

Genesis, Part 29

We last left our story with Jacob's marriage to the sisters Leah and Rachel, as a result of a trick by their father Laban. Jacob thought he was paying the bride-price of seven years of service to Laban to marry Rachel, but Laban substituted the older daughter Leah on their wedding night. The trickery was discovered the morning after, and when confronted, Laban suggested that Jacob should have understood he must marry the elder daughter first. He proposed another seven years to marry the younger daughter Rachel.

With two women and one favored over the other by Jacob, that introduced much jealousy and strife into this young family. Jacob favored Rachel, but as we shall shortly see, Rachel was barren for some seven years after they married—the seven years it took for Jacob to complete the payment of her bride-price, seven years of service to Laban. Meanwhile, during those seven years, Leah is pumping out babies every year.

Genesis 30:1 When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. 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?"

Rachel is barren while she watches her sister deliver one child after another. As previously noted, being barren in this culture and time was about the worst thing that could happen to a woman. The fact of her inability to conceive is exacerbated by the fact that her sister is having children regularly.

Rachel complains to her husband, as if he is the problem, "Give me children, or I shall die!" But since his other wife is having no problem conceiving, it cannot be Jacob's fault. He replies that he is not God, and the text suggests that only God can open her womb to conceive and deliver. So she comes up with a "brilliant" plan, one that has been used before in our story.

Gen 30:3 Then she said, “Here is my servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her.” ⁴ So she gave him her servant 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 servant 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 Naphtali.

Like Sarah before her, Rachel offers her servant Bilhah to her husband so that she might have a child through her. Rachel says she could bear children “for me,” literally, “on my knees.” Apparently, Rachel wanted to participate in the process of the birth of the children to her slave girl. Rachel hoped that through Bilhah she could “build a family.” This is the same expression used earlier by Sarah (cf. Gn 16:2).

Jacob acquiesced, and the plan succeeded. In rapid succession, two sons were born to Bilhah. Rachel assumed the role of mother and gave them appropriate names. The first was named Dan, “he has vindicated,” because she viewed this birth as divine vindication of her scheme. Bilhah’s second son was named Naphtali, “my struggle.” Rachel thought that through her scheme she had won in her struggle with Leah (30:3–8).

Gen 30:9 When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. ¹⁰ Then Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹ And Leah said, “Good fortune has come!” so she called his name Gad. ¹² Leah’s servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. ¹³ And Leah said, “Happy am I! For women have called me happy.” So she called his name Asher.

Meanwhile, Leah has stopped producing and, in her effort to stay ahead of her sister in “baby count,” she offers her handmaiden Zilpah to her husband, and she delivers a son. Another quickly follows. The score is Leah 6 and Rachel 2.

Gen 30:14 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 in exchange for your son's mandrakes."

We are moving right along in the timeline. Reuben, Leah's firstborn is old enough to be collecting Mandrakes in the fields. Rachel has not yet personally had her firstborn child, which will be Joseph. That comes at the seventh year of Jacob's payment-in-full of the bride-price for Rachel, the seven years of service to her father Laban. So we are somewhere around that seventh year and Reuben must be around six years old. He brings his mother Mandrakes.

Mandrakes were famed in ancient times for increasing sexual desire and enhancing fertility. Rachel is desperate to have her own child so she bargains for some of Reuben's Mandrakes. Leah's reply is interesting, as it tells of her pain concerning Jacob's obvious love for Rachel over her. As previously mentioned, this statement suggests that Leah was not a party to the bride swap by her father, and she thought she was the sister that Jacob wanted to marry only to discover that was not the case. She accuses her younger sister of having taken away her husband.

Rachel gets some Mandrakes in exchange for Leah getting dibs on Jacob's "attention" that night. The irony is Rachel got the Mandrakes but Leah got the baby.

Gen 30:16 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 listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son.¹⁸ Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband." So she called his name Issachar.¹⁹ And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son.²⁰ Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my

husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons.” So she called his name Zebulun. ²¹ Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah.

Leah had two sons and a daughter. The score is now Leah's 9 to Rachel's 2, none of which are her own children.

It is difficult to keep track of the timeline. According to the number of children accounted to Leah and her handmaiden Zilpah, we are dealing with at least 10 years, but according to the text, Rachel has not yet had her first child Joseph who comes in the seventh year of Jacob's service to Laban. There are two possibilities to explain this disconnect: Either the timeline for the birth of Leah's children including those by her handmaiden is indeed more than seven years and merely stated in its entirety to maintain the continuity of the narrative, or the other possibility is there was some overlap of Leah's deliveries, barrenness, and return to pregnancies with Zilpah's deliveries. Another possibility is the women got pregnant immediately after delivering a previous child. Unlikely, but if so, all the births could fit in a six-year window.

Gen 30:22 Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened 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!”

Rachel finally has a child of her own and Joseph comes in the seventh year of Jacob's payment of the bride-price for Rachel, which makes sense. God opens her womb, which we discussed in some detail last session.

We now have 11 sons who will be the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel. The 12th is yet to come, Benjamin, Rachel's second son. We will see his birth in Chapter 35. All Israelites could thus look back and see their ancestry in Jacob and the conflict of the women. To Israel, these narratives were more than interesting little stories. The rivalry that appears here explains much of the tribal rivalry that followed. But Genesis is clear: God chose the despised mother, Leah, and exalted her to be the first mother. The kingly tribe of Judah and the priestly tribe of Levi trace back to her, despite Jacob's love for Rachel and her son Joseph.

Jacob's Prosperity

Rachel has a son Joseph in the seventh and last year of Jacob's obligation to Laban. We know this is the seventh year because he asks his father-in-law to give him what he has coming so he can leave. This would only be possible after the seventh year and his obligation was paid.

Gen 30:25 As soon as 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, that I may go, for you know the service that I have given you."

Jacob stresses the fact of the 14 years of service he has rendered to Laban. He has paid his debt in full.

Gen 30:27 But Laban said to him, "If I have found favor in your sight, 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 livestock has 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?"

Laban cloaked his refusal in pious terms, claiming he could not afford to let Jacob go, as he enjoyed so much blessing. Laban recognizes that he has been blessed by his association with Jacob and wants him to stay. Though interested in leaving, Jacob is basically broke. He owns no land and no livestock but has four women and a bunch of kids to support.

Gen 30:31 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 pasture 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 they 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."

Jacob did not ask for fixed wages. He suggested that the speckled, spotted, or dark-colored sheep and goats be culled from Laban's livestock. Whatever speckled and spotted sheep and goats born and present after a period of Jacob tending Laban's flocks would be his. Sheep in that region were usually white, and goats were usually solid dark color. Realizing this, Laban quickly agreed to the terms of his son-in-law thinking that Jacob had made a terrible mistake.

Laban culled from the flock the marked animals and removed them three days journey from his own livestock. Laban did not want to take any chances that they would mingle with his stock and contaminate them (30:31–36).

Gen 30:34 Laban said, "Good! Let it be as you have said."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 the charge of his sons.³⁶ And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock.

The text initially seems to suggest that Jacob is asking for all the striped and spotted sheep and goats from Laban's flocks immediately and he will then leave. But the deal seems to be that Laban removes those striped and spotted animals from the flock, Jacob will remain and tend his flocks, and all those that are spotted or striped from then forward, for some here unspecified period, will be his to take with him. That time will turn out to be six years. Jacob will have served a total of 20 years (v. 41).

Laban separates the oddly marked sheep and goats from his flock and sends them off three days journey away under the care of his sons. This leaves only the "perfect" sheep and goats in his flock. Laban expects they will generally reproduce after their own kind and not produce many multi-colored sheep and goats. He thinks he has outsmarted Jacob.

Gen 30:37 Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plane trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks.³⁸ He set the sticks 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 sticks 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. 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 would lay the sticks in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the sticks, ⁴² but for the feebler of the flock he would not lay them there. So the feebler would be Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. ⁴³ Thus the man increased greatly and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

Jacob knew of a plan by which he could get solid-colored animals to produce spotted or striped offspring. He did three things. First, he removed bark from branches in such a way as to produce a striped effect. These branches were then placed in the water troughs when the flocks were in mating season. Seeing the striped branches triggered some presently unknown mechanism that caused the animals to produce striped or spotted young. One source claims that this is a well-known technique among stock breeders and has been used with varying results. Others regard this as pure superstition on Jacob's part.

Second, Jacob separated spotted animals from their mothers as soon as possible and created a flock of his own of only these lambs and goats which increased the likelihood that more spotted ones would be born. The unspotted animals were left to breed before the sticks, and some produced spotted animals which Jacob separated into his own flock.

Third, Jacob used the above techniques only with the robust animals, thus ensuring that he would have quality as well as quantity in his flocks.

Thus did Jacob build his wealth. He came to possess large flocks and many servants as well as other livestock. He observed the terms of his agreement with Laban to the letter, but his methods may have been morally questionable. Jacob the schemer was up to his old tricks again.

After working twenty years in Paddan Aram Jacob was ready to return to Canaan. He was now ninety-seven. He had eleven sons, at least one daughter, two wives, two concubines, and large flocks and herds.

Genesis 31:1 Now Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, “Jacob has taken all that was our father’s, and from what was our father’s he has gained all this wealth.” ² And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before. ³ Then the Lord said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.”

Several factors rekindled Jacob’s desire to leave Paddan Aram. Laban’s sons were complaining to their father that Jacob had gained his wealth at his expense. “Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him with favor as before” (Gen 31:2). Jacob became aware that his relationship was precarious with his father-in-law and he was in danger. Under the nagging influence of his sons, Laban’s attitude toward Jacob was changing. Tensions were mounting. At that time, God appeared to Jacob in a dream. God showed Jacob that his great wealth was not produced by his cleverness but by divine favor. God reminded Jacob of his oath at Bethel and directed him to return to Canaan. Furthermore, the Lord promised He would be with him on his journey.

Gen 31:4 So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was ⁵ and said to them, “I see that your father does not regard me with favor as he did before. But the God of my father has been with me.

Jacob must first convince his wives that they should leave. He calls Leah and Rachel together to hold a council in a field with his flock, which is assumed to be away from the hearing of those plotting against him. He confesses that their father does not look favorably upon him, something they probably already knew. Jacob senses danger for himself and his family.

Interestingly, he does confess that while Laban is against him, his “Father” has been with him. This is a reference to God and the warning Jacob has recently received that he should return to the land of his parents. Jacob has

all along had a spotty relationship with God, but now seems to be listening to what God is telling him.

Gen 31:6 You know that I have served your father with all my strength, ⁷ yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. ⁸ If he said, ‘The spotted shall be your wages,’ then all the flock bore spotted; and if he said, ‘The striped shall be your wages,’ then all the flock bore striped. ⁹ Thus God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me. ¹⁰ In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled. ¹¹ Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, ‘Jacob,’ and I said, ‘Here I am!’ ¹² And he said, ‘Lift up your eyes and see, all the goats that mate with the flock are striped, spotted, and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you. ¹³ I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now arise, go out from this land and return to the land of your kindred.’ ”

Jacob gave a marvelous speech to his two wives. He described his dissatisfaction with the way he was being treated by his employer. Laban had changed his wages ten times. He wanted to take with him a willing family, so he attested to God’s leading and provision. Because of the Lord, the sheep and goats had produced many spotted and striped animals so that his flocks had grown considerably. The Lord had come to him and told him He was aware of how he had been treated by Laban and told him it was time for Jacob to keep the vow he made at Bethel as seen in Genesis 28:20-22.

Gen 28:20 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 you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”

God had kept His end of the bargain. God had prospered him and now it was time for Jacob to do the same. But it was more difficult escaping

Laban's clutches than Esau's, for now, Jacob was married with four wives, thirteen children, and large flocks and herds. He was now part of Laban's clan, and disengagement was not easy.

Gen 31:14 Then Rachel and Leah answered and said to him, "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? ¹⁵ Are we not regarded by him as foreigners? For he has sold us, and he has indeed devoured our money. ¹⁶ All the wealth that God has taken away from our father belongs to us and to our children. Now then, whatever God has said to you, do."

His wives were on his side. They, too, had been abused by Laban. They both said he regarded them as foreigners. The word refers to someone other than family, foreign women—harlots. Furthermore, he has treated them like chattel and sold them, then used up whatever money was theirs. Laban had squandered the wealth which, by the sweat of his brow, Jacob had paid for these wives. They have nothing because of their father and both replied, "Now then, whatever God has said to you, do."

Gen 31:17 So Jacob arose and set his sons and his wives on camels. ¹⁸ He drove away all his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-Aram, to go to the land of Canaan to his father Isaac. ¹⁹ Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's household gods. ²⁰ And Jacob tricked Laban the Aramean, by not telling him that he intended to flee. ²¹ He fled with all that he had and arose and crossed the Euphrates, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead.

With his family in agreement, Jacob waits until Laban is away sheering his sheep before he takes his family and all his possessions and decamps for home.

In the process, Rachel stole her father's "household gods (*târaphiym / ter·aw·feme*). These are family idols and here testifies to Laban's spiritual status: He was an idolator. Why did Rachel steal them? Did she take them to leave her father no "gods" to appeal to, that Laban was without what he thought was his protection? His reaction later seems to confirm that

suspicion. It is also possible they were made of gold and could help replace what their father had stolen from them.

According to ancient customs, possession of these small statues legally guaranteed an inheritance. Is this why Laban pursued Jacob? It was one thing for Jacob to take his flocks and family; but his gods too? Perhaps Jacob would try to steal back to Haran someday and claim all of Laban's estate? It should be noted that later when Laban fails to find and recover the gods, he makes a treaty to keep this troublesome man out of his territory (vv. 43–53). Whatever the reason, Rachel's hard-headed self-interest almost brought disaster.

Gen 31:22 When it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled, ²³ he took his kinsmen with him and pursued him for seven days and followed close after him into the hill country of Gilead. ²⁴ But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, “Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.”

Laban discovers that Jacob has decamped and is headed home. He immediately goes in pursuit and after seven days catches up with him. But “God came to Laban” and warned him “not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.” This appears to be a warning that Laban should do nothing to impede Jacob's journey.

Gen 31:25 And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen pitched tents in the hill country of Gilead. ²⁶ And Laban said to Jacob, “What have you done, that you have tricked me and driven away my daughters like captives of the sword? ²⁷ Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? ²⁸ And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. ²⁹ It is in my power to do you harm. But the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, ‘Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad.’ ³⁰ And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?” ³¹ Jacob answered and said to Laban, “Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. ³² Anyone with whom you find your

gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it.” Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them.

Laban confronts Jacob. Of course, he is all indignant like he has been the victim of the affront. In a way, he was the victim in that he was not allowed to tell his daughters goodbye. After a long list of how Jacob had harmed him followed by a mention that Jacob’s God had warned him, he gets to the real point, “But why did you steal my gods?” Jacob has no knowledge of these idols and invites Laban to search his camp, and then he says something potentially very dangerous, “Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live.”

Gen 31:33 So Laban went into Jacob’s tent and into Leah’s tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah’s tent and entered Rachel’s. ³⁴ Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel’s saddle and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. ³⁵ And she said to her father, “Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.” So he searched but did not find the household gods.

Laban searches the camp finding nothing. Finally, he searches Rachel’s tent. She hides the idols under a camel saddle and sits on them, then pretends to be in her monthly cycle and thus cannot rise. It worked.

Gen 31:36 Then Jacob became angry and berated Laban. Jacob said to Laban, “What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? ³⁷ For you have felt through all my goods; what have you found of all your household goods? Set it here before my kinsmen and your kinsmen, that they may decide between us two. ³⁸ These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. ³⁹ What was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you. I bore the loss of it myself. From my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. ⁴⁰ There I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the cold by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes. ⁴¹ These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years

for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. ⁴² If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you last night.”

Jacob declared his innocence of any wrongdoing. Laban could not produce a single item that had been taken wrongfully. An angry Jacob berates Laban. He states his defense and argues it is he who has been abused by his father-in-law. He had labored hard and suffered much in Laban’s employment. Yet Laban had attempted to keep him poor by changing his wages ten times. Only because of the intervention of the “God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac,” had Jacob been able to come through his experience in Haran with any possessions.

Gen 31:43 Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do this day for these my daughters or for their children whom they have borne? ⁴⁴ Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I. And let it be a witness between you and me.” ⁴⁵ So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. ⁴⁶ And Jacob said to his kinsmen, “Gather stones.” And they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. ⁴⁷ Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed. ⁴⁸ Laban said, “This heap is a witness between you and me today.” Therefore he named it Galeed, ⁴⁹ and Mizpah, for he said, “The Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of one another’s sight. ⁵⁰ If you oppress my daughters, or if you take wives besides my daughters, although no one is with us, see, God is witness between you and me.”

⁵¹ Then Laban said to Jacob, “See this heap and the pillar, which I have set between you and me. ⁵² This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass over this heap to you, and you will not pass over this heap and this pillar to me, to do harm. ⁵³ The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.” So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, ⁵⁴ and Jacob offered a sacrifice in the hill country and called his kinsmen to eat bread. They ate bread and spent the night in the hill country.

In ancient law, a son-in-law surrendered all, if he left the house of his father-in-law. Ignoring their previous agreement about the spotted and striped livestock being Jacob's, Laban maintained his haughty attitude. He regarded everything in Jacob's camp as his own, yet he would not press his ownership claims. His hands were tied by divine warning. He therefore proposed that he and Jacob enter into a covenant. Perhaps recalling the tradition that the idols bestowed property rights on the owner, he offers a deal to Jacob that seems designed to prevent any such claim by Jacob to claim any rights to Laban's property at some future date. They will erect a stone heap that will represent a treaty between them. Jacob was not to take additional wives nor attempt to return to Haran. Laban pledged that he would not go beyond that monument to harm Jacob. The God of Abraham, Nahor, and their father would enforce this covenant by watching both parties. Laban did not trust Jacob, and vice versa.

Jacob agreed to the terms stipulated by Laban. He offered a sacrifice to seal the covenant and prepared a meal to which all were invited.

Gen 31:55 Early in the morning Laban arose and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them. Then Laban departed and returned home.