

Genesis 29-30 Jacob's Family

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Overview

This section describes the birth of most of Jacob's children; first by Leah, then by the handmaids, and finally by both wives. Each of these three divisions discusses the birth of four children, whose names reflect the strife in Jacob's family between Rachel and Leah.

This strife parallels that between Jacob and Esau.

- It is the strife of elder against younger,
- rooted in deception (compare the theft of the blessing in ch. 27 with the switched brides at the wedding)
- and the object of barter (compare the sale of the birthright in ch. 25 with the mandrakes in 14-16).

29:31-35, Leah

In passing, note that v.30 ("he loved also Rachel more than Leah") can be paraphrased "Leah was hated" (v.31). This is an important principle for understanding our Lord's command to hate our family (Luke 14:26) and even our own lives (John 12:25) for his sake. These commands do not contradict the fifth commandment or enjoin self-flagellation, but contrast relative degrees of affection. Hebrew can express absolute revulsion, but it requires circumlocution (as in Psa 139:22 "I hate them with perfect hatred") or other words such as "despise" or "abominate."

31, The Lord saw.—This is a fascinating expression to describe the God who causes all things. What need does he have to learn by seeing? Full list in Genesis: 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; 2:19; 6:5, 12; 7:1; 9:16; 11:5; 16:13; 22:8, 14; 29:31, 32; 31:42. Notable parallels:

- Repeatedly in ch. 1, to show the outcome of his creative work
 - 6:5; 7:1, to show his awareness of sin
 - 16:13, Hagar's confidence in the Lord's care, memorialized in the name "Beerlahairoi"
 - 22:8, in the sense "the Lord will provide," memorialized in the name "Jehovah-Jireh."
- Note here the verb shows an active sense, to "see to" something, make provision for it.

The theme of this paragraph is that the Lord sees and provides for Leah. She is the victim in this whole tragedy, abused by her father and unloved by her husband, but the Lord cares for her.

And she reciprocates in faith, shown in the naming of her sons. In three of the four cases she calls God by the covenant name LORD, showing her spiritual sensitivity. We see this also in the series of names, which reflects a noble pilgrimage.

32, Reuben ("Behold, a son").—Explained as "Surely the LORD hath beheld my affliction." Here she comes to the same realization that Hagar did in ch. 16, that in spite of her sad condition, God has looked on her in her need. And she is hopeful that this child will encourage her husband's love.

33, Simeon (“hearing”).—The Lord has not only seen, but heard, suggesting that she was crying out to him, like Hannah in 1 Sam 1. Having realized that the Lord does observe and intervene in the affairs of men, she is bold to turn to him in her need, and he rewards her.

34, Levi (“Attachment”).—Though she has borne him two sons, apparently she still feels alienated, and longs for her husband’s love. This son’s name reflects her hope that “finally” (AV “this time”) “will my husband be joined unto me.” Levi forms the family through whom Israel’s priesthood comes.

35, Judah (“Praised”).—Once again the name reflects her relation to the Lord, this time in praising him for his gift of children to her. Judah is the father of the royal family, the one through whom the Messiah comes.

Thus even though she is rejected by her husband, she becomes the matriarch of the two most important tribes, those responsible for the priesthood and the palace. She is the first and legitimate wife, and God honors her in that position.

30:1-12, The Handmaids

In this paragraph, both sisters resort to the strategy employed by Sarah in ch. 16, of seeking offspring through surrogates. Contrast 30:1, 9 (“Rachel saw ... Leah saw”) with 29:31, “The Lord saw.” This contrast reflects the difference between God’s gracious gift in the previous paragraph, and the efforts of the flesh in this one.

1-8, Rachel by Bilhah

1-4, A Domestic Quarrel.—In contrast with Leah’s godly attitude, each round in this exchange shows us the carnality of Jacob and Rachel. She is his match not only as the unnaturally favored younger sibling, but also as a carnal person.

1, Rachel’s words show three sins.

- The first sin is jealousy. “Rachel envied her sister.” Her eyes are fixed on herself in comparison with her sister, which is a sure recipe for strife. Compare the exhortation of Phil 2:3-4; Rachel is looking “on her own things,” when she should have rejoiced in her sister’s prosperity.
- Her second sin is ascribing to Jacob what really belongs to God alone, the power to grant offspring: “Give me children.”
- Her third sin is exaggeration: “or else I die.” Being childless is an unfortunate condition, but hardly a fatal one. Compare her complaint here with that of her aunt in 27:46, “What good shall my life do me?” Her exaggeration inflames the argument, and makes it difficult for Jacob to respond in a godly way.

2, Jacob’s response is partly correct, partly sinful, and definitely incomplete.

- His anger is wrong. In spite of his wife’s exaggeration, he should not have dealt with her in wrath, but in pity.
- The content of his rebuke is correct. He directs her attention to God as the only source of domestic fruitfulness. His use of “God” rather than “YHWH” shows that he is calling her attention to the Lord’s creative power.

- Yet his leadership is incomplete. He should have known from his parents that they faced the same challenge, and that it was overcome when Isaac prayed with his wife (25:21). Jacob does not provide such guidance here, probably because he does not think of coming to the Lord (YHWH) on the grounds of his covenant.

3-4, *Rachel's solution* follows in the same worldly custom as did Sarah in ch. 16. This was accepted practice in the culture of the day, though contrary to God's intended pattern of marriage as revealed in the garden of Eden.

5-6, Dan (“Judgment, Vindication”).—Rachel's words in naming Dan show two things about her own mental and spiritual condition.

- She ascribes the birth to “God.” Maybe she learned this much from Jacob's rebuke. Apparently she cried out to God, for she reports, “God ... hath heard my voice.” But this is just a matter of taking the name of the Lord in vain, for she is taking matters into her own hands rather than trusting in the Lord. Not until v.22 does Moses instruct us that the Lord actually did hear her.
- She focuses on the judgmental aspect of the birth. She was, after all, the promised wife, legitimate under the original marriage contract, and she sees the birth of a son as vindicating her position.

7-8, Naphthali (“Wrestling”).—The phrase “great wrestlings” is literally, “wrestlings of God.” We should probably retain the literal sense, recalling again her exercise in prayer. She is in strife with her sister to be a matriarch of the family, and her prayers to God have been part of this strife.

Thus Jacob's exhortation to her is successful so far as it directs her attention to God as the one who must deliver her, but unsuccessful in overcoming the strife between the sisters. As he sees them scheme and wrestle with one another, he must have been forced to think of the strife that he instigated with his own brother back in Canaan.

9-13, Leah by Zilpah

9, Leah saw.—Leah, like Rachel, acts according to what she saw, rather than resting in God's oversight. After four children, Leah stops bearing for a space, and seeing the productivity of her sister's ungodly plan, adopts it as her own. Thus Rachel's duplicity weakens Leah's faith. We see this in the names she gives her next two children. From her serene trust in the covenant God, she descends to pagan superstition. It is easy to trust in the Lord when things are going well, but when our adversary appears to have the upper hand, it is easy to fall back into carnality.

10-11, Gad (“Luck”).—The KJV rendering “troop” reflects Jacob's blessing in 49:14, but this is alliterative rather than etymological. “Troop” is *gadud*, with two instances of ‘d’, not one as here. It is better to associate the name here with the god of good fortune, named elsewhere in the OT only in Isa 65:11. In following her sister's carnal path, Leah has departed from trust in the Lord and descended into a reliance on good luck.

12-13, Asher (“Happiness”).—She gives her second surrogate son a similar name, reflecting the good fortune he has brought her, rather than giving credit to the Lord.

Leah's inability to rise to her previous level of praise may be conscious. Having taken matters into her own hand and followed the way of the flesh, she cannot praise the Lord. When we are

tempted to resort to fleshly means, we should realize that we are depriving ourselves of the security of God's care and of the joy of worshipping him for his bounty.

14-24, Both Wives

In the final paragraph, we return to natural children, first by Leah, but then finally by Rachel.

14-21, Leah

In 30:1-4 we saw the tension between Rachel and Jacob; here we see the tension between the two sisters. Moses portrays these dysfunctional scenes to show us the folly of polygamy.

14-16, Reuben's mandrakes.—The Hebrew name of these fruits is *dudaim*, “loves,” and the context indicated that they were considered aphrodisiacs and fertility aids.

- Reuben, probably less than ten at this point, finds an interesting plant in the field and brings it to show his mother.
- Rachel, still barren, recognizes the potential of the plant and politely asks for some of them. Her hope is in magic, not the Lord.
- Leah's response is surprisingly harsh, showing the degree of Jacob's favoritism for Rachel and the bitterness it engendered in Leah.
- Think how Jacob must feel in v.16, turned into the object of a commercial transaction between his wives. His duplicitous career began with buying Esau's birthright, something that ought not to be sold; now the Lord shows him what it feels like to be inappropriately commercialized.

17-18, Issachar (“There is a reward”).—The opening clause of the birth report emphasizes that conception is God's gracious response to the request of his people, and corrects Rachel's carnal trust in the mandrakes. Though she had the mandrakes, it was Leah to whom God hearkened.

Nevertheless, Leah's words show how far she has descended from her original trust in the Lord.

- At first (29:31-35), she was trusting in God as the covenant-keeper and praising him.
- In 30:9-13, she is drawn by jealousy into imitating her sister's godless practice, and now ascribes her children to luck and good fortune rather than to the sovereign Lord, not mentioning him at all in the names she gives them.
- When she resumes bearing, her words show that God's “grace had been forced out of her heart by jealousy” (K&D). Two indications:
 - She does acknowledge God's hand, but as the creator, not the covenant-keeper.
 - She reckons this son as a reward that she has earned by her “selfless” gift of Zilpah to Jacob, rather than to his gracious attention to her prayers. Yet Moses' introduction to the birth report emphasizes that the latter is really the case.

19-20, Zebulun (“Honor”).—As often, Leah's comment is both vertical (toward God) and horizontal (concerning other people, in this case, her husband). There is a pun between the two: “endow” is *zabad*, while “dwell” is *zabal*. The name of the son echoes both, but primarily the second.

What is the meaning of *zabal*? Most occurrences of the word in the OT are in connection with the temple as God's glorious dwelling, and our translators have focused on the "dwelling" notion. We know from 30:15 that Leah doesn't see as much of Jacob as she thinks she should, so this is reasonable. However, it is clear from the Ugaritic literature, discovered in Syria in the 1920's, that the emphasis of the root is not on a dwelling, but on glory and honor. It is used as an epithet for various deities, meaning "Prince." This understanding subtly changes the emphasis in the temple accounts from God's dwelling to his enveloping glory. Here it leads us to the sense, "Now will my husband honor me" or "glorify me." Thus the son's name means "honor" or "glory."

21, Dinah ("Judgment, Vindication").—This is the feminine form of "Dan," the name that Rachel gave Bilhah's first son in 30:5,6. While no comment is given, the name suggests that her focus is still on her contention with her sister.

The daughters are not usually named in genealogies. We know from 37:35 that Jacob had other daughters, but this one is singled out because she is a key figure in an upcoming episode in Shechem (ch. 34).

22-24, Rachel

Finally, Rachel bears her own child. If Leah has drifted away from the Lord through the experience, Rachel has been drawn closer.

- In 6, she claimed that God had heard her, though in fact she was acting in her own strength. This account explicitly describes God's intervention. In spite of her self-will, the Lord remembers her and hearkens to her, and grants her a son.
- Both of her previous pronouncements focused on her strife with her sister; this one focuses only on the Lord and his grace to her.
- Both of her comments focus on the Lord, and in the second she rises finally to the covenant name and expresses her hope that she shall have yet another son (a desire that is fulfilled in Benjamin after Jacob returns to the land of Canaan).

Joseph's name means "he shall add," and reflects this final hope.

Summary of Chapter

The overall movement of the chapter is from faith to flesh and back to faith, marked by the intervention formulas and the comments of the mothers as their sons are born.

- We begin with the Lord's intervention (29:31), and Leah's godly sentiments toward the covenant God in the birth of her first four sons.
- The intervention formulas in 30:1,9 show the effort of the flesh on the part of Rachel first, then Leah. The only attribution to God is by Rachel in 30:6, but it is vengeful and refers only to God as the creator.
- In spite of this carnality, God is gracious to both women, and intervenes in 30:17,22. In both cases, they acknowledge him in naming their sons. Rachel even rises to the level of calling him "Lord."

Application: God is gracious to his people, and draws them back even when they stray away from him.

Summary of Birth Accounts

See supplementary chart. The main sections are delineated by a notice of intervention, either by the Lord or by the sisters. All include a notice of conception and birth, and the giving of the name. The name is justified by at least one comment, relating either to the speaker's relation to the Lord (vertical) or to other people (horizontal); in some cases, both are present.