

In Haran, House of Service and House of Birth

(Genesis 29-31).

Jacob In Laban's House

From Bethel, the journey went to the north-east, along one of the trade-routes leading to Haran, where many of Terah's descendants lived (Genesis 22:20ff., 24:29b). The city had been an important trade centre since the days of Abraham, with merchants coming and going to and from Palestine, Egypt, Asia Minor, Asshur, and Elam. It was situated about 100 km to the north of the mid-Euphrates. More than 1 1/2 centuries before, Abraham had departed thence, as a rich prince among herdsmen, to go to Canaan; later Rebekah also had gone to marry Isaac; and now Jacob was going there, as a poor refugee, but blessed with the promise. The journey from Beersheba was approximately 1000 km, but it is very possible that he found a trading caravan along the way with which to travel.

Having come close to the city, he approached a well surrounded by three flocks; the shepherds were waiting for every flock to be present before giving their sheep and goats water. The reason was that the well was covered by a large stone which was then removed with everyone's help.

While waiting there, Jacob started a conversation about the place in which they lived, and about Laban: whether they knew him and all was well with him. A short interruption came when someone remarked that Laban's daughter Rachel was approaching with her father's flock. Then the conversation went on about the early watering of their livestock, it still being broad daylight; and so they went on discussing those things which interested Jacob. The first orientating contacts had been made with the city's inhabitants.

In the meantime, Rachel had arrived. Immediately Jacob, seeing her, started removing the large stone, with which the others will have helped him, and started drawing water to fill the drinking troughs for Rachel.

Undoubtedly, she will have been amazed at the friendliness of this stranger, and will have appreciated it. With Eastern politeness he approached to give her a kiss of greeting, and, no longer able to control his emotions, Jacob burst out in loud weeping.

A great deal must have gone through his mind now that he had met a daughter of Uncle Laban, “his mother’s brother,” an expression which is repeated several times—his mother’s, of whom he had always been the favourite. Scripture emphasizes this relationship to show that Jacob’s spontaneous and willing aid was an expression of happiness that made him weep for joy.

And then he told her that he was her father’s kinsman, one of Rebekah’s sons. Hearing this, Rachel rushed away to tell her father, who, when he heard the surprising news, hastened to meet Jacob, embraced him and kissed him, and brought him to his house. There was much to tell. And then Laban said, “Surely you are my bone and my flesh!” And for a full month Jacob stayed in Laban’s house as a guest.

Why does Scripture relate this so extensively?

Let us not regard this as a section of a family story. This, too, is part of the history of salvation. We have to look at it as a God-given combination of facts, in which the LORD revealed Himself in a special way, namely, in clearing the way to the fulfilment of the promise already given to Abraham, also to Isaac, and to Jacob (28:13-15). Here, and in what follows, Jacob may not be regarded as “a certain person,” but as the bearer of the promise, that from him a seed would come forth, as numerous as the dust of the earth.

Jacob's Service for Rachel

Laban noticed, in that first month, that Jacob, who will not have remained idle, was an experienced and capable herdsman. He would be useful. But a relative could not be kept as a slave. He realized that. Jacob should be like a labourer, receiving a daily wage, free to leave at any time. Because of this he asked Jacob what he wanted as wages. They could bargain, if necessary.

Laban, besides his sons, had two unmarried daughters: Leah, the elder, and Rachel, the younger. Leah was not strikingly attractive. However, Rachel was. Leah had weak eyes, as Scripture tells us, while Rachel's were bright and shining, which, especially in the East, was considered a mark of beauty. It will have been this attractiveness that captured Jacob's attention at their first meeting, and this grew into love. The feeling will probably have been mutual.

When asked about his wages, Jacob took the opportunity to offer his services to Laban for seven years for Rachel. We know from ancient sources that this occurred more often: a poor man could do service for a wife. Laban agreed, and said that he would rather give her to Jacob than to a stranger. They did not ask Rachel's opinion. And so it was settled; the deal was made.

In this dishonourable action, both Laban and Jacob took advantage of Rachel. They took Rachel, as it were, appraised her value as if she was a slave, and then included her in a wage contract as if she were merchandise.

Later Hosea says, "Israel (Jacob) did service for a wife, and for a wife he herded sheep," and in contrast, "By a prophet the LORD brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was preserved (shepherded)" (Hosea 12:13, 14). Jacob was interested in earthly things. Of how much greater treasure was it that the nation which came forth from him was shepherded by the LORD, Who, through Moses' service, gave rich spiritual blessings?

That was how Jacob came to serve for such a long time, but because of his love for Rachel it seemed only a few days.

When the time was up he asked Laban for his wife.
A feast was prepared for the men of the city.

But when evening came, Laban gave him Leah, veiled, with a slave girl. Now we observe Laban as a cunning egoist, who considered no means too crude to satisfy his greed.

Thus Jacob went in to Leah, who also had nothing to say in the matter, but who must have deliberately tried to convince Jacob during that wedding night that she was Rachel. She managed to cover the trickery, just as Jacob had done to his almost-blind father.

When Jacob, the next morning, saw how he had been deceived, and reproached Laban about it, Laban defended his actions by saying that it was not customary in that country to marry off the younger before the elder. He could have said that earlier! But Laban was hoping to keep Jacob with him. His deceit had followed a previously worked out plan, namely, to let Jacob have Rachel as well, after the bridal week, and again for seven years of service. And Jacob agreed. We can brand this as a dirty trick on Laban's part, but it was more: it was a deeply sinful act. He did not keep his promise; he broke his wage-contract, for Jacob had not served for Leah, but for Rachel; he coerced the socially weak Jacob into a position where he could be tempted to make a sinful marriage—with two sisters at that—and he forced him to another seven years of servitude for that which was withheld from him now: "Seven years for Leah, and seven years for Rachel," as is often said, is definitely wrong: Jacob never served for Leah.

But Jacob was not innocent either, in spite of these extenuating circumstances. A marriage depends on mutual agreement, something which was not the case with Leah: Jacob didn't want Leah, and *she* had no say in the matter. Calvin rightly states that Jacob did not have to live with that marriage and could send Leah away again: he had served for Rachel, not for Leah. But Jacob accommodated himself to Laban's decisions,

perhaps out of fear of being sent away himself, and where would he go then? Not to his parents, for fear of Esau. Moreover, Rachel would certainly not have been given to him if he became a nomad. Truly, he faced a dark future — but he apparently did not think of God’s promise at Bethel ... “I am with you.”

And thus his life of servitude went on . . . harassed from two sides: by a woman who suffered for lack of love, and by a woman who cried for lack of children: altogether a lot of material distress; heavy chastisement from God.

The Expansion of the Seed

The LORD’s mercy is great, although sin is punished, but with paternal pity. God remained faithful to His word.

When He saw that Leah was not loved, He gave her children, while Rachel was barren. She brought forth three sons in a few years, *Reuben*, *Simeon*, and *Levi*. At each name-giving she spoke of the unhappiness of being unloved. Only when the fourth son was born, whom she called *Judah* (“this time I will praise the LORD”), did she put away her grief, and let her joy break forth at having been given the precious gift of four sons.

Rachel’s envy, however, was great. She *demande*d children: “Give me children, or I shall die!” She could not stand it that Leah was blessed with motherhood, that Leah, with less rights, stood beside her as an equal; in her pride she elevated herself above her sister. At this, Jacob’s anger was kindled. As if it was his fault! “Am I in the place of God, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?”

But then she gives Jacob her slave girl Bilhah, and says, in a commanding manner, “Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, that she may bear upon my knees and even I may have children through her.” She gave Bilhah to her husband to wife. One sin brings forth the next. And when Bilhah bore Jacob a son, Rachel named him *Dan* expressing that God had given her justice, and had heard her. “Thus we see that while she seems to praise God, she does Him more injustice, by making Him subservient to her greedy desires” (Calvin). Bilhah’s second son is called *Naphtali*

(“with mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and have prevailed”), bragging, as Calvin rightly calls it, for with her two children, not even born of her, she could still not attain to Leah’s honour as a mother.

Leah followed suit, and gave her slave to Jacob, who begot two sons by her, named *Gad* (“good fortune”) and *Asher* (“happy am I”) by Leah. She was very quick to follow Rachel’s example, seeing that nothing excluded the possibility that she, who had four, would still be able to bear more children. How strong this desire for children was is demonstrated by the events surrounding Reuben’s finding mandrakes, which he brought to his mother from the field. The mandrake (or “love-apple”) is a fruit which looks like a yellowish apple, and is pleasant to the taste. The Hebrew word for it is “dudaim.” Arabs still believe the juices promote fertility, a tenacious tradition, thousands of years old. Rachel also wanted some, which made Leah ask angrily, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s mandrakes also?” The resultant quarrel was solved when Rachel took the mandrakes in exchange for a night with Jacob. And so, happily, Leah walked out to meet Jacob on his return from the fields to tell him the latest news and to invite him into her tent. It is remarkable that Leah speaks of Jacob as “my husband” yet says to Jacob that she has “hired” him from Rachel. Obviously, Leah did not have much to say, compared to Rachel, who considered herself superior. The result was that Leah again became pregnant and bore a fifth son, whom she named *Issachar* (“God has given me my hire because I gave my maid to my husband”). She meant that she had given Zilpah to allow Jacob more children, assuming that Issachar was the reward for that. But Scripture says that God hearkened to her: it was not because of the mandrakes, and it was no hire for her gift of a slave. Here we see how gracious God was, in spite of sinful actions, in hearing Leah’s sighings because of her distress. Again she bore a son, *Zebulun* (“a good gift”), saying, “Now my husband will honour me.” What a sad life she had! Finally she also bore a daughter, *Dinah*.

Then God also heard Rachel and she bore *Joseph*, (“May the LORD add to me another son!”) This also speaks of her desire. Still, we should not neglect Rachel’s longing to have part in mothering the promised nation.

However, it is hardly praiseworthy that there was so much envy between these two sisters. Truly, also Israel was conceived and born in sin. But Scripture does not only show the church in its germination as unclean from unclean, but also, and in the first place, expounds the faithfulness of the LORD, Abraham's God, to His covenant. He made the women's envy serve the fulfilment of His plan of salvation. And He is able to do it, for the ravine between heaven and earth has been bridged. Did He not already show the ladder which gave communion from the earth with the LORD, the ladder which pointed to Christ?

Questions

1. Is there any difference between the way in which God led Jacob when he came to Haran, and the way in which He leads believers today?
2. (29:17, 18) Was it not sensual to only look at outward beauty?
3. (29:18, 19) Was it customary to buy a wife? (compare 31 :14, 15)
4. Which wife is meant in Hosea 12:13?
5. Why did Laban act without consulting Rachel? (compare 24:54, 55)
6. What impression does this give us of Laban?
7. With respect to the wage-agreement, are there any extenuating circumstances in Jacob's social position? Could there not have been another solution?
8. Why was Esau's sin of bigamy more serious than that of Jacob?
9. Was there a wedding feast at Rachel's marriage?
10. How many years did Jacob serve for Rachel? (compare 29:30)
11. Does Scripture mention any happy marriages involving more than one wife?

12. What should be our attitude towards modern attempts to limit the number of children?