

The Family of Abraham - Part 20—Mandrakes and Poplar Rods

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[0 : 00] Welcome back to this, the 20th in my series on the story of the family of Abraham. Today we're looking at chapter 30 of the book of Genesis, which concerns a struggle between two sets of people, between Leah and Rachel, and between Jacob and Laban.

And these stories both flow from things that have happened before. I've mentioned on a number of occasions in this series, but it's worth reiterating that when we read these accounts, we are not reading isolated accounts, just in a sort of episodic, monster of the week type TV show that you might have had in the past.

No, this is a grand arc of narratives, where these smaller episodes fit into a vast overarching narrative, in which things flow from each other.

So when things may even appear episodic, we'll often see events that echo previous events, or events that are playing out the consequences of what has happened before.

In the case of the deception of Jacob concerning Leah and Rachel, we saw a sort of inverse of what happened with Jacob and Isaac. In that case, the mother had deceived the father concerning the two sons by mixing up the older and the younger, so that the younger was blessed, rather than the older.

[1 : 19] In the story of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, we have the father mixing up the two daughters, so that the older is taken into the marriage and the younger is not.

So what we're seeing in that case is an inverse of the previous account, and we're playing out some of the consequences of what has happened. Jacob's life, in many respects, will be haunted by that decision, that deception of his father.

And there will be ways in which this is partially resolved, but the consequences still play out. And not just for Jacob. Leah and Rachel are trapped within this situation where they are rivals with each other.

Leah is bearing many children, but she is unloved by her husband. And Rachel is bearing no children, she's barren, but yet she is loved by her husband. And they are caught in this conflict with one another.

You can imagine what both of them are thinking. For Rachel, she has been tricked out of her wedding night. She's been tricked out of having a husband of her own. Now she has to share that husband with her sister.

[2 : 30] And even worse, her sister is bearing many children, and she is bearing none. And she feels just this sense of futility and frustration, and this sense of the injustice of it all.

She's been wronged by her father. She's been wronged by her sister. And it seems like she's been wronged by God too. That in all of these situations, just no one is on her side.

And she complains to Jacob and gets angry with Jacob that she wants a son. She wants children or she will die. It's a similar sort of story in some respects to Rebecca, where Rebecca is a character who's, when we hear her speak outside of chapter 24, she's a character who's very much defined by this frustration and this wrestling.

She's someone who's frustrated by the fact that she doesn't know what's happening within her when she's giving birth to these twins. Why is it this way with me? She's frustrated with the wives of the daughters, the wives of her son Esau, the daughters of Heth, and their frustration and the cause of bitterness to her.

And then she mourns over, she does not want to be bereaved or to miscarry both of her children in one day. So she sends off Jacob. There's an element of tragedy there, that she is, there is the pain involved with the judgment upon the woman in Genesis 3.16.

[4 : 03] It's being played out in these stories. They're giving birth to children that will be the means by which God sets things right. But their experience is a painful one. It's an experience of struggling and wrestling, of having to pray, of having to seek God's deliverance, of seeing all things lost and then praying that somehow God might salvage the situation.

At every point in this story, we see that there is tragedy, either having directly occurred or tragedy that's just haunting the story or tragedy that's just around the corner, about to strike.

This is a very difficult story to find a point where everything's upbeat. There are points where it seems to be upbeat. But even at those points, tragedy seems to be around the corner or storm clouds are gathering.

When we read the story of Leah and Rachel, we should then recognise also the place of Leah. Leah was presumably, her father was primarily the one who instigated all of this.

He gave Leah to Jacob. Leah knows that she's not loved by Jacob. And she feels frustrated by the fact that even as she's bearing children and hoping that her husband will love her, she still finds herself not really loved.

[5 : 24] And that's her frustration for her. Likewise, she's angry with her sister. Her sister had been, she had been confused with her sister by her father and then given to Jacob.

And at that point, shouldn't Rachel have just left that situation alone? Just recognise the fact that the situation had been messed up by their father and that anything she could do would only make things worse.

So she should stay away from the marriage. Let Leah and Jacob have their marriage and do not interfere. But no, Rachel, her sister, had to butt in, had to marry Jacob too.

And now they're caught as rivals. Rachel is vying, is taking the love of her husband. The love that she should be entitled to. And now she finds herself unloved, even though God is listening to her and giving her children.

And in this situation, both of them are bitter rivals. Now think about Jacob. Jacob also has this great frustration. He's feeling this sense of being judged as a result of the thing that he has done to his father.

[6 : 33] Now he's facing the consequences with his father-in-law having performed a similar sort of trick upon him. And he feels frustrated with the situation in his own house, where instead of domestic bliss that he had foreseen with Rachel, now he's in a situation of pain and frustration and anger, as Rachel and Leah are angry with each other and struggling against each other.

And Rachel is now angry at him too. Give me children or I die. And yet he's not in God's place. How can he set this situation right? It seems that everything is wrong.

And Laban is involved in the situation in a way that makes things worse for everyone. He's a scheming machinator of plots and plans to try and defraud and reduce his son-in-law to servitude.

And his daughters are now being treated in many ways as strangers by him, as we'll see in the story. In this story, then, all of them seem to be suffering under the yoke of Laban, but not in a way that unifies them.

Rather, they're being torn apart. And we can see in these stories often the way that this desire for this sense of frustration that characters have gets played out upon others.

[7 : 57] So Jacob is probably not the person that Rachel should be blaming. But it's natural for someone in that position who feels all that frustration, who feels all this pressure, who feels that sense of futility and worthlessness, who feels that sense of just not being able to be the person that they were always hoping to be, that they would take it out on the person closest to them.

And she takes it out on Jacob. And so the very relationship that we had seen as the one that looked like this fairy tale union is now characterised by a degree of animosity and anger.

And it's a very sad story at this point. And as we read it, we'll see that Rachel tries to overcome the situation by giving Bilhah her maid to her husband Jacob.

And Bilhah bears two sons to Jacob. And the way that the sons are named throughout this story is important. As we follow the naming of the sons, we'll see, first of all, that when we think about names, we often don't give much significance to them.

We just think about them as the sound of a name. And it's attractive sound. Maybe it has certain connotations, class connotations, maybe ethnic or racial connotations.

[9 : 15] It could be connotations with someone you're associated with in your family tree. Maybe you're named after your grandfather or your grandmother. But in this context, the names are given a lot of weight.

And the mothers are naming the children. The mothers are naming the sons. And the names are given for a reason. When we see the names given, there is an explanation for why they are given the names.

Now, it's not always a straightforward etymology. On some cases, there's plays on words. There are ways in which we're exploring the ambiguities of words. Issachar being an example. Joseph being another.

Where it's playing upon two terms. And as we read through this, we should also bear in mind that the name in these situations is one of the first cards that is dealt to these characters in the game of their lives.

And as we read through their stories, we need to see how the destiny on that card gets played out. So they're given a name. And that name carries a certain significance with it.

[10 : 19] And it's something that their mothers put a lot of weight in giving them that name. It was saying something about their understanding of the significance of that child. And what will that child do with that?

So, for instance, Reuben is called Reuben because the Lord has surely looked on my affliction. Is Reuben going to be someone who's going to look upon the affliction of others and take pity upon them?

Simeon is called Simeon because the Lord has heard that Leah was unloved. Is he going to be someone who pays attention to the person who is unloved?

As we read through the story, we'll see that they play out their names in different ways. When we get to chapter 49, we'll also see many of these plays upon the names occurring again.

If you look at the characters of Dan, Dan is given a name that's associated with judgment. That God has judged Rachel's case and has heard her voice and given her a son through Bilhah, her maid.

[11 : 26] And in Genesis 49, Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. And this is a way in which we're seeing the name still being played upon.

Gad. A troop shall tramp. It's playing upon the word Gad in both cases. Other cases we see might be Zebulun shall dwell by the haven of the sea.

Zebulun meaning dwelling. Now dwell is a different word there in the Hebrew, but it's playing upon the same theme. Judah. You are he whom your brothers shall praise.

Judah means praise. Simeon and Levi are brothers, instruments of cruelty in their habitation. Simeon means hated and Levi means attached. And the themes of that particular judgment are these two brothers are attached to each other, but others should be detached from them, that they are detached from others, and that they are characterized by hatred and anger.

And so it seems to be playing upon the fundamental themes of these names. But at the beginning what you see is the mothers give them the names, and at the end, in the blessing, the father is declaring upon them their destiny in the future, and also casting, to some extent, judgment upon what they have done to that point.

[12 : 49] And so there are two different ways of looking at the names here. But pay attention to the names and the reasons that are given for the names, because there are stories being played out here. These, as I said, are the first cards that are dealt to these characters in the game of their lives, and how they work with those will be significant.

On the other hand, it's something that tells you about the place at which the mothers are in that particular part of the story. Rachel gives Bilhah to her husband Jacob, and Bilhah bears two sons to Jacob, Dan and Nathalie, Judge and Wrestling.

And we can see in those names just a sense of how Rachel feels frustrated by her sister. She's caught up in this conflict with her sister. She wants God to judge in her case, and so she calls her first son Dan.

God has heard her case against her sister, against the situation that she's in, maybe against her father, maybe even against Jacob too. And the second is called Nathalie.

With great wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and indeed I have prevailed. Now, the themes that we see here are also themes that are played out in the broader story. So, the theme of God seeing the affliction, and then God hearing that about a lack of love, the person is not loved, these are themes that we see playing out in the narrative more generally.

[14 : 20] These are Exodus themes as well. This is a moment where the story might be pivoting as well. In the story of the Exodus, in the story of the Kingdom, in these sorts of stories, often it begins with women struggling in birth.

It begins at that point with those private prayers, with the wrestling of people like Jochebed, Miriam, the Hebrew midwives, and characters like Hannah, or characters like Mary and Elizabeth.

These are the characters with which these great movements begin. And maybe in the depth of this servitude to Laban, and the struggle in the house of Laban, what we see in the prayers and the strugglings and strivings of these women, is the seed of what is about to take place.

And within these namings, we see signs, seeds of promise, about to burst forth at some point in the future. But at this point, naming Dan and Natalie, there's that sense of rivalry.

She's wrestling with her sister. And Jacob's wrestling with his brother. He's wrestling with Laban. He'll eventually wrestle with the angel. His life is characterized by wrestling.

[15 : 32] Rachel's life is characterized by wrestling. And there's a great tragedy that hangs over Rachel's life. As we see Rachel's life, Rachel, first of all, she's prevented from marrying Jacob straight away, in part because of what Jacob has done to Esau.

Jacob doesn't come bearing great wealth and gifts, as his father did with Eliezer of Damascus, as he was sent with many camels and gifts for Rebecca.

He doesn't have that, in part because he's had to leave at short notice. And then you have Laban, her father, tricking Jacob. And so she does not have Jacob to herself.

Her wedding night is spoiled and her marriage is one of rivalry with her sister. Her womb is barren. And then she's struggling with her sister.

And this rivalry defines her. And the misery of not feeling that her husband is, that she's not having children. She's angry with her husband.

[16 : 31] She's angry with God. She's angry with her sister. And then as her story progresses, we see the events concerning the teraphim, which we'll get to at a later point. We see the events of the loss of Jacob, no, the loss of Joseph.

The loss of her death in giving birth to Benjamin before that. Her life is stalked by tragedy. And later on in scripture, her life is defined very much by tears, by the struggling in giving birth and the tragic death in birth.

She will end up not being buried with Jacob. She'll be buried on the road. And her life is a life of tragedy. And the weeping of Jacob as he first meets her is possibly foreshadowing the tragedy of their union.

That their union, even though it will give birth to Benjamin and Joseph, it will be a union characterized by tragedy of love that does not come to fruition in the same way as it looked promising to.

It's a very sad story in many respects. At this point, Leah stops bearing and she gives Zilpah, her maid, to Jacob and she bears Gad and Asher.

[17 : 46] A troop comes, Gad, and Asher, I am happy for the daughters will call me blessed. There's a shift in Leah's tone at this point.

Then we have a peculiar episode. There's two peculiar episodes in this chapter. Very peculiar episodes. Episodes that are very odd in certain of the details that they mention.

In particular, the plants or the trees and other things that are mentioned. Here we have Reuben going out into the field at the time of the wheat harvest and finding mandrakes and bringing them to his mother Leah.

And then Rachel asks Leah, please give me some of your son's mandrakes. And Leah's response is angry. Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband?

Would you take away my son's mandrakes also? Now let's try and put ourselves in Rachel and Leah's position here. Rachel has born two children through Bilhah.

[18 : 50] And those two children have been called Dan, God has judged, and Naphtali. With great wrestlings I have wrestled against my sister. She sees herself as Leah's rival and caught up with this rivalry.

She's not really having children. And until Bilhah bears children for her. And her sister is bearing many children. She may be loved, but her sister has butted in on her marriage.

On the other hand, think about how Leah's looking at things. Leah feels that Rachel has taken her husband. She was the firstborn.

She should have. She should marry first. And yet, now you have Rachel wanting to take Jacob before her. And her father tricked Jacob.

And so Jacob ended up marrying her rather than Rachel. But within that situation, surely Rachel should have just left that alone. She should have recognised that that was the way it was supposed to be.

[19 : 52] It wasn't nice for her. Maybe she feels sorry for Rachel to that extent. But surely Rachel should understand that that's the way things are supposed to be. But no, Rachel doesn't seem to get it.

She marries Jacob too. And now she makes life miserable for Leah. Leah knows she's unloved. Whereas if Rachel wasn't in the union, perhaps she would have a chance of being loved by Jacob.

And it's a very difficult situation for her. Now, her firstborn son comes in bearing some flowers, some mandrakes. We don't know exactly what these dudaim are.

And we could speculate about them. Some have seen them as things for the purpose of fertility. Others as an aphrodisiac. Whatever they are, we don't exactly know.

And perhaps the most illuminating and stimulating reflection I've ever heard on this chapter is from Rabbi David Foreman. A very stimulating reflection.

[20 : 52] A long video in which he explores the way that this event is related elsewhere in scripture and what its meaning could be. I'm not entirely persuaded of all the details with absolute certainty.

But I think it's a very promising and suggestive reading. And I'll give you the bare bones of it here. He observes that we don't know what the flowers are. They're mentioned elsewhere in the Song of Songs.

But there's no certainty concerning what these are. Do we need to know what they are? Now, they may be for the case of fertility or aphrodisiacs or something like that.

And that's a possibility we should bear in mind, particularly as we read later in the chapter. But perhaps it just doesn't matter what they are. Perhaps the important thing is that they are given by Reuben to his mother.

Why is that significant? Why does Leah respond in the way that she does? If she had flowers, I mean, surely these aren't that valuable.

[21 : 54] Why shouldn't she just give some of the flowers to her sister? Why would she be so angry? And compare this to taking her husband?

And the way that she sees it, that Rachel has taken her husband, that may be a light switch going on for Rachel. Maybe Rachel's not thought about it that way from Leah's perspective.

Maybe Rachel thinks Leah should understand she's taken my husband. But no, Leah sees it the other way around. Why would she be so angry? And why would she compare these two things?

Well, because Reuben is her firstborn. And Reuben, at this point, is probably no more than three or four. He's gone out into the field.

He's picked some mandrakes, some flowers, specially for his mother. And those may as well be dandelions for all it really matters. The important thing is that they are flowers picked by the firstborn for his mother.

[22 : 55] They're a sign of his love for his mum. And in that situation, it's similar to the child that brings this hand painting that's home from Playgroup.

And you love that painting. You put it up on your fridge. It's a sign of your child's love for you. That after all you've put into that child, finally the child is giving something back.

That they have a love for you that is a cause of delight, a cause of joy. And for Rachel to want some of her son's mandrakes, that's quite an imposition.

I mean, it's bad enough to take the husband and his love. Should you want to take this expression of my son's love too? That's outrageous.

It's scandalous. It's something that really gives that sense of anger. It stirs up that anger within Leah. Because she feels that Rachel has caused enough trouble as it is.

[24 : 00] Does she want to snatch the love of my son too? It just seems so wrong. But what is Rachel thinking? Rachel, to this point, has been defined by rivalry with her sister.

By great wrestlings that she has wrestled with her sister. But at this point, something seems to have shifted. She's not seeing her sister as a rival. Rather, she's wanting to enter into the joy of her sister.

And her response is a striking one. Her response is to say that in exchange for the mandrakes, Jacob will lie with Leah that night.

Now, why is that significant? I mean, it's a very strange thing to give in exchange for a son's flowers that he has picked for his mum. You can lie with my husband tonight in exchange for this.

What is she giving? What had originally been taken from her? Her marriage bed. Leah had intruded. She had been an interloper upon that bed.

[25 : 08] And she had tricked Jacob into thinking that he was lying with Rachel, when in fact it was Leah. And now, Rachel is giving in exchange for this expression of the love of Reuben for his mother.

She's giving in exchange for that. What had once been stolen from her by Leah. It's a very significant action. It changes the character of the past event.

No longer is that event one that is seen as a poisonous event that hangs between the two sisters like a dark cloud. Rather, Rachel has given what was once taken.

And Leah now allows Rachel to share in the joy of her children. There's a union in the family. Now we'll see the breach between the two sides of the family continue into the next generation and beyond.

But for now, and on that level of the family, there has been a union. There's been an act of reconciliation. A remarkable act of reconciliation. And in that act of reconciliation, we see something of the initiative of Rachel in this situation.

[26 : 19] That she is willing to hold out the olive branch to her sister. And to take an action that takes the first step to restore a broken bridge. It's a very remarkable sign of how that action that had occurred in the past can be redeemed.

To some extent, there can be a redemption of what Laban had done to them both. And the rivalry that that had caught them within. And so she replays that event, but replays it in a way that takes out the sting and sucks away the poison of what had once been done to her.

After this event, Leah conceives and gives birth to a son called Issachar. And Issachar is called Issachar because God has given me my hire because I have given my maid to my husband.

So she called his name Issachar, meaning hire. It also means wages. So it's to hire. She's hired Jacob for the night.

And a very strange way to speak about it. And she'd also got her reward. And so these two themes, it's playing upon those two themes. And as we read through the story, we should recognise, mentioned earlier, these aren't strict etymologies.

[27 : 36] At many points, it's playing upon words, upon the sounds of words as well. And bringing in related terms and terms that sound similar. We'll see that also in the case of Joseph's name.

Issachar means reward. Now, when we get to the passage that Rabbi David Foreman comments upon, he talks about the story of Rachel as one of tragedy, as one of losing her life and childbirth, of almost losing two sons.

Benjamin is almost lost twice. He's almost lost, almost lost three times. He's almost lost in birth. He's almost lost, seems to be lost in the story of Egypt, when Jacob's cup is found in the top of his bag.

And then he's almost lost in the story of Judges, at the end of the story of Judges, as the tribe of Benjamin is almost completely wiped out. And so her story is stalked by tragedy.

Her son, her firstborn son, Joseph, it seems that Joseph, sent down to slavery in Egypt, it seems that he's dead.

[28 : 45] And the story of Joseph is again a story of deep, dark mourning for his father Jacob. And so these two parents, Jacob and Rachel, are defined by tears.

Rachel is defined by tears in places like Micah 4 and 5, giving birth and struggling to give birth, and death in birth.

And then the tears associated with lost children in places like Jeremiah 31. I've commented upon this before in talking about Matthew chapter 2.

Again there we see a reference back to Micah 5, in which context Rachel's tears are very prominent, and Rachel struggling in birth. And then, later on in that chapter, we see a reference to Jeremiah 31.

Rachel mourning for her children, because they are no more. And then the word of promise comes in in the prophecy, which is not cited in the chapter, but it talks about your sons will return.

[29 : 45] And then the immediate verse afterwards in Matthew 2, Christ returns from Egypt. And so the story of Rachel is a tragic one.

And in Jeremiah 31, we read of Rachel, a voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.

Rabbi David Foreman comments upon this, and he talks about the way that you can hear these pregnant phrases in that particular prophecy, that go back through the story of Rachel and her children and their destiny.

A voice heard on high. Reverse those words, and you get the statement of Potiphar's wife. When he heard my raised voice. Crying bitter, bitter tears.

And that's the same intensified word for bitterness that we find one time in the book of Genesis, concerning Joseph, about his life being embittered. We then see Rachel crying for her children.

[30 : 48] And that's what we see in the story of Joseph, as his father cries over his lost son. We have the refusing to be consoled. Who else refuses to be consoled?

Jacob refuses to be consoled over the death, supposed death of his son Joseph. And the mention of the children who have gone. Again, we see in the story of Joseph, Reuben comes to the pit, and behold, the child is gone.

And it's the tragedy of, he had hoped to rescue the child, to rescue Joseph, but no, the child is gone. The very end of this particular prophecy, it says, it moves to a point where it says, Now, she's told to stop crying.

What we'd expect to find there, Rabbi David Forman points out, is, For I have seen your distress, and I've taken compassion upon you, shown mercy upon you, and I will redeem your children.

But that's not what we read. Rather, we see that God says, Your work, what you have done, shall be rewarded. Or, there is a reward for what you have done.

[32 : 06] What did she do? Well, the clue is in there. The clue is that there is a reward, is, Basically, Basically, it's her Issachar.

And what was that thing that she did, that will be rewarded? It was that act of forging peace with her sister. The forging of peace, out of which her sister got her wages, her reward of Issachar.

Now, her, Rachel's Issachar, will be the redemption of her children, from exile. And so this story, and the stories that we find in Genesis, cast long shadows over the scripture.

In Matthew chapter 2, we'll see the same thing again, and have commented upon this before. As we go further on in this chapter, we see these themes continue to be played out. We see the story of Jacob's being tricked by Laban concerning his two daughters, the consequences of that playing out, and the consequences of what had occurred between Jacob and his father, Isaac.

Jacob asked to leave at this point. And he asked to leave after the birth of Joseph. First of all, God has, she conceives and bears a son.

[33 : 25] Finally, God remembers Rachel. God listens to her, opens her womb. She conceives and bears a son, and it called, God has called Joseph because God has gathered up my shame or my reproach.

And that, what is her reproach? I mean, it might be connected to the fact that the same word reference to gathering is in the previous chapter where Laban gathers together all the men of the place and made a feast.

It's associated with the tragedy of her wedding, the wedding that just went wrong, that didn't actually turn out to be her wedding at all. And God has dealt with that situation.

God has gathered up that reproach and rolled it away. And then she goes on to say, and she called his name Joseph and said, the Lord shall add to me another son.

And it's playing here upon two different words, add and gathered. And these are different words and it's a playing upon the terms that sound, sound alike.

[34 : 32] They're not exactly the same terms. And it's also a foreshadowing of the birth of Benjamin, which will be her death as well, which is worth bearing in mind. And the birth of this son, Joseph, is seen as an auspicious event that betokens that something has changed.

God has opened the womb of Rachel, who has been struggling to bear a son. This is the child of promise. Maybe it's significant that the child is born here 14 years after what has happened.

After he left and after he first arrived at the house of Laban. 14 years after the birth of Ishmael, we have the birth of Isaac.

So maybe there's a similar thing here. Two weeks of years and then there is a release. There is an event that occurs that is the deliverance.

And so at this point, he asked to be sent back to his own country and he's hoping to be sent away with a blessing, to be sent away with a gift. And yet he says, give me my wives and my children for whom I have served you and let me go for you know my service which I have done to you.

[35 : 49] And then Laban asked him to stay because he had been blessed as a result of Jacob's service for him. And he says, is there anything that I've really held back from you?

I've given you your wages. Are you expecting, essentially he's saying, are you expecting a gift as well? You've had your wages. I've not left anything out of your wages. He's not treating him as a son-in-law.

If he was a true son-in-law, he has sent him away with many gifts, with a blessing, with a sense of his fatherly favour for his daughters. But Laban is someone who has reduced Jacob to a sort of servitude and he's also reduced his daughters.

And when we later on read about Rachel and Leah's judgment upon their father, say, he's used up all our money. Joseph, or Jacob, had worked to pay a bride price, a mohav, for Rachel and Leah.

And that money was supposed to be theirs. It was supposed to be kept in trust for them by Laban as a guarantee so that if they ever needed it in the future, there would be that money there for them as security.

[36 : 56] But no, he uses up all that money. He treats them as strangers. He treats Jacob as a servant in his house and a mere employee and he's always changing terms with him.

He's not treating him justly. And in this way we see that there are Exodus themes playing out here again. The hard taskmaster who does not treat people fairly.

Jacob then makes an agreement with Laban and says that Laban's property has been increased and he should be given something by Laban but then Laban said what shall I give you?

And Jacob says he knows that Laban wouldn't give him anything of any worth so he makes an agreement and he makes a plan. You shall not give me anything.

If you will do this thing for me I will again feed and keep your flocks. Let me pass through all your flock today removing from there all the speckled and spotted sheep and all the brown ones among the lambs and the spotted and speckled among the goats and these shall be my wages.

[38 : 06] So my righteousness will answer for me in time to come when the subject of my wages comes before you everyone that is not speckled and spotted among the goats and brown among the lambs will be considered stolen if it is with me.

And Laban is quite happy with that but then he removes from the flocks all the male goats that speckled and spotted and female goats speckled and spotted and everyone that has some white in it and the browns among the lambs and gives them to his sons.

So he wants to limit the group that Jacob can select from and to remove the ones that would be most promising to breed the types of flocks that Jacob is looking for that will be his payment.

So he's trying to make things as hard as possible for Jacob. He's working at enmity with Jacob and in opposition with him. This story is the story that follows is a very very weird one.

It's perhaps one of the weirdest stories in Genesis maybe next to that story of Reuben and the mandrakes when people get fixated upon what were the mandrakes were they for fertility were they aphrodisiacs now they could well be and as we read the story we might find some reasons why they might be paralleled.

[39 : 22] Within this story we have a plot that or a plan that Jacob hatches and it's a very strange one it's hard to figure out the details and by far the most illuminating or stimulating treatment I've read on this is Scott Neugel's article I'm trying to remember the name of it it's something like Sex Sticks and the Trickster in Genesis 30 but I can't remember the name but I'll give the link to it below in the comments and the show notes.

His theory is that Jacob essentially puts in the watering hole where all the flocks will be coming to drink he's still looking after part of Laban's flocks the part that has not been sent away with Laban's sons and he's got some flocks of his own which are separated from that too and so he tries to get the flocks to certain of the flocks certain animals within the flocks to conceive or to mate against the rods now some have seen the idea being Jacob puts the rods within the water so that when the flocks bear children which they would bear in the watering hole and watering troughs that they would see that and it would imprint upon them and then they'd have lambs and they would have goats that would be of a similar colour that would reflect those sorts of colours now it's a sort of primitive magic that he's using some nature magic now I don't think that's what he's doing and later on in the story we'll see that

God is the one who has acted within this situation in chapter 31 the angel of the Lord spoke in a dream saying Jacob he said here I am and he said lift up your eyes and see all the rams which leap on the flocks are streaked speckled and grey spotted for I have seen all that Laban is doing to you and earlier on so God has taken away the livestock or earlier on in verse 7 your father has deceived me and changed my wages ten times but God did not allow him to hurt me if he said thus the speckle shall be your wages then all the flocks bore speckled and if he said thus the streaked shall be your wages then all the flocks bore streaked so God has taken away the livestock of your father and given them to me and it happened at the time when the flocks conceived that I lifted my eyes and saw in a dream and behold the rams which leaped upon the flocks were streaked speckled and grey spotted reading this it suggests that God was the one that made this plan work ultimately now that doesn't mean that there wasn't good reason for what

Jacob did in a number of respects there were good reasons for what he did it actually could work to some extent but also it was an act that had significance in terms of the larger story I mentioned before that Rachel and Leah were in rivalry with each other as a result of what Laban had done in confusing the two on Jacob's wedding night now there are similar themes going on here because that event set Jacob and Laban at odds with each other and we have two different parts of the story as well the first part of the story begins with Jacob serving for wives and then children and now he's serving for the flocks and these things are paralleled Leah's wages occur through birth and Jacob's wages occur through the birthing of these flocks and so in both of these stories there's the significance of birth and both are replaying the past event in some ways

Jacob or Rachel and Leah are replaying the event in a way that gives reconciliation that takes out the poison from that past event Jacob and Laban are playing out the event but Jacob is playing it out so that Laban gets his comeuppance and so in both of these cases we're seeing the same themes playing out and if there is some reference to aphrodisiacs in the mandrakes or some reference to fertility it would seem to be that something similar is taking place here what are the rods the rods according to Scott Norgal they're phalluses they're false phalluses and they're designed as so that the ewes and the she goats that Jacob does not want to bear young he will get them to mate with the false against the rods and as a result they won't be bearing young whereas the other ones he'll make sure that they actually mate freely and so the plan is to get all the fertile all the ones that would go to

[44 : 37] Laban he makes sure that they just mate against the rods and in essence he's making some sort of ovine sextile according to Scott Norgal and I think there's a good argument to be made for that at points his argument is stretched a bit too far I think but I think there's something it makes a lot more sense than many of the other theories and certain things start to slip into place as we start to think about this particular plot it explains why the things happen in the way that they do again it's a deception involving goats and concealment it's maybe the reference it talks about in the runnel setting them before the flocks and the gutters in the watering troughs now the gutters the question is are those runnels or gutters are they just the same thing as the watering troughs or are these different things are these like flowing hair as we see a reference to that within

Song of Songs I think he might be stretching things a bit here because in Exodus we have a reference to watering troughs using this sort of word but it's possible it may be a reference to goat like hair and so he establishes using these three different trees wood from these three different trees he establishes these rods and he establishes these rudimentary sex dolls for sheep and goats that they will use rather than mating with each other and this is a way that he can end up tricking Laban think about some of the deeper themes here Rachel is named Rachel meaning you and Leah means could mean wild heifer or something like that and so the building up of sheep and of cattle and these sorts of things is associated with the wives the wives are the ones that are building up flocks as well in the story we have the earlier story

Jacob was given the less favoured daughter by the father-in-law and the beautiful ewe was withheld from him what we see in his plan is that he plays out this scenario again he does not ask for the beautiful ewes of Laban's flock rather he asks for the ones that Laban is quite happy to dismiss and through those he will make his wealth will be made great not through the more favoured ewes and in the story that proceeds we'll see that it's!

Leah the two sisters that ends up being the most fertile to bear many children and it's Rachel the favoured ew who is not the most fertile and in this story I think there's playing out something very similar where does he place these things and he's using deception to get remember he's using deception to get the ewes to come in to one that is not actually around where is he doing this at the watering hole in the previous chapter we see that there is a feast of wine immediately before the deception Laban has a feast of wine he gathers people together for a feast of wine and it's after that that Jacob is deceived and so he brings Laban's flocks to the place of drinking and it's at that point that he deceives them and so it's playing out the same themes

Jacob carefully divides these animals so he will get the speckled and spotted lambs and dark lambs and every speckled and spotted she-goat Laban tries to make sure that this isn't successful or is limited in its success and divides it but Jacob still deals with the remainder of Laban's flocks and he uses the rods on the dark coloured she-goats at the watering hole so that they don't bear offspring and then separates the sheep and makes them face the striped and dark coloured animals in Laban's flock and so he also makes Laban's stronger animals mate upon the rods leaving Laban with a weaker flock and I think Walter Brueggemann brings out many of these themes that Laban deceives Jacob into receiving Leah the strong wild cow and now the strong of Laban's flocks are placed before the impotent rods and Rachel means you and Rachel and Leah are associated with flocks and later on we'll see him calling to his flocks

[49 : 44] Rachel and Leah in a way that suggests that maybe Rachel and Leah and their children are his flocks at the beginning of this account of entering into the land of Laban we see him meeting three flocks and then Rachel coming with the flock last again I've suggested in the previous talk that this might be what we see at the end at the end of the story he divides his family into four flocks or three or four flocks with him going ahead and he's the shepherd perhaps and then you have four flocks the flock of Bilhah the flock of Zilpah the flock of Leah and the flock of Rachel and Rachel's flock comes last and that parallel suggests that we should read the story of Laban and Jacob and Laban's flocks against the background and alongside and parallel with the story of Jacob and Laban's daughters their bearing of young and the flock's bearing of young are paralleled events

Laban tricks or Jacob tricks Laban into giving him the lambs that he wants even if the beautiful ewes are denied to him he will still beat Laban at his game what we see then in this chapter is the reversal of it's the playing out of what has happened previously it's the playing out of the significance first of all of Jacob's deceiving of his father which had the knock-on consequence of Laban deceiving him in a very similar manner concerning his two daughters and that created a rivalry between Leah and Rachel and a rivalry between Laban and Jacob and here we see those things being played out again and they're being played out in the next they're being played out between Rachel and Leah the two sisters and they're being played out between father-in-law and son-in-law there are some interesting details in this chapter as well it's mentioned that there are three rods that are used he takes rods of green poplar and of almond and chestnut trees peeled white strips in them and exposed the white which was in the rods now why those particular trees it's a very strange thing to talk about

I mean why would we expect those particular trees to be mentioned if we look at it a bit more closely I think what we'll see is that they are associated with key names first of all what do you see repeated in this account you see repeated references to white you have the white strips being peeled you have that being peeled in order to reveal the white within them and then there is the fact that there is a white tree associated the tree is literally called with a name that plays off Laban's name and Laban means white among other things it's associated with white also associated with bricks also associated with Lebanon a number of other things that Laban's name is associated with we'll get to the story of David we'll see it's associated with the name Nabal which is Laban backwards so what is he doing earlier on in the story of chapter 26 I think it is or 25 we see that in chapter 25

Esau is deceived by Jacob concerning his birthright and what happens in that story is that Esau asks for some of the red red stuff that Jacob is cooking some of the lentil stew now Esau may not know that it is lentil stew he wants the red red stuff now he might think it's forbidden food he might think it's a blood stew of some type perhaps that's something that David Dorb has suggested but what is he immediately called after that he's called Edom meaning red he's deceived using the red red stuff he's outwitted and he despises his birthright what happens here Laban is deceived using white strips stripped from the white tree to reveal the white beneath Laban white is deceived using the white tree and the white strips revealing the white beneath and so there's a poetry to this red is deceived using the red red stuff that

Jacob is cooking and white Mr. White is deceived by the white is outwitted using the white rods and in both of these cases we see a poetry of that's playing out in these stories these events are connected if you're reading these stories and just taking these events as separate accounts and you're not seeing the way that destinies of persons and families and peoples are playing out here and that these events flow from each other in related themes and motifs and sequences then you're missing a lot of what is going on the deception of Laban here is connected with the deception of Esau it's connected with the events with Rachel and Leah and what's happening with them and maybe there is also a connection between the mandrakes and certainly a connection between the reference to flowers in a strange place or trees in a strange place and the specificity of it again is odd mandrakes have been associated with fertility and aphrodisiacs their presence in the Song of Songs might suggest that too the other tree that's mentioned here is you have the almond tree or luz and the other one is associated with nakedness and with craftiness it's the same word that we find at the very end of

[55 : 57] Genesis chapter 2 the nakedness of Adam and Eve and the next verse of the craftiness and cunning of the serpent what might be going on here the significant word plays we've seen the word plays in the story of Esau where Seah and the words for goats and hairy and the place where Esau lives in Seah and then Edom playing off red all these things are playing off against each other and Edom plays off Adam they're all these different word plays that associate particular clusters of themes what do we know about these two terms Luz associated with craftiness and cunning and nakedness associated with the other word what should we make of these things well we've already seen a Luz in the previous chapter the Luz that's name is changed to or two chapters earlier Luz that's name is changed to Bethel its name formally was Luz the changing of a name is interesting the changing of a name to give it a new significance as a result of a divine encounter maybe there's something going on there maybe we're supposed to see this as something associated with the changing finally of

Jacob's name Jacob's name is associated with craftiness with him being a serpent type figure with him taking the heel of his brother as he goes out to the womb with him being the one who supplanted his brother the one who deceived his brother those two times concerning the birthright and then the blessing and so he's the heel it's not a positive term and that term is changed but yet here maybe we have one tree the white tree is associated with Laban and those other terms one is associated with the serpent seems to have associations with the serpent from Genesis chapter 3 verse 1 and the other seems to be associated with craftiness and other things like that maybe what these trees represent is Laban as this crafty another crafty serpent like figure and Jacob must be craftier than him Jacob here we see his struggle with Esau

Esau is very much a man of the earth Esau Esau is a smart guy Esau is rather a man who's very much defined by the proximity to the earth he's a hairy guy he's an earthy guy he smells of the field he's a hunter he wanders around in the field he's someone who is a man of weaponry he's a man who's a man defined by hairy hands he's a doer and Jacob is more of a thinker he's a wily guy he's a slippery smooth character and Laban is a good match for Jacob Laban is someone who's wily like he's a true serpent he's a serpent that Jacob needs to outwit and so on one hand he's fighting struggling against wrestling against Esau his brother Esau this earthy man and then he's wrestling against Laban this smart wily serpent and both of them he outwits both of them he overcomes eventually and as we see his story reach its climax

Jacob takes within himself these different qualities he is wily like the serpent but he is also someone who has developed strength someone who can wrestle and someone who can outwit and someone who can master with his strength other other persons when he's wrestling with the angel for instance and I mentioned already in chapter 29 he's someone who seems to have developed a strength by that point that he did not have previously so he takes on the character of some of the characteristics of Esau and some of the characteristics of Laban but these are purified within him and brought to a proper righteous expression he's wise as a serpent but yet harmless as a dove he's someone who has the strength and the hands ultimately of an Esau and can wrestle and overcome Esau but yet he's someone who's not the one who despises his birthright like Esau he's not one who is characterised by

Esau's unfaithfulness of Esau's impetuosity and his anger and all these sorts of things and so Jacob becomes a full man he becomes a complete person through taking on characteristics and through being made faithful through trials this period in the house of Laban is a period also of darkness there are ways in which we do have references to mourning but most of the events of these chapters are symbolically at the very least occurring in darkness the sun descends when he's at Bethel and he dreams this period in the house of Laban is defined by bearing children these different events of the night time of the lying with wives it's defined by the event of Laban deceiving Jacob in the night it's defined by Jacob's dreams and ultimately it is one that does not a period of darkness that does not symbolically end until the sun ascends as he crosses over the ford of the

[61 : 33] Javok this story then is a very powerful foreshadowing of the story of the exodus it's one that brings together great themes that have been playing out throughout the story of Jacob to this point I've tarried a long time with this chapter because there's a lot going on here and many people really do not know what to make of it but it's a rich and full chapter that maybe you've just not realised how much is within this I hope this has been helpful if you have any questions about this or anything else please leave the questions in my Curious Cat account if you'd like to support this and other videos like it please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts particularly because this enables me to transcribe these this takes a long time to listen to something like this and I want to make it accessible to more people so they don't have to if you would like to if you found this helpful as well please tell your friends and spread the news about these because I want people to get the most out of these in the future thank you very much for listening

Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow God bless