

Genesis 29: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 29 Jacob said to them, My brothers, where do you come from?

They said, We are from Haran. He said to them, Do you know Laban the son of Nahor? They said, We know him. He said to them, Is it well with him? They said, It is well, and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep.

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. 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. While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess.

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.

[1 : 23] Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman and that he was Rebecca's son. And she ran and told her father.

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.

And Laban said to him, Surely you are my bone and my flesh. And he stayed with him a month.

Then Laban said to Jacob, Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing?

Tell me, what should your wages be? Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.

Jacob loved Rachel, and he said, I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.

Laban said, It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man.

[2 : 24] Stay with me. So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, Give me my wife that I may go into her, for my time is completed.

So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went into her.

Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant. And 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? Laban said, It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.

Jacob did so and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.

Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.

[3 : 32] So Jacob went into Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

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.

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.

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.

And she conceived again, and bore a son, and said, This time I will praise the Lord. Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing.

[4 : 33] In Genesis chapter 29, Jacob leaves Bethel and heads towards the land of the people of the east, Haran and the house of his uncle Laban. Once again we have surprising scenic details.

There's a well with a stone over it, and three flocks of sheep lying beside it. Jacob asks the shepherds whether they know Laban, and is told that they do, and that his daughter Rachel is coming with the sheep.

They cannot remove the stone until the flocks are gathered. And Rachel is bringing the fourth flock. On Rachel's arrival, Jacob removes the stone and waters the flock of Laban.

Jacob greets Rachel with a kiss and weeps aloud, telling her that he was her father's kinsman and the son of Rebekah. And when Laban hears this, as Rachel runs to tell her family, he runs to meet Jacob, embraces him and kisses him.

Now, there's a lot of scenic detail in this passage. And as usual, when the Bible gives us lots of seemingly superfluous scenic details, they probably aren't merely there for the purpose of painting a florid picture in our minds.

[5 : 36] It's worth bearing in mind how random, occasional, and often weird the scenic details Scripture gives us are. So, for instance, we are told all of the ingredients of the meal that Abraham gave to the angels, but we are told virtually nothing about the physical appearance of the majority of biblical characters, including Jesus himself.

There are scenic and other details that are used very sparingly, and usually when they're present, they're there for us to pay attention to. There's a principle of drama called Chekhov's gun.

The principle goes as follows. Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter, it absolutely must go off.

If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there. So it is with Scripture. Scripture does not give us irrelevant story elements. Biblical narrative often involves scenic or incidental details, but those details help you to recognize connections.

So, for instance, why are we told that John the Baptist dresses in a particular way, with camel skin and a leather belt around his waist? Well, because it helps us to recognize his resemblance to Elijah.

[6 : 50] Why are we told here that there are three flocks of sheep, with a further fourth flock of sheep led by Rachel on the way? Well, one thing it helps us to do is to recognize the symmetry between the beginning of Jacob's journey to Paddan and Uram, and then his return, when he divides his family into four groups, with Rachel last.

In that return journey, he has an encounter with God's angels at Mahanaim, which he calls God's camp. This reminds us of the story of Bethel in chapter 28, with Jacob's statement, this is the gate of heaven, this is the house of God.

Now, what other things do we see? There's a physical feat at the sight of the water, and there's a meeting with Esau that recalls the meeting with Rachel and Laban, running out to meet him, embracing, kissing, and then also lifting up their voices and weeping.

It's the same patterns that we see in the story of meeting with Rachel and Laban. And so these scenic details help us to recognize something more of the shape of this story, and in the shape of the story, some of the deeper themes and things that are playing out.

This is a there and back again story, and once you've realized that, you'll recognize some further connections, and it will help you to see part of the meaning of what's taking place. Jacob in this chapter already seems quite transformed from the weak character of chapter 27, who could not take the initiative, but had to be pushed into things by his mother.

[8 : 22] Now he's lifting up his legs and running on his way. He can remove a great stone single-handed, and once again note Jacob's association with stones. This is something that we've seen in the previous chapter, and we'll continue through in his story.

Beyond the change in Jacob's ability and character, maybe we should notice a further connection between a matriarch and a well, as Rachel is here encountered at a well.

We've seen the story of Hagar and the well, we've seen the story of Rebecca and the well. Later on we'll see in Exodus the story of Moses meeting with his wife at a well.

And these stories are familiar patterns being played out in different forms. Now I've mentioned before that the differences between the accounts are as important as their similarities. The meaningful differences become more apparent as the similarities become more familiar to us. So as we've read a number of these stories, we begin to see the ways in which each particular story stands out.

[9 : 23] And in this story, one of the ways it stands out from the others is that the well is blocked and needs to be opened. It can only be opened when Rachel has arrived with her flock.

Now note the fact that it is the opening of Rachel's womb that marks the turning of the tide in the next chapter. As Rachel comes with her flock of children, there will be a change in the movement of the story.

The fruit of Rachel's womb will bring blessing for all, but it will only occur through struggle. After the other flocks have arrived, it will be Rachel's flock that will come last.

Rachel is described as a shepherdess, a fitting companion for one who's associated with sheep. Her name also means ewe or female sheep. And in this story, we'll see parallels between flocks of sheep and flocks as the family.

Jacob acts like Rebecca did for his grandfather, Abraham's servant. So he goes and he waters the flocks of Rachel just as Rebecca watered the flocks or the camels of Eliezer.

[10 : 30] Rachel then acts like Rebecca, running and telling her family about this person who's arrived. And Laban's extravagant greeting at this point is perhaps in hope of treasures from the grandson of Abraham.

He was, in the previous story, and remains a mercenary man. But yet a month passes, and there's no great caravan of wealth coming behind Jacob. Jacob's by himself with no great treasures to his possession.

And then we see Jacob's status reduced by Laban. He's no longer being treated as a kinsman, but more as a hired servant. He has to work for his keep. He has to be paid wages.

He's no longer treated as Laban's bone and his flesh, but as one who's working within his house for money. Now, he's not reduced to servitude and slavery, but his situation is definitely lowered at this point.

He wants to serve for Rachel, Laban's youngest daughter. And Rachel is described as beautiful, but Leah's eyes are delicate. It can be translated weak or perhaps delicate.

[11 : 36] I would prefer to go with delicate, which may also suggest that they were beautiful in their own way. He serves Laban for a week of years. For seven years, which is later described as a week.

It feels like a few days to him. Now, remember in the previous chapter that Rebecca had told Jacob to stay for a few days in Laban's house and that she summoned him back when the time came. Now, it feels to him like this whole seven-year period is just a few days. He loves Rachel so much. At this point, he's presumably working for a bride price.

And the purpose of a bride price is to give security to the wife. So this money would be given to Laban, which Laban would hold in trust for Rachel so that if anything happened, if Jacob abandoned her or if Jacob died, Rachel would have that money as her security.

But yet, Laban switches Rachel with her elder sister Leah. And we can think back to chapter 27. This is the same sort of thing that happened.

[12 : 41] Rebecca had switched her two sons. And now, Rebecca's brother Laban switches his two daughters. He says, It is not so done in our country to give the younger before the firstborn.

You can imagine that stung, that Jacob knew that Laban was referring in part to the way that he had treated his brother Esau. There is a feast. There's the switching of the two children.

There's the use of darkness as a means of hiding recognition. So in the first story, it's the blindness of Isaac that's the darkness.

Here, it's just the darkness after the feast. We should presume that Jacob has drunk well. It's a feast of wine that they celebrate. And the drinking is something that is important to pay attention to here because we'll see references to it in the chapter that follows.

Jacob then says words to Laban that are very similar to the words of Esau to his father. He then goes on to serve another seven years for Leah. Altogether, this makes 14 years, two separate weeks of years, distinct sets, one week and then followed by another week.

[13:52] We should notice that there is another example of this later on in Genesis. It will occur again in the story of Joseph and the famine in Egypt. So keep this detail in the back of your mind for now because it will become relevant again then.

Jacob now has two rival wives in his house, one loved and the other unloved. And they're sisters, but they're at odds with each other now. And the repercussions of this will become central for the rest of the book of Genesis.

It's a rivalry between two wives, which spills over into the rivalry between two sides of a family. Later on, the law will say that you should not do this.

You shall not take a wife as a rival wife for her sister. In Leviticus 18 verse 18. This is speaking very clearly to a situation like that of Jacob and Rachel and Leah.

It's not an appropriate situation. And we can see from the fallout of it that it is a negative choice. There were many ways in which this led to harmful consequences for all parties involved.

[14:57] Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah are now born and named. We should observe the way that Leah is dealing with God through the story of her childbearing. She's in a tragic situation.

She's presumably in this situation more as a result of her father's engineering and plans and plots than of her own. But God sees and remembers her. Even though her father has wronged her, her sister is her rival, her husband doesn't love her, God sees her.

As in the story of Hagar, God remembers the outcast and has concern for the outcast. In Genesis, the names of the characters are often important for the narrative.

I've already noted the way that various facets of the laughter to which Isaac's name refers is explored throughout the story. And the names of Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah are important. The meanings that are given to them. And we'll maybe see or comment upon these at some later points. Within the story of Genesis. A question to think about in conclusion.

[15:59] It's important to remember that when we're reading the story of Genesis, we're not just reading a story or set of stories of mere individuals. The story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the descendants of Jacob is a story of God dealing with the tangled mess of a family over many generations.

All these stories are intertwined in unexpected and surprising ways. The story of Hagar is still playing out in the story of Joseph. The story of Rachel has repercussions all the way down. And the decision of Isaac to bless Esau over Jacob, that was eventually foiled by the deception of Jacob, has consequences that play out in the decisions and the events of this chapter.

As Jacob has the same sort of deception played on him. So when we're reading this story, we need to recognize that there is something that connects them all.

They are part of a greater story. And that this is a story in which the actions of one family member, a few generations back, can have repercussions for someone a few generations down the line.

[17:07] We are not detached individuals. And Abraham's descendants are not detached individuals. There are consequences that play out over generations. Now, this is how God deals with us too.

God deals with larger bodies of people, not just individuals in splendid detachment from each other. So for this question, I want you to think about the way in which, if you were telling your story, the story of other people around you, how you could retell it, not as a story of an individual life, but as the story of God dealing with families and bodies of people connected with each other.

Think about your story that way, and it may help you to read the story of Genesis in a richer and fuller manner.