

Genesis 29:1 – 30

¹ Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east. ² He looked, and saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for from that well they watered the flocks. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. ³ When all the flocks were gathered there, they would then roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well. ⁴ Jacob said to them, ‘My brothers, where are you from?’ And they said, ‘We are from Haran.’ ⁵ He said to them, ‘Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?’ And they said, ‘We know him.’ ⁶ And he said to them, ‘Is it well with him?’ And they said, ‘It is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep.’ ⁷ He said, ‘Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them.’ ⁸ But they said, ‘We cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone 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 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 mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother. ¹¹ Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. ¹² Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah’s son, and she ran and told her father. ¹³ So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister’s son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things. ¹⁴ 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 relative, 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 And Leah’s eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face. ¹⁸ Now Jacob loved Rachel, so 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 to give her to another man; stay with me.’ ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. ²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, ‘Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her.’ ²² Laban gathered all the men of the place and made a feast. ²³ Now in the evening he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and Jacob went in to her. ²⁴ Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid. ²⁵ So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, ‘What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?’ ²⁶ But Laban said, ‘It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷ Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years.’ ²⁸ Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. ²⁹ Laban also gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Finding Love by a Well:* Recall that God had Adam meet Eve by a source of water (Gen.2:10 – 14). Abraham’s servant Eliezer met Rebekah on behalf of Isaac at a well (Gen.24:10 – 21), then escorted Rebekah back to Isaac, who met her at yet another well (Gen.24:62 – 67).
- *Jacob’s Emotion:* There is a Hebrew word pun between ‘he watered’ (*wayashq*) and ‘he kissed’ (*wayishaq*) in 29:10 – 11. The same pun is used by the poet of the Song of Songs (Song 8:1 – 2).

- *Jacob's Bride-Price Offer to Laban:* Laban would recall that Abraham's servant Eliezer came to look for a bride for Isaac with ten camels and gifts in tow. Rebekah, Laban's younger sister, agreed to go, and she became Jacob's mother. But Jacob comes to look for a bride and comes with absolutely nothing. He offered seven years of labor, well over the maximum bridal price (50 shekels) in the ancient world. The average manual wage was approximately one shekel per month, which makes Jacob's offer worth about 84 shekels.
- *Laban's Character Reflected in His Daughter's Names:* Leah means *cow*, Rachel means *ewe*.
- *Leah's Eyes:* Leah's eyes were 'weak' or 'tender' (29:17). This is a difficult term to translate. Bruce Waltke suggests that her soft 'eyes lack the fire and sparkle' prized as beauty (see Song of Songs 4:1, 9). Robert Alter suggests, however, that perhaps Leah's only physical beauty were her eyes, in contrast to her beautiful sister, who apparently had striking face and figure. In any case Rachel wins the beauty pageant, and Jacob's interest.

Questions

1. Jacob and the well. How has the well archetypal scene been used so far in Genesis?
 - a. Adam and Eve by the source of rivers
 - b. Rebekah discovered by a well, and meets Isaac by the well called Beer-lahai-roi.
2. How does Jacob feel when he arrives at the well?
 - a. He knows he has arrived at the right place, among his family (v.5 – 6)
 - b. He meets Rachel, and is deeply emotional (v.9 – 12) – she is his cousin, so it could be that he has been homesick; we also know that he falls in love with her, so it could be that he is smitten romantically
 - c. He rolls away the stone by himself! That’s quite a feat of strength. Normally, the shepherds would do this as a team effort, because the stone was huge.
 - d. The Hebrew word pun between ‘he watered’ (*wayashq*) and ‘he kissed’ (*wayishaq*) in 29:10 – 11 suggests that he did these things eagerly, with great energy.
3. What kind of person is Laban?
 - a. Laban named his girls after animals. Leah means cow, Rachel means ewe. As father of a family of shepherds, Laban treated his daughters like the animals he wanted to use for profit. Throughout the entire story there is no affection demonstrated between Laban and his daughters.
 - b. What did he remember from Eliezer’s visit for Rebekah? That Rebekah came back with bracelets and a gold ring, and that Abraham’s family was rich. Laban wants something and was surely disappointed by Jacob’s empty-handedness. He quotes the same phrase that the exuberant Adam said when God brought Eve to him, ‘You are my bone and my flesh,’ but falls flat.
 - c. He is totally manipulative. He takes advantage of Jacob for a month (v.14 – 15), and we learn that Jacob has been serving him for free. Then he makes the pretense of being generous by offering to pay him.
 - d. Illus: Laban is like the villain Mr. Thenadier in *Les Miserables*, who is an innkeeper that cheats all his customers:

Welcome, Monsieur, sit yourself down
And meet the best innkeeper in town
As for the rest, all of ‘em crooks:
Roosting their guests and crooking the books
Seldom do you see
Honest men like me
A gent of good intent
Who’s content to be
...
Master of the house, keeper of the zoo
Ready to relieve ‘em of a sou or two
Watering the wine, making up the weight
Pickin’ up their knick-knacks when they can’t see straight
Everybody loves a landlord
Everybody’s bosom friend
I do whatever pleases
Jesus! Won’t I bleed ‘em in the end!
...
Food beyond compare. Food beyond belief
Mix it in a mincer and pretend it’s beef
Kidney of a horse, liver of a cat
Filling up the sausages with this and that
Residents are more than welcome
Bridal suite is occupied
Reasonable charges
Plus some little extras on the side!

Charge ‘em for the lice, extra for the mice
Two percent for looking in the mirror twice

Here a little slice, there a little cut
Three percent for sleeping with the window shut
When it comes to fixing prices
There are a lot of tricks he knows
How it all increases, all them bits and pieces
Jesus! It's amazing how it grows!

4. How does Laban take advantage of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel?
 - a. He takes advantage of Jacob's utter lack of resources.
 - b. He takes advantage of Jacob's spiritual weakness. Jacob has become driven by his sexual appetite. This is clear when he says to his soon-to-be-father-in-law, 'Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her.' (v.21). Notice that Jacob is like Esau here, when Esau was driven by his stomach (physical appetite) and traded off his birthright.
 - c. Laban can be legal and technical, as when he says that the firstborn must be married off first. He mocks Jacob's past deception of his brother Esau. 'What goes around comes around.' So he deeply abuses Leah and Rachel so he can get more work out of Jacob.
 - d. Imagine being Leah: manipulated by her father, forced into the embrace of a drunken man who thinks she is someone else, who is culturally obligated to serve out his 'week' of sexual intimacy with her, all the while he is thinking of another woman, her younger sister Rachel.
 - e. Imagine being Rachel: also manipulated by her father, denied the peaceful happiness she was hoping for and thrust instead into a tension-filled, simmering conflict between her father and sister and husband.
 - f. How is Laban an older, more experienced, more manipulative version of Jacob?
 - i. He takes advantage of someone else's physical appetite and weakness
 - ii. He lets people believe that he is someone else
 - iii. He strains family relations through cunning and trickery
 - g. Illus: Sometimes our own sin brings us into contact with people who sin in the same way, but are much better at it than we are. For example, when I was young, my sin was placing my identity in my performance-orientedness. It succeeded for me – for a while. I got into Stanford. But when I got there, I was surrounded by people who had the same basic sin pattern, but were much better at it than I was. I finally cried out to God to know if there was there was a deeper meaning to life!
5. Why do the narrator and Laban use the phrase 'the place' in 28:22 and 26?
 - a. It reminds us of Bethel, where Jacob encountered God and it was called 'this place' (Gen.28:11, 16, 17, 19). It serves as a subtle hint to the reader that God can indeed be found behind the scenes even in 'this place' of abuse and deception.
 - b. It's not that God is causing the sin and harm. But that God is working to redeem it, just as God promised Jacob back in Bethel that He will work to redeem his journey.
 - c. Illus: Me meeting David Miyahara at Stanford. I met him my freshman year. He was a real answer to prayer for me, because I wanted someone to disciple me. He mentored me for the next three and a half years.