

Genesis 29:1-30:24  
Psalm 127/137  
John 2

“Eleven Sons in Seven Years”

October 4, 2009

Read Hosea 12:2-14

Rather than read the whole of Genesis 29-30 right now,  
I wanted us to start with Hosea 12,  
because Hosea 12 reflects on the principle of reciprocity.  
With the measure that you judge others, God will judge you.  
Hosea is a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel/Ephraim.  
At this time Israel (at its best) is worshiping at the golden calves at Bethel and Dan.  
And so Hosea’s comment about how God met Jacob at Bethel  
would have a double meaning.  
If Jacob holds fast to love and justice,  
then God will be with them.  
But the northern kingdom has chosen false balances.  
Hosea shows the parallel between Jacob fleeing to the land of Aram  
and serving for a wife,  
with Israel in Egypt, being brought back by Moses.

These endured hardship with patience – and God blessed them.

But Israel has given bitter provocation –  
Israel has rebelled against the LORD –  
therefore God will repay him for his disgraceful deeds.

There is a sense in which Jacob’s time with Laban is a picture of Israel’s captivity in Egypt.  
And yet in spite of all this, God builds his house.

Remember this,  
because the story of Jacob in exile is reminder to us  
that God works even in the midst of dysfunction and distress.

Sing Psalm 127  
Read John 2

Genesis 25-35 is the book of the Generations of Isaac.  
And in these chapters we are seeing how the narrative is designed to show us,  
how the blessing of Abraham comes to Jacob.

We have come to the central story of the Generations of Isaac:  
the birth of the Patriarchs – in the context of Jacob’s struggles with Laban.

- A Birth of Esau and Jacob (25:19-34)
- B Blessing of Isaac (26:1-5)
- C Rebekah in a foreign palace – pact with foreigners (26:1-35)

- D Jacob Steals Esau's Blessing (27:1-28:9)
  - E Jacob into Exile: God's Promise (28:10-22)
    - F Conflict with Laban: Rachel and Leah (29:1-30)
      - G The Birth of the Patriarchs (29:31-30:24)
        - F' Conflict with Laban: Prosperity/Flight (30:25-31:55)
          - E' Jacob Returning: God's Blessing (32:1-32)
            - D' Esau Reconciles with Jacob (33:1-17)
              - C' Dinah in a Foreign Palace – pact with foreigners (33:18-34:31)
                - B' Blessing of Jacob (35:1-15)
                  - A' Birth of Benjamin – Deaths of Rachel and Isaac (35:16-29)

How old is Jacob?

The chronology of Genesis is notoriously difficult,  
 because there are occasional gaps and assumptions that have to be pieced together.  
 But we are told that Joseph was about 44 years old when Jacob was about 130  
 (the year that Jacob came down to Egypt).  
 That means that Jacob was 86 when Joseph was born.  
 And since Joseph was born at the end of Jacob's 14<sup>th</sup> year with Laban  
 (after he has worked off the price for both of his wives)  
 therefore Jacob would appear to be around 70 years old when he came to Laban.

We also know that Esau (Jacob's twin) married two Hittite women  
 about the age of 40,  
 and that years later he married an Ishmaelite –  
 after Jacob had left.

So either way, Jacob is no spring chicken when he heads to Haran.

### 1. Jacob at the Well (29:1-14)

*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 behold, 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 over the mouth of the well.*

Apparently the stone would require at least three men to move it –  
 since there are three flocks (with three shepherds)  
 who are not able to move the stone.

*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 livestock 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 was a shepherdess.*

*10 Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother,  
and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother,*

*Jacob came near 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.*

Have you noticed that the patriarchs all seem to find their brides at wells?  
(Rebekah for Isaac – Rachel for Jacob – and Zipporah for Moses).

Many of the fathers see this as a picture of baptism,  
which I would take to be far-fetched  
if it were not for passages like Ezekiel 16,  
which speak of how God washed and cleansed his bride,  
and for that matter, Ephesians 5 which uses the same imagery,  
“having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (5:26).

We are intended to see a parallel between Abraham’s servant and Jacob.

They both come to a well outside Haran –  
perhaps even the same well,  
since both Rebekah and Rachel came to the well.

But the parallel also has its contrasts:

Abraham’s servant prayed to God and gave thanks to him;  
Jacob does not.

Instead, Jacob uses his brute strength to impress his bride to be!

Jacob must learn through discipline what it means to follow Christ.

Also note the contrast between Abraham’s servant who comes with great wealth,  
and leaves a few days later with the bride in hand –  
and Jacob who comes alone and empty handed –  
and must labor for 7 years to obtain his bride.

*13 As soon as Laban heard the news about 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.*

Interestingly, Laban initially treats Jacob the same way that he treated Abraham’s servant.

But that should not be particularly encouraging to us –  
since we saw that Laban was greedy and grasping back then!

And sure enough Laban hasn't changed!

## **2. Jacob's Wages (29:15-30)**

*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?”*

This sounds generous, right?

Actually it is not.

As Laban's nephew, Jacob should work “for nothing” –  
and as Jacob's uncle, Laban should give Jacob  
all that he needs to establish himself in life  
(think of Abraham's care for his nephew, Lot!).  
Instead, Laban wants to benefit from the labor of Jacob  
with only minimal expenditure.

And so Jacob becomes a contract laborer in Laban's house.

The key word here is “ebed” – to work or to serve – used seven times in verses 15-30.

The noun form of “ebed” means “slave” –  
and is the term used for Israel's slavery in Egypt.

We have already seen that Jacob has been sent into exile,  
now we see how Jacob's exile prefigures that of his children.

Jacob – the one who is to rule over his brothers –  
is enslaved by his uncle Laban!

In one sense, this is not surprising.

Jacob has nothing to give for a bride –  
nothing except the promise of the inheritance (birthright and blessing).

All that belongs to Isaac will one day be his.

Shouldn't that be enough for Isaac's brother-in-law?

But Laban is greedy and grasping.

And he knows that Jacob is entirely at his mercy.

*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 in form and appearance.*

Weak or “soft” eyes lack the sparkle that was prized by men in the ancient near east.

And so we are not surprised to hear that...

*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 people 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 female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.)*

The wedding feast in the ancient world involved a considerable quantity of wine (as we saw also in the wedding at Cana in John 2).

Jacob may not have been entirely sober when he took Leah to bed that night.

And in the dark he did not figure out the ruse.

*25 But 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?”*

This is the same word that Esau had used of Jacob – when he claimed that Jacob had cheated him (27:35-36).

Perhaps it is fitting that the man who deceived his blind father should himself be deceived in the blindness of the night.

Genesis does not condemn Jacob for his resolute pursuit of the Abrahamic blessing – but it does show, time after time, the principle of reciprocity: with the measure you judge others, you will be judged.

But of course, behind all this, the purpose of God is at work.

Every Israelite who ever heard this story would know how it all ends:

It is not the beloved wife, Rachel, who will bear the Messiah – the anointed one – but the unloved wife, Leah, who bears the priestly tribe of Levi, and the kingly tribe of Judah.

Still, Jacob knows none of this yet – and Laban’s answer must have stung:

*26 Laban said, “It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.*

Jacob has been fighting against the rights of the firstborn all his life!

And while he was fighting for God’s promise, there is a certain fittingness to this penalty.

The younger son who has obtained the blessing is now upended by the rights of primogeniture.

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 be his wife.  
29 (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.)*  
30 *So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah,  
and served Laban for another seven years.*

This is flatly contrary to Leviticus 18:18 –  
A man shall not take a woman’s sister as a wife while she is still living.

This is a good argument for the antiquity of the story of Jacob.

Notice that the narrator illustrates the difference between the first seven years  
and the second seven years.

The first seven years are recounted in one verse (v20).

The second seven years take 29 verses!

This parallels Jacob’s experience,

as the first seven years fly by in anticipation of his marriage to Rachel,  
while the second seven years take forever,  
as his wives quarrel and scheme.

### **3. The Birth of the Patriarchs (29:31-30:24)** **a. The LORD Opened Leah’s Womb (29:31-35)**

Note the parallel between 29:21 – “give me my wife that I may go in to her,  
for my time is completed” –  
and 30:25 – “send me away...for you know the service that I have given you.”

In these seven years Jacob has 11 sons,  
because after Rachel bears Joseph,  
Jacob claims that his time is up.

So Leah gets pregnant quick and probably had four sons in four years.

Perhaps even before those four years are up,  
30:1 probably goes back a couple years.  
After all, it wouldn’t have taken Rachel four years  
to realize that she wasn’t getting pregnant!

So Bilhah bears two sons probably around years 3-5.  
It would take Leah a year or so to realize that she has stopped bearing,  
so we’re probably in years 5-6 when Zilpah is having her two.

And then almost certainly before Zilpah bears Asher  
Leah gets pregnant again and bears two more sons in years 6-7.

(The statement that Dinah was born “afterward” – v21 probably means that she was born after the seventh year).

So almost certainly then Leah and Rachel were both pregnant together in year 7.

In other words, we are talking about all-out sexual war.

These women are scheming and maneuvering –  
each trying to win their husband’s affection,  
and even using the naming of their sons  
to “hurl malicious shafts at one another.” (Waltke, 408)

*31 When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.*

The unloved wife is the wife who will bear half of Jacob’s sons.  
She will have seven children –  
including the priestly tribe of Levi and the royal tribe of Judah.

*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; for now my husband will love me.”*

Reuben means “see, a son!”  
Leah demonstrates good theology in her naming:  
she understands that the LORD has looked upon her affliction.  
But her understanding of human nature is not so good  
There is no indication that Jacob’s heart changes toward her.

*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.*

Simeon means “he heard” –  
The LORD sees.  
The LORD hears.  
He cares for the wife who is hated by her husband.  
Leah understands something of the character of God.  
She is often presented in a poor light compared to Rachel,  
but even while she battles her sister,  
she still hopes in God trusts in him.

*34 Again she conceived and bore a son, and said,  
“Now this time my husband will be attached to me,  
because I have borne him three sons.”  
Therefore his name was called Levi.*

Levi means “attached” – but again her hopes are disappointed.

Her husband does not love her.

*35 And she conceived again and bore a son, and said,  
"This time I will praise the Lord."  
Therefore she called his name Judah.*

Finally, she learns her lesson!  
This time I will praise the LORD!  
Even if my husband will not love me,  
I will still praise the LORD.

She will forget this sometimes –  
even the greatest of saints can be forgetful at times!  
But she calls his name, "Praise"  
because she knows that the LORD is her refuge.

*Then she ceased bearing.*

**b. Childbearing by Proxy: the Handmaids' Tale (30:1-13)**

*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?"*

Jacob is passing through his exile –  
his being cast out of the land.

And he watches his wives repeating the struggle between himself and Esau.

But isn't it ironic?  
Leah has children – but she wants to be loved.  
Rachel is loved – but she wants to have children!

Each woman wants what her sister has –  
and refuses to be content with what she has.

And while men can face this just as easily,  
I would say this especially to you women:  
Do not envy the gifts that God has given to your sister.  
You may wish that you could have children as easily as Leah –  
or that your husband loved you as much as Jacob loved Rachel.  
But such jealousy will only devour you,  
and it will poison your relationships with other women in the church.

God has given you the gifts that he wants you to have.  
Be content with those gifts and use them for his glory.



And we should all be thankful that we live in a society that forbids polygamy –  
so at least you can escape the soap opera that became the house of Jacob!

*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.”*

Rachel here uses the same language that Sarah had used:  
she wants to be “built up” – the Hebrew for “that I may have children”  
means literally, “that I may be built up.”

As we’ve seen throughout Genesis,  
while the seed of the serpent is busy building cities,  
the seed of the woman is building altars.  
And particularly here Rachel wants to be built up.

*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.*

Dan means “to vindicate” or “to judge” – with a positive outcome!

Rachel sees this as a matter of justice.

She has been “wronged” by her sister,

and now God has vindicated her by giving her handmaid a son.

*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.”*

*(literally, ‘in the wrestling with God, I have wrestled with my sister...’)*

*So she called his name Naphtali.*

Curious.

Jacob will later “wrestle” with the angel and prevail.

Here Rachel is the one wrestling with God –

and she sees the second son of Bilhah as further evidence of God’s vindication.

Not to be outdone,

Leah sends her maidservant into the fray...

*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.*

While the naming of Judah indicated some measure of faith,

Leah’s naming of Gad is more disturbing –

because Gad simply means “good luck.”

*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.*

Asher means “happy” – and indicates that Leah is trumpeting her own victory.

**c. God Remembered Rachel (30:14-24)**

*14 In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field  
and brought them to his mother Leah.*

The Hebrew word for mandrake is “duda'im” –  
which means “love fruits.”

They were commonly considered an aphrodisiac throughout the ancient world.

Reuben – perhaps by this time a child of five –  
is already being sucked into the machinations of the sisters.

*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.”*

Rachel is willing to trade her night with Jacob in exchange for the mandrakes,  
in hope that the mandrakes will help with her fertility.

And Leah is willing to trade her mandrakes for a night with her husband.

*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.*

Issachar means “wages.”

In verses 16-18 we hear the word “hired” or “wages” (it's the same word) four times.  
This is the same word used back when Jacob accepted the daughters of Laban  
as his “wages.”

Jacob receives Leah and Rachel as his “wages” from Laban –  
and now Leah receives Jacob as her “wages.”

It is worth noting that the phrase “he lay with her that night”  
is never used in Genesis of a loving sexual relationship.  
Jacob has been “hired.”  
He is not there freely.

*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.*

Zebulun means “honored one” – but once again her hopes fall short.

*21 Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah.*

The “afterward” suggests that this occurred after the seven year contract.

*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!”*

The name Joseph plays on two words which she uses here:

‘asaph – taken away  
yoseph – may he add

No doubt Rachel is thinking of the latter – “May the LORD add to me another son!”  
But those who know the rest of the story will also remember  
that Joseph will in fact be taken away.

### **Conclusion**

Leah and Rachel both acknowledge that the LORD opens the womb,  
but they display anything but confidence in the LORD  
through their sexual warfare as Leah seeks the love of her husband,  
and Rachel seeks children.

And yet what is the result of all this sexual warfare?

The twelve tribes of Israel are taking shape.

God’s purposes for history are coming together in the midst of a dysfunctional family.

All of you know what this is like.

Because all of you come from dysfunctional families!

You know what “dys-function” means, right?

Improperly functioning.

There’s another word for it:

sinful.

Throughout most of this narrative, God has been silent.

Twice we have heard that God listened to Leah and opened her womb.  
God has mercy on the unloved wife.

And at the conclusion of this God-forsaken chapter in the lives of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel,  
God remembered Rachel.

One thing to remember is that today's story took fourteen years in the lives of these people.  
Seven years of eager anticipation for Jacob.  
And then seven years of strife and envy and sexual warfare.

But then again, Jacob is in exile.  
He is prefiguring the exile of his children.  
He is enduring the cross.

And not surprisingly, since he is *not* the Holy One,  
he endures it imperfectly!

But two things should give you hope as you hear this story:

- 1) God uses the weak and foolish things of this world to accomplish his purposes.
- 2) And far, far more importantly –  
we have someone better than Jacob sitting at the right hand of the Father!

Jacob is undergoing the process of discipleship – the way of the cross –  
and he is learning what it means to be the Seed of Abraham.

But as Paul says, there is reason why the Hebrew (and Greek) word for Seed  
is a collective singular.

Because all the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob  
are in the end, inherited by one man – Jesus, the Son of God.

Psalm 137