

Jacob Builds a Family and a Flock (Genesis 29:1-31:13)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Genesis

I. Background, from Prior Lessons (Jacob and Esau)

- a. Jacob tricks his father into giving him the blessing, instead of giving it to Esau, his older twin brother. (**Genesis 27:18-40**)
- b. Esau is furious about his brother's treachery, plans to kill Jacob after his father dies. Jacob's mother wants to send Jacob to be with her brother Laban, to be safe until after Esau's anger subsides. She has Isaac send Jacob to Haran, in Mesopotamia, to find a wife from among Laban's daughters. (**Genesis 27:41-28:5**)
- c. On the way to Haran, Jacob stops in Bethel, puts his head on a rock and goes to sleep. In a dream, he sees a ladder or stairway to heaven, with angels of God ascending and descending on it. The Lord promises that Jacob will have many descendants: "Your seed shall be as the dust of the earth...". The Lord also promises to protect Jacob on his trip, and to bring him back to that place. (**Genesis 28:10-22**)

II. Jacob Meets Rachel and Her Father, Laban (Read **Genesis 29:1-21**)

- a. Elements of the story
 - i. Jacob obeys his father's instruction and goes to Haran.
 - ii. At a well he meets shepherds, and asks them if they know Laban.
 - iii. The shepherds point out Laban's daughter, Rachel, who is approaching with her father's sheep.
 - iv. When Jacob sees Rachel, he is overcome with emotion. He weeps and explains who he is, that he is a relative.
 - v. Rachel runs to tell her father, Laban, who welcomes Jacob (his sister's son); Jacob stays with them for a month.
 - vi. Laban has two daughters (**Genesis 29:16-17**)
 1. Leah the older daughter. Her eyes were "delicate" (sometimes translated "tender", "weak" or even "sickly").
 2. In contrast, it says that Rachel, the younger daughter "was beautiful in form and appearance".

- vii. Jacob loves Rachel and offers to serve Laban for seven years to get her hand in marriage. Laban agrees to the proposal.
- viii. A great love story: "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed only a few days to him because of the love he had for her." (Genesis 29:20)
- ix. At the end of the seven years, Jacob asks to take Rachel for his wife.

III. The Wedding, and a Big Surprise

a. Read Genesis 29:22-25

i. Elements of the story

1. Laban holds a great wedding feast to mark the big event.
2. On the wedding night, he switches the daughters. Laban sends in Leah, the older daughter, instead of Rachel, the younger daughter.
3. Leah cooperates with her father's scheme; her father gives her one of his maids, Zilpah.
4. In the morning, after the wedding has been consummated, Jacob wakes up and, "Behold, it was Leah!"

ii. **Question:** Could something like this really happen, marrying someone without seeing who the person is?

1. When we lived for a time in Albania, a country with a very old culture and different marriage traditions, I once asked a man a little older than I was, "When did you first meet your wife?" He replied, "After the wedding". I knew they had arranged marriages in the past in Albania, and assumed he meant he met her at the wedding, right before they pledged to be married. However, he really *did* mean *after* the wedding. The bride was covered so completely during the wedding ceremony, that the groom did not get to see his bride until *after* the wedding commitment was made. That certainly amounts to a surprise wedding gift, one that you cannot return!
2. Also keep in mind that alcohol is often associated with wedding feasts, sometimes involving multiple rounds of toasts, and many drinks.
3. Bottom line: If Laban wanted to deceive Jacob regarding the bride, certainly there are ways for him to have accomplished that.

- iii. Something to consider if you are feeling sympathetic for Jacob.
1. Recall that seven years earlier, Jacob had conspired with his mother to deceive Isaac. Jacob switched the two brothers, and at the time, it appeared that he succeeded in 'getting away with it' (he obtained the desired blessing).
 2. Now, seven years later, he runs into someone even more deceptive than he is; truly an Olympic, world-class deceiver: his uncle Laban. While Jacob had switched the two brothers, Laban switched the two sisters! And of all possible times to do this, he chooses to do it on Jacob's wedding night, after seven years waiting for the 'big event'.
 3. The father/daughter deceitful duo of Laban and Leah, who conspired to deceive Jacob, were *even worse* than the mother/son pair of Rebekah and Jacob, who conspired to deceive Isaac.
 4. God has a great sense of timing. Jacob didn't 'get away' with anything when he deceived his father and defrauded his brother. The Lord waited seven years for the perfect moment to bring about exquisite justice, and 'drop the piano' of discipline on the head of Jacob at this most vulnerable moment. Jacob would learn a lesson about deceit administered at the hands of a true master deceiver; a lesson that Jacob would never forget!
 5. Do you ever wonder why God apparently allows people to get away with things that are wrong or unjust?
 - a. Perhaps we can learn something about the Lord from this story. Justice comes, but often it does not come until later. God operates on a different timeline than we generally do (often a lot slower, waiting for the right time, right circumstances, etc.).
 - b. Many asked the Lord this question, in the Old Testament:
 - i. Job wrestles with this question, "*Why do the wicked live and become old, Yes, become mighty in power?*" (**Job 21:7**, NKJV). He concludes later in **chapter 21** that their day is coming; the Lord will indeed put out the lamp of the ungodly and bring destruction upon them in the future.

- ii. David asks, “*Lord, how long will the wicked, How long will the wicked triumph?*” (**Psalm 94:3**, NKJV)
 - iii. Jeremiah wonders, “*Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?*” (**Jeremiah 12:1**, NKJV)
- c. Many times we see the Lord finally bringing judgment on the wicked. He does it at just the right time, in just the right way; even if it looks like the wicked are about to ‘get away with it’. For example:
- i. In **Daniel 4**, King Nebuchadnezzar is warned to repent of his arrogance. He continues his wicked ways for 12 months until the day when he is walking around the palace and says, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for a royal dwelling by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?” (**Daniel 4:30**, NKJV) While the words are still in his mouth, the Lord intervenes and humbles the king with madness (driven from men, eating grass like an ox, hair and nails growing wild) until he repents.
 - ii. In **Daniel 5**, Belshazzar, king of Babylon makes a feast and brings in the gold and silver vessels that had been taken from the temple in Jerusalem. As they are drinking and praising the gods of gold, silver, stones, etc., the hand appears writing on the wall. That very night the king is killed and his kingdom is overthrown.
 - iii. Haman, a high official in the Persian court, plotted against the Jews and erected gallows to hang Mordecai, a close relative of Esther. However, Haman is hanged on those very gallows, in **Esther 7**.
- d. Can you think of someone who has been acting wickedly, toward you or others, who seems to be getting away with it with no consequences, and is prospering? Do you struggle that? Perhaps even religious leaders who sinned against you or others, without facing any consequences? God will deal with them at the right time, in the right way. It took seven years to set up Jacob for his big day. It may even come

on the Day of Judgment, when Jesus says many will be unpleasantly shocked. However, God will bring justice, in his own time (not ours). That is what the Lord does.

- b. Jacob gets Rachel, but must work seven more years (Read **Genesis 29:26-30**)
 - i. Laban makes the excuse that local custom is to marry off the older daughter first. *Do you think perhaps he could have managed to mention that to Jacob beforehand?*
 - ii. Laban offers to give Rachel away seven days later, if Jacob will agree to serve Laban *an additional seven years.*

IV. **Jacob Has First 11 Sons, and One Daughter** (Summary of **Genesis 29:31-30:24**)

- a. Jacob loves Rachel, but hates Leah (**Genesis 29:30-33**).
 - i. Are you feeling sorry for poor Leah, the less attractive sister?
 - ii. Keep in mind that she was involved in tricking Jacob into marrying her through deception, and forcing him to work an extra seven years hard labor for her father!
- b. The battle of the wives, to produce offspring
 - i. At the start, Rachel is barren but Leah has four boys in a row.
 - 1. **Reuben**, the firstborn
 - a. Leah says, "The Lord has surely looked on my humiliation. Now therefore my husband will love me." (**Genesis 29:32**)
 - 2. **Simeon**, the second son
 - 3. **Levi**, the third son
 - a. She says, "Because the Lord heard I was hated, He has therefore given me this son also." (**Genesis 29:34**)
 - b. Levi is the forefather of Moses, Aaron and all the priests and Levites.
 - 4. **Judah**, the fourth son
 - a. Judah is the forefather of David, Solomon, all the kings of Judah. Later it was prophesied that the Messiah, the Christ, would come from this line.
 - b. The gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, showing that He was descended from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah. (**Matthew 1:2**)

- ii. Rachel sees that she is not conceiving, and blames her husband, Jacob. She tells him, "Give me children, or else I die." (**Genesis 30:1**). Jacob understandably gets angry with her, and responds, "Am I in the place of God?" (**Genesis 30:2**). Then Rachel gives her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob. Bilhah bears two sons.
 - 1. **Dan**, and
 - 2. **Naphtali**
 - a. Note that this name is familiar from the New Testament. The region where Jesus grew up and had much of his ministry, in Galilee (northern Israel, west of the Sea of Galilee) was in the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali... Galilee of the Gentiles" as prophesied in **Isaiah 9:1-2** and recounted in **Matthew 4:12-16**.
- iii. Then Leah, noticing that she has stopped bearing children, gives her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob. Zilpah has two sons.
 - 1. **Gad**, and
 - 2. **Asher**
- iv. Leah "hires" Jacob from Rachel for one night, for her son's mandrakes. Leah conceives a fifth son; then has her sixth (and final) son after that:
 - 1. **Issachar**, Leah's fifth son, and
 - 2. **Zebulun**, Leah's sixth son.
 - 3. Then Leah has a daughter, **Dinah**
- v. Finally, "then the Lord remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb". She conceived and brought forth her first child:
 - 1. **Joseph**, the first of Rachel's two sons.
 - a. He is major figure in **Genesis 37-50**; also mentioned prominently in Stephen's speech in **Acts 7**.
 - b. Joseph was the last of Jacob's sons born in Haran. Jacob would have one final son, **Benjamin**, would be born to Rachel as the family was moving back to Canaan.
- vi. A simple overview of the 12 sons of Jacob:
 - 1. Leah bore six sons, including Levi and Judah.
 - 2. Each of the (three) other women bore two sons.
 - 3. Joseph and Benjamin were born last, both from Rachel.

V. Jacob Builds His Own Flock

- a. Jacob proposes a way to get paid for his work, to build his own flock. (Read **Genesis 30:25-33**)
 - i. Elements of the story:
 1. Jacob now has four wives, eleven sons and a daughter.
 2. He has fulfilled his 14 years of working for Laban to get his two daughters, but is still tending Laban's sheep.
 3. Jacob now asks Laban's permission to return to his homeland in Canaan.
 4. Laban's livestock have multiplied under Jacob's care. When Jacob arrived, Laban did not have much; but he became very wealthy. Jacob saw this as the Lord blessing Laban through Jacob's service.
 5. Laban instead is now willing to pay Jacob, and he asks Jacob to name his wages.
 6. Jacob comes up with an unusual plan for getting paid.
 - a. Jacob will take all the grey sheep, and the spotted and speckled goats from among the flock, now.
 - b. He would continue to do this going forward; if Laban found any other kinds of sheep or goats in Jacob's flock, he could consider them stolen.
 - b. Laban deceives Jacob *again!* (Read **Genesis 30:34-36**)
 - i. Laban removes all the speckled and spotted goats, and the grey sheep (which were supposed to go to Jacob!), and gives them to his own sons.
 - ii. He leaves Jacob to tend all the rest of his flock.
 - iii. Laban puts three days journey between the two groups.
 - iv. Laban has cheated Jacob:
 1. Not only did Laban remove the ones promised to Jacob, but
 2. The ones removed were the ones that would breed similar offspring, so future revenue was cut off as well!
 - c. Jacob prevails anyway, using an unusual approach (read **Genesis 30:37-43**)

- i. He takes branches, peels the bark in strips and puts them into the watering troughs.
 - ii. When the flocks came to drink, they mated by the rods, and their offspring came out speckled, spotted, grey.
 - iii. Somehow, this strategy worked. Jacob built up a large flock from among Laban's sheep, and became a wealthy man.
 - iv. **Question:** What is this? This seems to violate what we know today about genetics. Is this story the product of a superstitious, pre-scientific age? Does this story harken back to a time when people thought looking at a striped stick when an animal was mating could determine the outcome of its offspring's appearance? (Hold that thought until later.)
- d. There is more to this sheep mating story (read **Genesis 31:1-13**)
- i. Laban's sons, and Laban, become upset upon seeing how wealthy Jacob is becoming, through this sheep mating arrangement.
 - ii. The Lord tells Jacob that it's time to go back home to Canaan now; Jacob shares that with Leah and Rachel.
 - iii. Jacob recounts that Laban had *changed his wages 10 times* regarding what type of sheep and goats he would receive (speckled, spotted, white, grey, etc.). Laban keeps changing the terms of the deal (which color/pattern from among the sheep and goats Jacob would get). The Angel of the Lord comes to Jacob in a dream and explains that the Lord was protecting Jacob and providing the right colored offspring from among the sheep and goats. The result of this unusual breeding strategy was due to a supernatural act from the Lord to prosper Jacob, despite Laban's efforts to cheat his son-in-law.

VI. Early Christian Writers Saw More in This Story

- a. Although early Christian writers are not writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as were the apostles and other writers of the New Testament, they can provide insights into the Scriptures that are worth considering.
- b. Their insights into the significance of this story startled me when I first read them. I share them with you for your consideration as well, whether you come to agree with them or not; at least consider what they have to say.
- c. From Irenaeus (c. 130–200 AD, overseer of the church in Lyons, in modern-day France), in *Against Heresies*: "In a foreign country were the twelve tribes born, the race of Israel, inasmuch as Christ was also, in a strange country, to generate the twelve-pillared foundation of the Church. Various colored sheep were allotted to this Jacob as his wages; and the wages of Christ are human

beings, who from various and diverse nations come together into one cohort of faith, there was every necessity that Jacob should beget sons from the two sisters, even as Christ did from the two laws of one and the same Father; and in like manner also from the handmaids, indicating that Christ should raise up sons of God, both from freemen and from slaves after the flesh, bestowing upon all, in the same manner, the gift of the Spirit, who vivifies us (*gives us life – CP*). But he (Jacob) did all things for the sake of the younger, she who had the handsome eyes, Rachel, who prefigured the Church, for which Christ endured patiently; who at that time, indeed, by means of His patriarchs and prophets, was prefiguring and declaring beforehand future things, fulfilling His part by anticipation in the dispensations of God, and accustoming His inheritance to obey God, and to pass through the world as in a state of pilgrimage, to follow His word, and to indicate beforehand things to come. For with God there is nothing without purpose or due signification. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book 4, Chapter 21; in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 493)

- d. From Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD, from Samaria), in his *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*:
 - i. “For in the marriages of Jacob I shall mention what dispensation and prophecy were accomplished, in order that you may thereby know that your teachers (*here Justin is referring to the Jewish teachers - CP*) never looked at the divine motive which prompted each act, but only at the groveling and corrupting passions. Attend therefore to what I say. The marriages of Jacob were types of that which Christ was about to accomplish. For it was not lawful for Jacob to marry two sisters at once. And he serves Laban for [one of] the daughters; and being deceived in [the obtaining of] the younger, he again served seven years. Now Leah is your people and synagogue (*foreshadowing the Jews – CP*); but Rachel is our Church. And for these, and for the servants in both, Christ even now serves... Jacob served Laban for speckled and many-spotted sheep; and Christ served, even to the slavery of the cross, for the various and many-formed races of mankind, acquiring them by the blood and mystery of the cross.” (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 134; in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 267)
 - ii. Based on what Justin is saying here to his Jewish friend Trypho (similar to what Irenaeus says), let’s take another look at the story we have been reading. If Justin is correct, the story is not only true, but also contains an important allegorical significance. It contains a prophecy that tells the story of the Christ and the Church, well over 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus. Consider:
 1. The two sisters foreshadow the Jews and the Christians (the church)

- a. Leah, the older sister, represents the Jews
 - b. Rachel, the younger sister, represents the Church
 - c. Jacob served for both, as Jesus did.
 - d. Consider that Paul says the two *brothers* represented the Jews and Christians, with the older one representing the Jews, in **Galatians 4:21-31** (comparing Ishmael and Isaac). Paul also discusses the older son vs. the younger son foreshadowing Ishmael vs. Isaac and Jacob vs. Esau, in **Romans 9:6-24**. Consequently, the older/younger daughter parallel here (to Jews and Christians) seen by early Christian writers also strikes me as plausible.
 - e. Jacob's greatest love and desire was for the younger sister; Jesus' greatest love and desire was for the Church, his desired bride. (**2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5:25-33, Revelation 19:7-8**)
2. Who might Laban represent?
- a. Since Laban is the great deceiver, following the allegory here, it follows that he would represent Satan.
 - b. Jesus says regarding Satan, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it." (**John 8:44**, NKJV)
 - c. Laban is the master deceiver, the enslaver, the cunning champion of the bait-and-switch, who does not want to give up control over his kingdom. He deceives us into thinking that he is the one who will make us happy in life, dangling the temptation of illicit pleasures before us. However, his way of sin leads to emptiness, destruction and regret.
3. Jacob foreshadows Jesus.
- a. He is the good shepherd.
 - b. He served for both the Jews and the Church.
 - c. Despite Satan's treachery, He is building up a mighty flock, plundering from among Satan's own flock.

- d. His flock is made up of some of all kinds. Like the multi-colored flock assembled by Jacob, His flock will have some of all types of people in it, of all colors, from among all tribes and nations.
4. The flock is built through the wood and the water (the peeled wood branches and the watering troughs). In many places, early Christian writers noted this wood + water combination and saw it as foreshadowing the cross and baptism, through which we will be saved. (**1 Corinthians 1:18, Mark 16:15-16, 1 Peter 3:20-21**)
- e. Justin continues from the previous quote, “Leah was weak-eyed; for the eyes of your souls (*referring to the Jews – CP*) are excessively weak. Rachel stole the gods of Laban, and has hid them to this day; and we have lost our paternal and material gods. Jacob was hated for all time by his brother; and we now, and our Lord Himself, are hated by you and by all men, though we are brothers by nature. Jacob was called Israel; and Israel has been demonstrated to be the Christ, who is, and is called, Jesus.”
 - f. Lessons for us from this:
 - i. I will never read this story the same, again.
 - ii. Look deeper when you read the Scriptures!
 - iii. There are valuable insights that can be had from the early Christians.
 - iv. Laban (Satan) is a major player in the story. Let us see him for what he is: the master deceiver, the liar and cheat, and master of the bait-and-switch. We must recognize Satan as a major player in our own real-life drama: the spiritual battle we are in the midst of today.
 - v. Through suffering and submission, and righteousness, Jesus will triumph no matter what Satan throws at him. The Lord will build the flock. And it will have some of all types of people, from all colors, in it.
 - vi. Jesus always loved the Church, his desired bride.
 - vii. We can be saved through the good shepherd, and become a part of the flock he is building from out of Satan’s flock, through the mystery of the water and the wood.