

Jacob’s Journey

I. JACOB FLEES TO LABAN

Leaving aside the tensions within the family, Genesis now concentrates on the marriages of Jacob and Esau – the former keeping to the traditions of his ancestors, and the latter going against them.

Read: Genesis 28:1-9

[1] Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women.

[2] Arise, go to Paddan-aram to the house of Bethuel your mother's father; and take as wife from there one of the daughters of Laban your mother's brother.

[3] God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples.

[4] May he give the blessing of Abraham to you and to your descendants with you, that you may take possession of the land of your sojournings which God gave to Abraham!"

[5] Thus Isaac sent Jacob away; and he went to Paddan-aram to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramean, the brother of Rebekah, Jacob's and Esau's mother.

[6] Now Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him away to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and that as he blessed him he charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women,"

[7] and that Jacob had obeyed his father and his mother and gone to Paddan-aram.

[8] So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please Isaac his father,

[9] Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, besides the wives he had, Ma'halath the daughter of Ishmael Abraham's son, the sister of Neba'ioth.

A. Jacob Looks for a Wife

Isaac sends Jacob to Paddan-aram [Upper Mesopotamia, the homeland of Jacob’s mother] to Rebekah's people to find a wife - but not before giving him the full covenant blessing God gave to Abraham. Review Gen. 24:3-8.

What do you think is Isaac's main concern as he gives this blessing?

Recall that Isaac himself stayed in Canaan while Abraham's servant sought a wife for him. Perhaps afraid that Jacob will not otherwise return Isaac is reminding Jacob that:

- whatever the circumstances between him and Esau, and
- however true it is that they still live in Canaan as foreigners,
- God has promised them the land that He gave it to Abraham and it is the descendants of Jacob, as recipient of the blessing, who will take possession of it.

B. Esau Marries Ishmael’s Daughter

Esau marries yet another wife, this time an Ishmaelite, apparently in a last-ditch effort to do the right thing and please his parents. Unfortunately this is too little, too late, and his action draws a further line of distinction between his family and the future chosen people of God.

II. JACOB’S DREAM AT BETHEL

Read: Genesis 28: 10-22

[10] Jacob left Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran.

[11] And he came to a certain place, and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep.

[12] And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!

[13] And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of

Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants;

[14] and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves.

[15] Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you."

[16] Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it."

[17] And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

[18] So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

[19] He called the name of that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

[20] Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,

[21] so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God,

[22] and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee."

C. The First Appearance of God to Jacob

Re-read Gen. 27:20 and 28:3. By what names does Jacob know God at this point in his life?

Jacob knows God as "the Lord your God," the Lord Isaac's God. God has revealed Himself to Abraham and to Isaac, and Jacob knows Him (and has been blessed by Him) only through his father - God has not revealed Himself personally yet to Jacob.

By what name does God identify Himself in Jacob’s dream [vs. 13]? What does this name reveal to Jacob about who God is?

God revealed Himself to Jacob as "**the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.**" This says to Jacob far more than that He is great and powerful: it says that He is a personal God, a God who has sought out men to bless them and who has promised to make of Abraham (through his son Isaac and now through Jacob) a great nation and a source of blessing to the world.

It is not just Isaac who has blessed Jacob; that blessing came through Isaac from God Himself.

D. Jacob’s Ladder - Stairway to Heaven

The ladder described here is an ascending stairway connecting heaven to earth, not a ladder with rungs - hence the angels ascending and descending the steps. God himself was at the top of the ladder and spoke to Jacob in his dream, a sign that God would now be Jacob's God.

What New Testament statement by Jesus recalls this event? (Read John 1:50-51).

In John 1, the angels ascending and descending on Jesus, the Son of Man, designate Jesus as God's chosen one from whom blessing and redemption would come to the world. They recall the story of Jacob's dream, in which he is confirmed as God's chosen one - the first Israelite and mere shadow of the true Israelite [Jesus] who was to come.

Jacob is running away from his brother and from the Promised Land. But God meets him where he is, and gives Jacob what he needs to take the next step. How does God extend His promise to cover Jacob's immediate future?

God reiterated to Jacob elements of the promise he'd made to Abraham: descendants, land, and worldwide blessing. To that he added a promise to be with Jacob and watch over him wherever he should go; to bring him back to Canaan; and that He would never leave him until He had done what He promised.

Jacob needs to be reassured that by leaving the land of promise, he is not leaving God's presence. God will be with him wherever he goes, until He accomplishes what He has promised. God was clearly with Jacob in a way that he was not with other people at that time.

Yet His intention was to be with all His children and He became so gloriously when He sent His son Jesus, called "Emmanuel (which means, 'God with us')." (Matt. 1:23).

What does Jacob vow in return if God keeps His promise?

If God will be with him and watch over him and bring him safely home, Jacob vows that the LORD will be his God; the stone he set up at Bethel will be God's house; and he will give God a tenth (by which he would acknowledge the LORD as his God and King).

Jacob in Haran: Growth and Testing

I. INTRODUCTION

Jacob has been called by God to father His people. He has received both birthright and blessing from Isaac, and the blessing of Abraham has been passed down to him.

But Jacob to this point knows God only as the Lord, God of his father Isaac and of his father Abraham. What will it take to make the Lord his God, and to make him Israel, father of God's people?

For Abraham the test was of his faith in God's word: did he truly believe God would do as He'd promised, and would he thoroughly trust God and act accordingly, even though circumstances were against him?

Isaac was tested in his self-sacrificing obedience - would the promised son willingly give up his life? And would he obey God to the point of totally relying on His provision?

Jacob's testing occurs in the crucible of life. Will his nature and desire to do things his own way prevail, or will he learn to give God control? This week's lesson covers the next 20 years of Jacob's life, which he spends away from his father in Haran. It is a time of struggle, of constant striving against others to attain what he wants.

Jacob is used to getting things on his own terms and by his own power. In Haran he comes up against others as wily as he is, and equally determined to come out on top. But while God does not make himself heard until it is time for Jacob to depart, His hand is ever present, guiding circumstances and turning evil to meet His good purpose and preparing Jacob to return to his homeland.

II. JACOB MARRIES RACHAEL

Read: Genesis 29:1-30

This section tells about Jacob’s sojourn away from the Promised Land, in the house of Laban, who stands here for continuity with Abraham’s forebears [cf. chap. 24]. Here Jacob will marry, have children, and prosper; and finally return, as Abraham did, from Haran to settle in the land of Canaan.

Jacob’s marriage has special importance because from it will come the twelve tribes of Israel.

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

[2] As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and lo, 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,

[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 upon the mouth of the well.

[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 the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him."

[6] He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!"

[7] He said, "Behold, it is still high day, 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."

[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 Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother.

[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 tidings of 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,

[14] and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.

[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 older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.

[17] Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful and lovely.

[18] Jacob loved Rachel; and 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.

[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 men of the place, and made a feast.

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

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

[25] And 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?"

[26] Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the first-born.

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

[28] Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to 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, and served Laban for another seven years.

A. The Deceiver Deceived

In a scene reminiscent of that in which Abraham's servant finds Rebekah for Isaac, the first people Jacob meets on arriving in "the land of the eastern peoples" are from Haran. Not only do they know Laban, from whose house Jacob is to choose a wife, they are able to point out to him Rachel, who at that moment is arriving with her sheep.

Rachel seems as tailor-made for Jacob as Eve was for Adam, and he falls in love with her immediately. When you consider the many people Jacob might have met before those from Laban's household, and even that the less lovely (at least to Jacob!) Leah might have been approaching at that time, it is hard not to see God's hand bringing them together.

After Jacob works seven years for Laban to earn Rachel as his bride, he is rewarded with the older yet still unmarried Leah instead.

In what way is Laban's trick a kind of "poetic justice?"

Jacob gets a dose of his own medicine from the wily Laban: the one who stole the benefits of the first-born by pretending to be the first-born now gets the first-born, who pretended to be the younger!

Just as Rebekah substituted her younger son for the older to achieve her goal, her brother Laban substitutes his older daughter for the younger. The deceiver has himself now been deceived.

Jacob`s Children

Jacob’s love for Rachael is such that Leah feels inferior in her husband’s eyes. But God comes to the help of the weaker. God, "the father of compassion and the God of all comfort, (2 Cor. 1:3)" comforts the unloved Leah by giving her children. Thus Leah wins favour with Jacob.

What do the names Leah gives her first three sons reveal about her heart cry? How has her attitude changed by the time the fourth is born, as evidenced in the name she gives him?

Note: Leah was not hated or despised, but “less favoured and loved.” See verse 29.

Read: Genesis 29:31-30:24

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

[32] And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben; for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon 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 called his name 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 his name was called Levi.

[35] And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD"; therefore she called his name Judah; then she ceased bearing.

Gen.30

[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'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?"

[3] Then she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees, and even I 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 called his name 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 called his name Naph'tali.

[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 called his name 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 called his name Asher.

[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, "Give me, I pray, 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.

[17] And God hearkened to 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 called his name Is'sachar.

[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 honor me, because I have borne him six sons"; so she called his name Zeb'ulun.

[21] Afterwards she bore a daughter, and called her name Dinah.

[22] Then God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her and opened her womb.

[23] She conceived and bore a son, and said, "God has taken away my reproach";

[24] and she called his name Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son!"

Despite God's comfort and the gift of children, Leah longs to be loved by Jacob. "See, a son" she names Reuben, adding "surely my husband will love me now." Simeon, the second son, is evidence to Leah that God has heard she is unloved (Simeon means "one who hears").

When the third boy is born, "now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons," Leah hopes, naming him Levi or "attached."

B. Judah

Jacob still prefers Rachel, though she remains childless. The names are a poignant cry for her husband's love. Leah finally turns her heart from longing after her husband and fixes it on God. Her fourth son is named Judah, "praise" - for "this time I will praise the Lord."

It is fitting that the son born when Leah learns to accept God's love, the son Leah does not use to try to buy Jacob's love, but who instead causes her to lift her voice in praise to God, should become the father of the tribe from which King David and ultimately the Messiah, Jesus Christ, would come

C. Levi

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 his name was called Levi.

Levi is the third son of Leah and Jacob.

- The Levites one day would take the place of the first-born from all the tribes and be separated to God to serve alongside the priests in the Temple.

In spite of being unloved and unwanted, Leah bore six of Jacob's sons along with one daughter. Read the account of the births of Jacob's children in Gen. 30:1-24, paying careful attention to the way they are named.

D. Competition between Rachael and Leah

The first half of Genesis 30 reads like a competition between Rachel and Leah (and their handmaids – Bilhah and Zilpah!) for favour and status. The atmosphere is tense, competitive, full of selfish striving, all revealed in the names they give their sons. Even Leah seems to lose the equanimity she gained with the birth of Judah, and joins in the race.

But however selfish their efforts were, the end result was right in line with God's plan: as Boaz was to say later in Ruth 4:11, "together (Rachel and Leah) built up the house of Israel."

E. Children are a Gift from God

It is not in Jacob's power to give life, even to his beloved Rachel. Only God, the author of all life, sustains it and creates new life. God opens and closes the women's wombs, causing them conceive, or not, according to His plan.

Children are a gift from God. Even in Old Testament times, people understood that children are endowments of the Creator according to His will. Married couples hope to be blessed with children, but they are not entitled to a child, as if something is owed to them by God. Children are a privilege.

We have already seen how Rachel's and Leah's longings and rivalry work to achieve God's goal of twelve sons to head the future 12 tribes of Israel.

The twelfth son, Benjamin, will be born to Rachel after the family leaves Haran.

God also uses Jacob's persistence and passion and his rivalry with the equally scheming and self-seeking Laban to gain for Jacob prosperity and the two wives and two handmaids he will need to found the new nation.

F. Polygamy

When Rachael found that she could bear no children, she gave her maid, Bilhah, to Jacob to bear sons, just as Sarah had done previously with Abraham and Hagar. Later, Leah would do the same with her maid, Zilpah. So here we have Jacob practicing polygamy.

- Polygamy in the Bible almost always leads to misery.

Jacob never loved Leah the way he loved Rachael, and Leah knew it. But Rachael was barren, whereas Leah easily conceived and bore four sons.

Rachael was miserable because she had no sons. Leah was miserable because Jacob obviously loved Rachael more.

- Later law forbade an Israelite to marry sisters [Lev 18:18]

Polygamy presents an offense against the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage. From the beginning God created marriage to be that state of faithful conjugal love in which the family could grow and prosper.

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” [Gen. 2:24]

III. JACOB PROSPERS

Read: Genesis 30:25-43

[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 the service which 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 it."

[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?"

[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."

[35] But that day Laban removed the he-goats that were striped and spotted, and all the she-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; and Jacob fed the rest of Laban's flock.

[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 which he had peeled in front of the flocks in the runnels, that is, the watering troughs, 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 brought forth striped, speckled, and spotted.

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

[41] Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding Jacob laid the rods in the

runnels 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.

[43] Thus the man grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, maidservants and menservants, and camels and asses.

Laban learns through divination that God has blessed him because of Jacob, and he wants that blessing to continue.

(Note: divination, which reflects a world view in which supernatural powers other than God are in control, was later forbidden to Israel. See Lev.19:26, 31.)

Laban evidently has cheated Jacob out of his due many times, starting with his substitution of Leah for Rachel. He hopes to lure Jacob to stay longer by allowing him to name his wages.

Jacob proposed that he tend Laban's flocks in return for all the speckled, spotted sheep and goats and dark coloured lambs, while Laban would keep the solid-coloured animals.

Even though Laban secretly removed the livestock that should have gone to Jacob, Jacob was able over the period of six years (see Gen. 31:41) to breed out strong, mottled livestock for himself. In this way, Jacob became "exceedingly prosperous (vs. 43), turning Laban's prosperity to his own profit.

Reflection

The story of Rachel and Leah can be painful to read. How often have you identified with the anguish of the unloved and unlovely Leah? Notice how God has compassion on the neglected one and makes her fruitful.

Not only does He make her mother to six of the 12 tribes of Israel, she is mother of the first-born; of the Levites; and of the ancestor of Christ himself. Follow Leah's example at the time of Judah's birth, when she is able to fix her heart on

God and praise Him. God is able to bring great beauty out of the pain and ashes of our lives.

The story of Jacob and Rachel's early family life is compelling in its honest portrayal of human frailty. That God built His family out of them not only in spite of but by using their shortcomings is a tribute to the awesome power and love of God. It also shows us the way God works with ordinary human beings to accomplish His purposes.

Are you ever frustrated by your own failures and shortcomings as you work to follow Christ and do good?

Take comfort in the example of this Patriarch, who God made the father of Israel. Give what you have and what you are to God, whatever shape you are in, and ask Him to use you and mold you as He wills.