

Genesis 29:31 – 30:24

^{29:31} Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. ³² Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, ‘Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me.’ ³³ Then she conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this son also.’ So she named him Simeon. ³⁴ She conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ Therefore he was named Levi. ³⁵ And she conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘This time I will praise the LORD.’ Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing. ^{30:1} Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, or else I die.’ ² Then Jacob’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’ ³ She said, ‘Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children.’ ⁴ So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. ⁵ Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. ⁶ Then Rachel said, ‘God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.’ Therefore she named him Dan. ⁷ Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. ⁸ So Rachel said, ‘With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.’ And she named him Naphtali. ⁹ When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. ¹⁰ Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. ¹¹ Then Leah said, ‘How fortunate!’ So she named him Gad. ¹² Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. ¹³ Then Leah said, ‘Happy am I! For women will call me happy.’ So she named him Asher. ¹⁴ Now 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 for you to take my husband? And would you take my son’s mandrakes also?’ So Rachel said, ‘Therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.’ ¹⁶ When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him and said, ‘You must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son’s mandrakes.’ So he lay with her that night. ¹⁷ God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. ¹⁸ Then Leah said, ‘God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband.’ So she named him Issachar. ¹⁹ Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. ²⁰ Then Leah said, ‘God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons.’ So she named him Zebulun. ²¹ Afterward she bore a daughter and named her Dinah. ²² Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. ²³ So she conceived and bore a son and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach.’ ²⁴ She named him Joseph, saying, ‘May the LORD give me another son.’

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Childbearing*: Having children, especially sons, was extremely valuable in this culture because children represented your work force, impact, legacy, and significance.
- *Mandrakes*: These plants were considered a ‘love flower’ – an aphrodisiac and a help to conceiving a child. The Hebrew word for ‘mandrake’ (*dud’im*) is a pun on the word for ‘love’ (*dodim*).
- *Hebrew Names*: Each child’s name has meaning that reflects the experience and state of Leah and Rachel.
 - Reuben: Seen
 - Simeon: Heard
 - Levi: Attached

- Judah: Praise
- Dan: Judgment, or ‘he judged’
- Naphtali: My struggle
- Gad: Fortunate
- Issachar: Reward, recompense
- Zebulun: Gift (*zebed*) or honor (*yizbeleni*)
- Dinah: Judged, vindicated
- Joseph has a double meaning. *Yosef* is identified with the root word for *add* (y-s-p) as in, ‘The LORD shall add to me another son.’ *Yosef* is also compared to the word *taken away* (from the root *s-p*) as in, ‘God has taken away my reproach.’

Structure of the Jacob, Leah, and Rachel Story¹

- A. God makes promise; struggle in childbirth; Jacob and Esau born; Jacob buys birthright (25:19 – 34)
- B. Rebekah endangered in a foreign place, Isaac lies about her, makes a pact with foreigners (26:1 – 34)
- C. Jacob tricks Esau, fears him, and flees the Promised Land (27:1 – 28:9)
- D. At night, God speaks to Jacob in a dream (ladder with angels), Jacob names Bethel, makes deal with God (28:10 – 22)
- E. Jacob meets Rachel and Laban (29:1 – 14)
 - F. Jacob must acknowledge the rights of the firstborn (Leah) and is vulnerable to Laban, Laban deceives Rachel (29:15 – 30)
 - G. Jacob experiences conflict between his two wives (29:31 – 30:13)
 - H. Rachel stops trying to thwart God’s blessings to Leah, relinquishes her rights and control over Jacob (30:14 – 21)
 - H’. God ‘remembers’ Rachel; Rachel bears Joseph (30:22 – 24)
 - G’. Jacob experiences conflict with Laban but accepts a handicap with his flocks, relinquishes his rights (30:25 – 36)
 - F’. God prospers Jacob and protects him from Laban; Rachel deceives Laban (30:37 – 31:35)
 - E’. Laban departs from Jacob (31:43 – 55)
- D’. At night, God wrestles Jacob, Jacob named Israel, asks God for blessing (32:1 – 32)
- C’. Jacob returns to the Promised Land, fears Esau, but is reconciled to him (33:1 – 20)
- B’. Dinah endangered in foreign place, Jacob’s sons lie, make a pact with foreigners, and kill them (34:1 – 31)
- A’. God fulfills promise; Jacob named Israel again at Bethel; struggle in childbirth, Rachel dies; Reuben forfeits birthright; Isaac dies, Jacob and Esau bury him (35:1 – 29)

¹ By Mako Nagasawa using insights from J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1986), p.53 – 54.

Questions

1. Verses 29:31 – 35 concern Leah, and perhaps about 4 years of her life. What's happening for her, relationally and spiritually?
 - a. Does it matter whether Leah was complicit with her father Laban in tricking Jacob to marry her?
 - b. She bears sons, which is an ancient ideal for a wife, because sons mean heirs for the family
 - c. Her hopes are actually tied to Jacob. She just wants to be loved by Jacob. She sees God and her children as a means to that end.
 - d. Her first three sons are named for that hope: seen, heard, attached.
 - e. But what happens with her fourth son, Judah? Judah means 'praise' and the word 'Jew' comes from that name. She seems to say, 'I will praise the Lord' independently of what else happens. Her love for God has deepened. Regardless of whether my husband loves me, I will praise the Lord.
 - f. Application: Do we receive God's gifts for God's purposes? Or do we try to use God's gifts for our own purposes?
 - g. Illus: This story comes to me through a Harvard student who told me about her youth pastor, Steve*. Steve wanted to be really important. So when he went to college, he considered all the 'important' paths: pre-med, pre-law, and so on. He was and is very bright, so he could have gone down any of those paths. But once when he was tutoring some youth, he heard God whisper to him, 'If you really want to be important, give your life to young people.' So Steve eventually became a youth pastor. Not a prestigious and well-thanked job, to say the least. But indeed, he was very important in the lives of some young people, including the Harvard student who told me about him and said that his impact was part of what shaped her life to go into education, teaching, and ministry. It's not that going into other fields is necessarily wrong, but treating God as a means to other people's approval is necessarily wrong. If you make God and the kingdom of God on earth your goal, then God can use you in many more ways, for His glory and your joy.
 - h. Application: Do you see God as a means to your own ends? Say, good grades for a good job?
2. Verses 30:1 – 8 concern Rachel. What is happening for her?
 - a. Sight, self-centered interpretation: saw that she bore Jacob no children (30:1)
 - b. Jealousy: she became jealous of her sister (30:1)
 - c. Accusation and manipulation: and she said to Jacob, 'Give me children, or else I die.' (30:1)
 - d. Alienation: Then Jacob's anger burned against Rachel, and he said, 'Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?' (30:2)
 - e. Spiritual regress for the family; she introduces Sarah's self-empowerment strategy: She said, 'Here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children.' (30:3)
 - f. Success, but introduction of a whole new level of competition (30:9 – 13)
3. Verses 30:9 – 13 concern Leah. What do you think of her response to Rachel?
 - a. She plays at the competition game, spiritual regress for the family
 - b. She uses Zilpah as a tool, just as (from God's perspective, even though the culture accepted it) Sarah had used Hagar as a tool, and Rachel had used Bilhah as a tool
 - c. She names two more sons of Zilpah (Gad, Asher) but without direct reference to God
4. Verses 30:14 – 21 concern a direct interaction between Rachel and Leah.
 - a. What does the narrative say on the surface?
 - b. Has Rachel been forbidding Jacob from being intimate with Leah? She has been trying to hoard God's blessing for herself, whether she's known it or not, and whether that's her first motivation or not, at the expense of her sister Leah.
 - c. Why would Rachel want mandrakes? Perhaps Jacob has felt distant from Rachel too? Because Rachel is concerned that Jacob is now having sex *with three other women*?
 - d. Why would Rachel change her mind about Leah? Is it because she really wants those mandrakes? She also has compassion on Leah. She finally sees her sister as the victim, in bondage to other sin, and not just the competitor. And she wants Leah to have a share of Jacob's love, to have more children, and to share in God's blessing, most importantly.
 - e. Why would God 'remember' Rachel at this point? Because there is a small thaw in their anger. It's not perfect by any means. But it's a small chisel, a start. Even though the language is in business terms, we can sense that Rachel is being vulnerable to Leah and asking for help: 'Please...' Leah reacts sharply but Rachel gives up control of access to Jacob. Leah might

sympathize with Rachel's barrenness, so gives her mandrakes. Maybe she thinks, 'Well, I hope you do have a child.' God takes that small opening and says, 'I'll take it!!'

- f. Illus: My son John struggling with feeling like he has no close friends, but seeing his younger sister Zoe having friends. He hasn't been jealous of Zoe. Instead, he prayed that he would be able to be friends with Alain, a Haitian boy 2 years older than John, who has started coming to our church.
 - g. Application: If there is someone you're jealous of, compete with, in such a way that you want to stop God from blessing them, repent of that
 - h. Application: Who would come up with this story as the origin of their own people group?
5. What do Jacob, Leah, and Rachel learn about God? What do we learn about God's goodness?
- a. God works primarily by giving life; whether or not it is accurate to attribute barrenness to God, the text doesn't tell us
 - b. God allows His gifts to be abused or received with ungratefulness
 - c. God sees and hears the daughters who had been used by their own father Laban
 - d. Jacob senses that God is leading him back to reconcile with his brother Esau
 - e. He calls us to share His desire to bless others
 - f. Our healing and life-giving lies in wanting God's blessing for others
 - i. Illus: me in Barcelona, praying for the thieves
 - ii. Illus: me helping my dad

Paul Borgman notes that there are 'Three Mirrors for Jacob': (1) The rights of the firstborn: Jacob took Esau's firstborn rights at Esau's expense; Laban upholds Leah's firstborn rights at Jacob's expense; (2) Quarrels between siblings: The brothers Jacob and Esau quarreled; the sisters Rachel and Leah quarreled; (3) The duel of the schemers: Jacob vs. Laban.