2 Kings 5:7).*

Although failure to produce children was seen by many in the culture as disgrace upon the woman, God views it differently, as he states through his prophet: <<*Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD>> (Isaiah 54:1).*

³ Then she said, 'Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her.' ⁴ So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife; and Jacob went in to her. ⁵ And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. ⁶ Then Rachel said, 'God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son'; therefore she named him Dan. ⁷ Rachel's maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. ⁸ Then Rachel said, 'With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed'; so she named him Naphtali.

Genesis 30:3-8

To overcome her barrenness, Rachel offers Jacob her servant **Bilhah** as a substitute wife. **That she may bear upon my knees and that I too may have children through her** refers to the custom where the husband impregnated the surrogate while the surrogate reclined on the lap of the wife, and how she might even recline on the wife as she gave birth. The symbolism clearly showed the child to be legally the child of the mother, not the surrogate, who was merely in the place of the wife in both conception and birth. This practice, which was also carried out by Abraham and Sarah (16:1-4), was part of ancient Near Eastern culture and any resulting children were accepted as belonging to the wife, not the servant. For example, the Nuzi texts from the 15th Century BC treat the concept of marriage, and many of these texts deal with the issue of childlessness and provisions for new wives. Children born to the substitute, or second, wife were regarded as belonging to the main, or first, wife. In this way, continuity of the family line was preserved. For this reason, Rachel names the two boys born to Bilhah. Once again each name involves wordplay, **Dan** and **Naphtali** being associated with the verbs ‘judge’, **God has judged me**, and ‘wrestle’, **with mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed**. With the birth of Dan, Rachel presumably felt vindicated in the way that she was being judged and with Naphtali she had prevailed since Leah had apparently stopped giving birth.

Such vindication is reflected in the words of the psalmists: <<Vindicate me, O LORD, my God, according to your righteousness, and do not let them rejoice over me>> (Psalm 35:24), and: <<Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!>> (Psalm 43:1).

⁹ When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. ¹⁰ Then Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹ And Leah said, ‘Good fortune!’ so she named him Gad. ¹² Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. ¹³ And Leah said, ‘Happy am I! For the women will call me happy’; so she named him Asher.

Genesis 30:9-13

Leah took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah, who has stopped bearing children, figured she could use the same surrogate mother method to increase the number of children accounted to her, so she gave her maid Zilpah to Jacob as Rachel had given her maid Bilhah to Jacob.

And Leah said, ‘Good fortune!’ so she named him Gad. Jacob’s seventh son, born to him through Zilpah the maid of Leah, was named Gad, meaning Troop or Good

Fortune. The wives of Jacob continued to use their children as pawns in a power struggle within the home.

And Leah said, 'Happy am I! For the women will call me happy'; so she named him Asher. Jacob's eighth son, born to him through Zilpah the maid of Leah, was named Asher, meaning happy. Leah seems more concerned about the status the child would bring her - all the women will call me happy or **blessed** - than about the child himself.

The Virgin Mary expressed similar feelings when she was pregnant with Jesus: <<And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the LORD, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name'>> (Luke 1:46-49).

¹⁴ In 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.'¹⁵ But 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 for your son's mandrakes.'¹⁶ When 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 with her that night.

Genesis 30:14-16

These verses, which recount Leah's conception of Issachar, highlight the intensity of the dispute between the two sisters. On this occasion Leah buys from Rachel the right to lie with Jacob. Having agreed to this with her sister, she says to Jacob, I have hired you with my son's mandrakes. The Hebrew term *duda'im* translated here as mandrakes, possibly 'love fruits' or 'love apples', is usually understood to denote the plant *mandragora officinarum*, a species long regarded as having unusual properties. Unfortunately, no explanation is given as to why Rachel is so eager to have these mandrakes; the context suggests that she may have viewed the plant as increasing female fertility. This and other proposals, however, must be treated with caution.

Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? The hostility between Leah and Rachel was as obvious as it was painful. It must have been terrible living in a home where one wife believed the other had stolen her husband from her. This confirms the wisdom of God's original plan, as expressed in Genesis 2:24: one man to be joined to one woman in a one-flesh relationship. Later, Leviticus 18:18 forbade the marrying of sisters: <<And you shall not take a woman as a rival to

her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive>>, and this shows why. The words of the prophet seem appropriate here also: <<*Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?’>>* (Isaiah 7:13).

I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes. It is evident from the account that Jacob preferred to spend his nights with Rachel. What a sad state of affairs that his first wife should need to make payment to be with her husband. This was the result of Laban’s deception, which had brought so much unhappiness rather than joy to his own daughters.

¹⁷ And God heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.

¹⁸ Leah said, ‘God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband’; so she named him Issachar. ¹⁹ And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. ²⁰ Then Leah said, ‘God has endowed me with a good dowry; now my husband will honour me, because I have borne him six sons’; so she named him Zebulun. ²¹ Afterwards she bore a daughter, and named her Dinah.

Genesis 30:17-21

God heeded Leah. Although it is observed in 29:35 that Leah ceased bearing after the birth of Judah, she obviously wishes to have more children. God grants her wish, enabling her to have two more sons and a daughter.

Once more, the names of the sons, Issachar and Zebulun, are deliberately chosen to reflect events surrounding their births: Issachar is related to the concept of ‘wages’, God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband, and ‘Zebulun’ to the concept of ‘honour,’ now my husband will honour me. It seems that despite the fact she had presented Jacob with six sons, he still did not care for her in the way he did for his beloved Rachel. The NT calls for husbands to honour their wives: <<*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*>> (Ephesians 5:25), <<*Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly*>> (Colossians 3:19), and: <<*Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honour to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life – so that nothing may hinder your prayers*>> (1 Peter 3:7).

Afterwards she bore a daughter. This is the first mention of a daughter in the family. The word afterwards is poignant for there is no record that Leah, Bilhah or Zilpah have any more children.

The birth of Dinah is briefly mentioned, anticipating the events recorded in Chapter Thirty Four, where she becomes the focus of very unsavoury dealings with the Hivites in the land of Canaan.

²² Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. ²³ She conceived and bore a son, and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach’; ²⁴ and she named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the LORD add to me another son!’

Genesis 30:22-24

Then God remembered Rachel. After many years of waiting, Rachel eventually bears Jacob a son. On God’s ‘remembering’ refer to the comment made on 8:1. The repetition of God emphasises that he is the one who has enabled Rachel to conceive and give birth. This is reinforced when Rachel acknowledges that God has taken away my reproach. Since throughout Genesis fertility is often associated with divine blessing, a woman’s inability to bear children could be interpreted as reflecting divine disapproval. Given the resentment that existed between the sisters, Leah may well have taunted Rachel over her inability to bear children.

She named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the LORD add to me another son!’ As with all the other sons born to Jacob, Joseph’s name is derived from a remark made by his mother, may the LORD add to me another son; in Hebrew Joseph sounds like the verb ‘add to.’ For the sad answer to her prayer, refer to 35:16-20, where Rachel died giving birth to her second son Benjamin.

II.b.xii Genesis 30:25-31:21 - Jacob Prepares to Return to Canaan

Jacob now believes it is time for his return to Canaan and requests that Laban release him from service. However, Laban has become wealthier through the endeavours of Jacob and does not want him to go, so he tries to deceive him once more with a ruse over how Jacob could be paid in livestock. However, God allows Jacob to prevail and he becomes a wealthy man in the process. This caused dissention between Jacob and Laban’s sons, who believed he was stealing their sheep, so Jacob decided to take his family and his flock and flee from the clutches of Laban and his sons.

II.b.xii.1 Genesis 30:25-43 - Jacob Prospers at Laban’s Expense

Having completed fourteen years of service to Laban, Jacob looks to return to his family in Canaan. Laban, however, is reluctant to lose Jacob’s service, which has brought him considerable wealth. The events narrated in this section illustrate how God’s blessing is mediated through Jacob, but only to those who bless him. By mistreating Jacob, Laban is eventually disadvantaged.

²⁵ When Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, ‘Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. ²⁶ Give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you, and let me go; for you know very well the service I have given you.’ ²⁷ But Laban said to him,

‘If you will allow me to say so, I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you; ²⁸ name your wages, and I will give them.’ ²⁹ Jacob said to him, ‘You yourself know how I have served you, and how your cattle have fared with me. ³⁰ For you had little before I came, and it has increased abundantly; and the LORD has blessed you wherever I turned. But now when shall I provide for my own household also?’

Genesis 30:25-30

Send me away, that I may go to my own home and country. Although Jacob was in Haran with Laban and his daughters for more than fourteen years, he knew that he belonged in the land promised to him by God, through the covenant made with his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. After fourteen years, Jacob still called the Promised Land my country.

Learned by divination. The narrator does not specify the precise method by which Laban discovers that the Lord has blessed him because of Jacob. The Israelites were later prohibited by God from practicing divination: <<***No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practises divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead***>> (Deuteronomy 18:10-11), because it sought to provide knowledge by inappropriate methods, e.g. interpreting omens, using supernatural powers. Laban’s use of divination is sinful, even though the information obtained is accurate.

The LORD has blessed me because of you. In Genesis, all the members of the special line descended from Abraham are portrayed as mediating God’s blessing to others.

Name your wages. For fourteen years Jacob has served Laban in order to pay the bride-price for Leah and Rachel. Having fulfilled this obligation, which has financially benefited Laban well beyond what he might have expected, Jacob now wants to provide for his own household. Laban, conscious of how Jacob has enriched him and eager to retain his services, asks Jacob to name his wages for remaining with him.

But now when shall I provide for my own household also? Jacob has always provided a home and food for his family through his labours but now he wants to focus his efforts on providing for them alone through his efforts for until now it has been Laban who has prospered the most. The apostle Paul writes: <<***And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever***>> (1 Timothy 5:8).

³¹ He said, 'What shall I give you?' Jacob said, 'You shall not give me anything; if you will do this for me, I will again feed your flock and keep it: ³² let me pass through all your flock today, removing from it every speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats; and such shall be my wages. ³³ So my honesty will answer for me later, when you come to look into my wages with you. Every one that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and black among the lambs, if found with me, shall be counted stolen.' ³⁴ Laban said, 'Good! Let it be as you have said.'

Genesis 30:31-34

As payment for his services, Jacob asks Laban to allocate to him all the speckled and spotted sheep and goats, along with every black lamb. Their distinctive markings allow these animals to be easily distinguished from those that belong to Laban so that ownership would not be in doubt. Indeed, Jacob states that any other lambs if found with me, shall be counted stolen. A charge that would see him lose his entire flock and probably his life as well.

Laban said, 'Good! Let it be as you have said.' This was an agreeable deal to both parties. First, it was a foolproof way to distinguish between the flocks of Laban and Jacob. As well, Laban liked the deal because the odds were heavily stacked in his favour. Jacob may have proposed this arrangement because he was willing to trust in God's provision.

³⁵ But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them in charge of his sons; ³⁶ and he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock.

Genesis 30:35-36

Having agreed on the wages, Laban secretly removes all the animals allocated to Jacob and gives them into the charge of his sons. This places Jacob at a serious disadvantage for the genetics of the remaining goats and sheep would most likely produce only lambs pure in colour. Yet again, Laban's deceitful nature influences his treatment of Jacob.

He set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, while Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban's flock. A great distance was set between the two flocks so that Jacob could not take any of the spotted or speckled animals

from Laban's flock to add to his own. Despite the agreement, Laban did not trust Jacob and wanted to ensure his own success in the deceit. Jacob personally was caring for the remainder of Laban's flock as a good employee should.

³⁷ Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the rods. ³⁸ He set the rods that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering-places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, ³⁹ the flocks bred in front of the rods, and so the flocks produced young that were striped, speckled, and spotted.

Genesis 30:37-39

To recover the loss of speckled and spotted sheep and goats, Jacob attempts to manipulate the breeding process of the flocks by placing fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane trees in the troughs where the flocks were watered. These rods, which have peeled white streaks in them, correspond to the genetic makeup of the flocks, producing animals that are striped, speckled, and spotted. The text should not be understood to imply any causal relationship between the rods and the newborn animals. The outcome is purely genetic and according to the design of the creator God.

⁴⁰ Jacob separated the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and the completely black animals in the flock of Laban; and he put his own droves apart, and did not put them with Laban's flock.

Genesis 30:40

Jacob separated his animals from those of Laban's flock so that he could not be accused of inter-breeding with or even stealing any from those belonging to Laban.

⁴¹ Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob laid the rods in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the rods, ⁴² but for the feebler of the flock he did not lay them there; so the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's.

Genesis 30:41-42

Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob laid the rods in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the rods. Jacob adopts a selective breeding policy to ensure that the striped, speckled, and spotted sheep and goats come from the strongest animals in Laban's flocks.

So the feebler were Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. Laban's attempts at deception ultimately disadvantage him as this stock became ever weaker.

⁴³ Thus the man grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys.

Genesis 30:43

Thus the man grew exceedingly rich. Having arrived in Paddan-aram with only his staff: <<*I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies*>> (Genesis 32:10), Jacob becomes very rich. The brief description of his possessions resembles earlier summaries of Abraham's wealth; refer to 12:16 and 24:35, as well as the comment made on 26:12-13.

Jacob's principles for prosperity:

- Don't make wealth your goal (vv.25-26).
- Don't be afraid to work for others and try to increase their wealth before or as you work to increase your own wealth (v.27).
- Work hard, dedicating yourself to your employer's success (v.26 and Genesis 31:38-42).
- Trust God (vv.31-33).