

Genesis 30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 31 January 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 30 When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, Give me children or I shall die.

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? Then she said, Here is my servant Bilhah.

Go into her so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her. So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife and Jacob went into her.

And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, God has judged me and has also heard my voice and given me a son. Therefore she called his name Dan.

Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed.

[1 : 00] So she called his name Naphtali. When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son.

And Leah said, Good fortune has come. So she called his name Gad. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, Happy am I, for women have called me happy.

So she called his name Asher. 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.

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.

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.

[2 : 08] And God listened to Leah. And she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband. So she called his name Issachar.

And Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, God has endowed me with a good endowment. Now my husband will honour me because I have borne him six sons.

So she called his name Zebulun. Afterwards she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah. Then God remembered Rachel. And God listened to her and opened her womb.

She conceived and bore a son and said, God has taken away my reproach. And she called his name Joseph, saying, May the Lord add to me another son.

As soon as Rachel had borne Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, Send me away that I may go to my own home and country. 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.

[3 : 11] But Laban said to him, If I have found favour in your sight, I have learned by divination that the Lord has blessed me because of you. Name your wages and I will give it.

Jacob said to him, You yourself know how I have served you and how your livestock has fared with me. 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? 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.

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.

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.

[4 : 15] Laban said, Good, let it be as you have said. 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.

And he set a distance of three days' journey between himself and Jacob, and Jacob pastured the rest of Laban's flock. Then Jacob took fresh sticks of poplar and almond and plain trees, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the sticks.

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, the flocks bred in front of the sticks, and so the flocks brought forth stripes speckled and spotted.

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.

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. But for the feebler of the flock he would not lay them there.

[5 : 30] So the feebler would be Laban's, and the stronger Jacob's. Thus the man increased greatly, and had large flocks, female servants and male servants, and camels and donkeys.

Genesis chapter 30 may be one of the more confusing chapters in the book, with two of the most surprising and difficult episodes within the entirety of Genesis.

It continues the story where we left it off, in chapter 29. Jacob has been deceived by his uncle Laban into marrying Leah rather than Rachel. He then takes Rachel, who ends up as a rival wife to her sister.

However, Leah has four sons, while Rachel is childless. Rachel was tricked out of her marriage by her father, whereas Leah was tricked into it. And so at this point, Rachel envies her sister and vents her anger at Jacob.

Rachel's painful childlessness exacerbates the rivalry that she has with her sister, and even sparks antagonism with Jacob, her husband. And as a result of Laban's trickery, what could have been a fairytale union is now a miserable situation for every person involved.

[6 : 38] Like Sarai did with Hagar, Rachel tries to salvage the situation of her childlessness by giving her handmaid Bilhah to Jacob, her husband. And she names the two sons that she receives through Bilhah after her rivalry with her sister Leah.

God has judged me, Dan. With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed, Naphtali. And like Jacob wrestling with Esau, his brother, so Rachel is wrestling with Leah.

Jacob and Esau were in conflict with each other from the womb, and Rachel and Leah have been in conflict since being placed into this marriage situation. These stories of giving birth should not be passed over without attention.

The great works of God in history so often begin with women struggling in birth. They begin at places and with persons that we would not look to, with expectation of some great deliverer arising. It begins with things such as the story of Jochebed and the Hebrew midwives in the book of Exodus, and their resistance to the murderous decree of Pharaoh. It can begin with the story of Hannah and her wrestling prayer in the temple.

[7 : 51] Or it can begin with Elizabeth and Mary, two figures that would not be expected to give birth. Now, as God's works begin in these places, so in the chapter that we're reading here, we can see the same sort of pattern.

The turning point occurs as the women wrestle with God in prayer. God hears and remembers them. And out of that hearing and remembering comes a change of direction.

We've already noted this in the story of Leah, but it happens here in the story of Rachel as well. When she notices that she has stopped giving birth to children, Leah gives her handmaid Zilpah to her husband Jacob.

And Leah, through Zilpah, has Gad and Asher. And at this point we meet one of the stranger stories within the book, which is the story of Reuben and the Mandrakes.

So Reuben goes out into the field at around the time of the harvest, and he brings in some mandrakes for his mother. We don't know exactly what the mandrakes were.

[8 : 53] There are speculations. Some see them as a plant for fertility. Others see them as some sort of aphrodisiac. We don't know what they are. So what are we to make of them?

I think the clue, and it was Rabbi David Foreman who put me onto this, is found in who picks them and for whom. Reuben picks them for his mother Leah.

And the significance of this is that Reuben is the oldest son of Leah. He's only a few years old at this point. And he goes into the field and he picks some flowers to show his love for his mother. And he gives those flowers to his mother as a gift. When Rachel asks for the mandrakes then, she's not just asking for the plants or whatever they are. She's asking for Leah's son's mandrakes. It's important whose they are and from whom they have come. Reuben has given these to his mother as a sign of his love. And it is precisely this gift that Rachel requests.

[9 : 55] Now think about Rachel to this point. Rachel has been wrestling with her sister, envious of her sister, a rival to her sister. She's named her first two sons after this rivalry.

That God has judged in her case and come out in her favour in the case of Dan. And then Naphtali naming her son after that wrestling that she has with her sister.

That she has prevailed finally against her rival. And now she's asking for some of the gift that Reuben has given to his mother. What's significant about this?

Well, what Rachel is doing, I believe, is trying to create peace. She's changing the tenor of the relationship that she has with her sister. No longer is it going to be one of rivalry, but she wants to share in the love that her sister has for her son Reuben.

And no longer see herself as an opponent, but as one who's going to share and rejoice with her. However, when Leah's response comes, it's an angry response.

[10 : 57] It's a response that speaks of how aggrieved she feels by Rachel's actions. Rachel could have just left the situation alone. She could have allowed Leah to take her husband and mourn the fact.

And yet that's not what she did. She entered the marriage as a rival to her sister and ended up in a situation where her sister could not be happy and had to live as the unloved wife, no matter how many children she had.

And so Leah naturally feels fairly aggrieved by this situation. What is the arrangement that they come to? And why is that significant? Well, Rachel says that she can have, Leah can have Jacob that night.

That is a significant thing to do because that's what originally was stolen from her. She had her marriage bed stolen from her by Leah. And now she is giving that marriage bed to her sister, no longer as a rival, but as a sister.

And in exchange, she is going to share in her sister's love for her child. What she's doing is trying to create peace in a situation where there has been a breach.

[12 : 07] And as we go through scripture, we'll see events that call back to this memory. I think there's a very powerful reference back to this in chapter 31 of Jeremiah, which I might get to in a moment.

Out of that union that night, Leah gives birth to another son called Issachar. And Issachar, she sees as her reward or her wages. Later on in the Bible, in Jeremiah chapter 31, God says to Rachel that there is a reward for what she has done.

That seems to me that that's a reference back to this event, that Issachar is named after reward or wages. And in the same way, there is an Issachar for what Rachel has done.

And what did she do? She healed the breach with her sister. She formed peace. She pursued reconciliation where there was that tension within the family. And as we look in the rest of the book, that tension continues in the next generation.

But in her generation, Rachel sought to heal it. At this point, God remembers Rachel, listens to her and opens her womb. She bears a son whom she calls Joseph.

[13 : 19] And the birth of Joseph is seen to be a transition point. At this point, there is a sign that God has blessed. God has finally opened the womb of Rachel.

And now there is a promise of actually moving on, of returning maybe to the land that Jacob has left. However, when Jacob asked to leave, Laban asked him to stay on, as he has been blessed through the work of Laban.

Again, it is important to notice the way that Laban is treating his nephew here. He's not treating him in a proper way. If he were a good uncle, he would be sending him away with many gifts and

blessings, but he doesn't do that.

Rather, he treats Jacob as someone who has just owed any outstanding wages, of which there are none. But yet, when we look at the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 15, we're told that if you have a Hebrew man or Hebrew woman working for you as a servant, they should serve for six years, and in the seventh year they should go free.

And they should not be let free empty-handed. They should be furnished liberally from the flock, from the threshing floor, from the wine press, and as God has blessed them, they should actually give on to the person that has served them.

[14 : 34] And yet, this is completely different from the way that Laban treats Jacob. He is not a good uncle or even a good master. Laban does not treat Jacob as a family member, but more as a dishonoured servant.

And so Jacob's response to Laban's request for him to stay is a shrewd one. He knows that Laban won't willingly give him anything of real value. So Jacob asks for something that Laban won't value so highly.

It's also something that is easily tested. So Laban would easily be able to tell if Jacob hasn't kept the terms of the agreement, because it's the colours of the animals themselves.

Likewise for Jacob. Laban tries to ensure that Jacob won't have as much of the flock to choose from, so he puts most of the irregular coloured animals with his sons, leaving Jacob with only a small flock to select from.

But this, in many ways, makes things easier for Jacob to carry out his later activities without supervision. And again, we should note the play upon words here. There are white strips taken from the white tree.

[15 : 40] The poplar tree is one of the trees that's mentioned, and that's a tree that plays upon Laban's name, revealing the white beneath. And he's changing the colour of the white flocks of Laban.

And so Laban, his name connects with the colour white. And Jacob is changing the colour of the white flocks of Laban, using the white tree, white strips, and the white that's revealed beneath it. God is ultimately the one who makes Jacob's unusual plan work, as we see in the following chapter. But there are things to be noticed here. First of all, again, the plays upon words.

We've already observed some of the plays upon words in the story of Esau. Esau is associated with the land of Seir, but he's also associated with hair and with goats, both of which are very similar terms to the word for Seir.

Likewise, he's called Edom, just after he's eaten some of the red, red stew. And again, Edom connects with red, and it also connects with Adam. And so there are lots of plays upon words going on here.

[16 : 49] Laban has a name that again connects with the colour white, connects with Lebanon, perhaps, connects with poplar tree, it connects with bricks, whereas Jacob is connected with stones.

And as we go through, we'll see other plays upon words. Once again, it's important to pay attention to the unusual details that are given to us. So why mention that he uses fresh sticks of poplar, almond, and plain trees?

Why those particular trees? Why not just say some sticks? The fact that specific trees mentioned suggests that those trees are mentioned for a reason. And I think we'll see as we look a bit more closely.

First of all, the poplar tree plays upon the name of Laban. The almond tree is named Luz. We've already seen a Luz in chapter 28. Luz, which is the former name of Bethel.

And then it's connected with crookedness as well. And then there's the final tree, which is the plain tree, which is a word that's very similar to that for cunning. The use of those particular trees suggests that maybe there's something more going on here, that these symbolize something, that they stand for something.

[18 : 03] Now, there may be some parallels between the story of the wives and the story of the flocks. Laban, Mr. White, refused to give Jacob his beautiful ewe, Rachel.

Remember, Rachel means ewe. But he gave the feeble-eyed or delicate-eyed Leah instead, the less favoured sister. Jacob places the rods at the place where the flocks drink.

And he was deceived after a drinking feast. He symbolically repeats Laban's switch, but uses it to become strong. He knows that Laban's not going to give him the well-favoured sheep and livestock. Rather, he's going to give him the weak. He's going to give him the miscoloured. He's going to give him the less favoured. And so he accepts those. And he uses those to become strong.

He is symbolically replaying what Laban has done to him in a way that will lead him to prosper. The result is that Jacob increases, much as Abraham did in Egypt in chapter 12.

[19 : 07] And there are parallels between this story and the story of Abraham leaving Egypt in chapter 12. There will be another Exodus story in the two chapters that follow.

A question to reflect upon. The curse or judgment of Genesis chapter 3 verse 16 is that women will have pain in childbearing. And this plays out in the story of the matriarchs of Israel who often have difficulty conceiving.

Think of Sarai, Rebecca and Rachel all as examples of this. And in addition to struggle with barrenness, the many other pains and difficulties and dangers that attend childbearing.

Rachel is perhaps the greatest example of this. The person who dies ultimately in childbirth. And her story is a very painful one. Yet the flip side of that pain that recalls Genesis chapter 3 verse 16 is the promise that comes attached to it.

That this is the seed of the woman that's going to come forth. We can think of Genesis 3 verse 15 here. That the woman's seed will crush the serpent's head. And it's precisely those children of promise that require the most suffering to bring forth.

[20 : 24] What insight might this give us into the story of Rachel and its importance and the story of her son Joseph? Thank you.