

# THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM – PART VI – SECTION III

## JACOB, LABAN, RACHEL AND LEAH

### LOVE, CHILDREN AND FAMILY FEUDS

I. Chapter 29 begins with a scene of Jacob and Rachel falling in love, but with a possible conflict with the local culture arising in the background.

A. The scene begins with Jacob arriving at Haran and rejoicing at his success so far.

1. The meeting place, here as often is at a well. The well is logical as a meeting place in a society where water was a precious commodity. But here, as with the meeting between Abraham's servant and Rebekah, later between Moses and Zipporah his future wife, and Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the water from the well is also a symbol of grace, life giving water from heaven. See St. Caesereus of Arles, Sermon on Genesis 88.

2. On the well is a stone that the shepherds, by custom or necessity, will lift together. There are three flocks present; presumably there are more flocks they are waiting for.

- It is not clear whether they are unable to lift the stone covering the well (and therefore preventing evaporation) without the strength of all present, or whether by custom they wait for everyone to get there. It may be some combination thereof.

3. Jacob, not particularly familiar with the region, must ask where it is, and how Laban is doing.

- It has been over 60 years since Abraham's servant brought Rebekah to Laban. Thus Laban is presumably at least in his 80s. It is possibly that the Laban spoken of is a son of the original one, but the text does not say that, and in fact, by calling Laban "son of Nahor" it indicates that this is the same Laban.

- Rachel will be referred to as Laban's daughter, but that could mean granddaughter or even great-

granddaughter.

- B. When the shepherds say that Laban's daughter Rachel is coming, Jacob recommends that the shepherds go ahead, water their sheep, and then leave for the pastures. He presumably wants to be alone with Rachel.
- The shepherds, however, point out their custom of only watering the sheep together.
- C. When Rachel arrives, Jacob understandably wants to help and impress her by watering her sheep.
1. He has not brought wealth, as Abraham's servant did long ago, and so he must impress her (and by extension Laban) by his talents.
    2. The first thing he does is remove the stone covering the well. If the stone was in fact too large to be moved by one of a few people, he must have had some special abilities.
      - It is true that he probably had some of Jacob's people with him, but he still would probably not have had as many people as the shepherds of three flocks.
      - Thus, if the stone were too large for the shepherds, either God was giving him supernatural strength or he knew of some clever device (e.g., the use of levers) to move the stone.
    3. In any case, by moving the stone he is showing ingenuity and independence, but he is also breaking a custom that brought the shepherds of the area together. Even in the midst of love, tension is starting to build.
- D. The next scene shows that the two do in fact love each other, in addition to knowing that the relationship was willed by God. He is very emotional and she, apparently with excitement, runs to Laban.

- The love between Isaac and Rebekah was the first clearly romantic love in Genesis (at least after Adam and Eve.) This scene is the first clear case of love at first sight. The book of Tobit has a similar scene as Tobias falls in love with Sarah even before seeing her. See Tobit 6:18.

E. Laban goes out to meet Jacob and confirms at least that Jacob is of his family, a point in his favor. However, it is also clear that Jacob, unlike Abraham's servant long ago, has not wealth to bring with him. That fact may have changed the relationship.

- There is an irony in Laban declaring that Jacob is of his flesh and blood. At one level, he means that Jacob is a relative. At another level, the phrase could mean that Laban is as clever and deceptive as Jacob.

II. The next sixteen verses describe fourteen years, as Jacob works for Rachel, and ends up with her sister Leah as well, in addition to a harder bargain that he wanted.

A. Presumably because he brings no wealth or obvious power, Jacob begins working for Laban and the relationship is uncertain. He cannot simply take Rachel as his wife.

B. Laban proposes that he should pay Jacob for his labor.

1. At one level, the proposal could simply come from a sense of justice; Laban does not want to take advantage of Jacob, who is presumably a clever person.

2. But, at another level, it establishes a sense of superiority of Laban over Jacob, for the latter is not the servant of the former. That status may make a marriage more difficult. Laban may be deferring a decision on whether he wants Jacob to marry Rachel or his other daughter Leah.

3. The text begins by describing Leah and Rachel in more physical terms. Leah, whose name could mean "cow," "strong woman," or "mistress" is described by her eyes, which are said to be "rakoth," which could mean either soft (beautiful) or weak. Rachel is said to be beautifully formed, and the object of Jacob's love.

4. As it will turn out, Leah is the more pious, and probably more generous, of the two. She would be the better mother, but Jacob does not understand or appreciate these qualities.

C. In any case, Jacob using his cleverness to get what he really wants, Rachel's hand in marriage. And he is willing to do anything to accomplish that end.

1. Thus, Jacob proposes a very generous offer of seven years' service for Rachel's hand. Given that he was probably talented and certainly blessed by God, and that Laban had many flocks to attend to, the offer may well have been more valuable than the great gifts that Abraham's servant offered sixty years later. Seven years' service is certainly a greater testimony of the character of the prospective husband.

2. Laban agrees, although with a somewhat ambiguous statement. He says that he prefers Jacob to anyone else. But he may not want to give up Rachel at all; he may have considered the seven years a test, or even thought that Jacob would tire of the service.

- One must presume Rachel was relatively young that Jacob did not worry about losing seven years of fertility.

D. In an exquisite summary of the effects of true love, the text says that the seven years seemed as a few days. As St. Augustine says, "Anything is easy if done for love." See also St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 55.

III. In a move that is both deceitful and yet poetic justice, Laban tricks Jacob into both marrying Leah and working for seven more years.

A. At the end of the seven years, Jacob has plainly fulfilled his side of the bargain and now wants Rachel for his wife. Laban cannot object, but rather has a fine wedding feast.

B. Laban invites all of the neighbors to the feast. At one level, the invitation seems that obvious custom, although it is in contrast with the marriage of Isaac, which did not seem to involve a lot of ceremony. It is possible that the increased ceremony indicates that marriage is becoming thought of as more sacred. On a more prosaic note, Laban may want witnesses to the events that will happen, so that Jacob cannot deny that he first took Leah (albeit unintentionally.)

- Laban does not seem to worry about the possibility that the neighbors will look down on him for his deceit. It is possible that, because Jacob is an outsider who has changed customs, and possibly because he is prosperous, the neighbors want to see him tricked.

C. In any case, Laban commits the trickery of substituting Leah for Rachel to Jacob, who had probably been drinking a large amount of wine.

- Rachel presumably had to agree to the trickery. It appears, at this point at least, she is very willing to help Laban and Leah. The situation will very much change later.

- The fact that the deceit could work indicates: (1) positively, that he and Rachel were chaste before marriage; but (2) negatively, that Jacob did not know Rachel's voice, and perhaps her personality, well.

D. Jacob is quite understandably furious at the deceit, but Laban justifies his move and offers a new arrangement.

1. Laban says that it is not custom for the younger to marry before the older. At one level, one can sympathize with the concern for Leah, who is probably now in her early 30s. At a more subtle level, Laban (or perhaps the author) is hinting at the fact that Jacob substituted himself for Esau through deceit. And now he is receiving his just recompense. The word here for firstborn (*habekhirah*) is very closely related to the word for birthright (*habekhorah*.) The similarity emphasizes the connection between this deception and the deception and maneuverings Jacob used.

2. Laban tries to increase his profit from the arrangement by offering Rachel in exchange for seven more years of service.

3. Jacob accepts the new offer, for he cannot obtain Rachel any other way, being a foreigner in the land. He may also have taken the hint that he deserved to be deceived. However, interpreting an ambiguity in Laban's offer, he does take

Rachel as his wife first, and then works for the seven years. Having been deceived once, he will not trust Laban to fulfill his side of the bargain again.

4. Laban does show some generosity by giving handmaid to his daughters, but this gift will turn out differently than he expects.

E. Jacob then works for another seven years for Laban, but this time, while prosperous, does not go so smoothly, as the next passages indicate.

F. Some of the Church fathers explain that polygamy was permitted in an earlier era because children were needed and there was a lack of men. Some of the father's also compare Jacob's two wives to the Jews (compared to Leah, who was fruitful at first) and the Gentiles (compared to Rachel, fruitful only later) who feuded but whom Christ would eventually join together. See St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 56; St. Caesarius of Arles, Sermon on Genesis 88.

IV. Leah and eventually Rachel have children, demonstrating their differences and a rivalry increasing between them and troubles for Jacob.

A. God begins by blessing the unloved Leah by giving her children. Leah in turn shows her trust and thanksgiving to God.

1. Although older than Rachel, she has four children, apparently in rapid succession. One gets the impression, she was also prayerful, for God looks with favor upon her.

2. In naming the children, she refers to God's providence three out of four times. In the first three cases, she also refers poignantly to her hope that Jacob will love her more because of her children. Unfortunately, for now at least, the hope will be unfulfilled. In the last case, that of Judah, she puts her hope in God alone.

3. One oddity is that Jacob seems notably absent in the naming of children. He, who is so (overly) clever is dealing with men and for a woman does not seem to concern himself enough with children.

B. At first, Rachel is barren, and this fact leads to terrible envy.

1. At first, she protests in anger to Jacob. He unfortunately does not give her the sympathy that she needs, but simply says that choice is God's. Notably, unlike Isaac and Rebekah, neither of them turns to God in prayer.

- It may be the case that Jacob's desire for children is being satisfied, albeit through Leah. In any case, the initial emotional love is not sufficient. He, like many husbands, needs to learn more love and prayer.

2. Rachel's response is to get Jacob to have children through her handmaid. At one level, she is acting like Sarah did before. But here, her situation is less sympathetic because she is still of child-bearing years and her behavior is tainted even more by envy and anger. By contrast, Sarah at least seemed content with her state, but was using a scheme to fulfill what she thought was God's plan for Abraham.

- The plan works, at least to the point where two children, Dan and Naphtali, are born.
- Their names, however, indicate that the situation is deteriorating. She does refer to God in the first name, but somewhat disingenuously, for she really did not trust God very much. In naming Naphtali, however, her envy comes out as the primary passion. Children are becoming a weapon and a status symbol.

3. Sadly, Leah then joins in the maneuvering and gives her maidservant to Jacob to have two children by them. In naming those two children, Gad and Ashur, she no longer refers to God, but to good fortune.

- C. The situation then goes from bad to worse as Leah and Rachel then treat Jacob almost as a commodity.
1. Reuben, the firstborn of Leah, who is presumably now about 10, brings mandrakes to his mother. Mandrakes were apparently used as an aphrodisiac, and Leah has now decided to start using to this trickery to get Jacob's love.
  2. The relationship between Jacob and Rachel has apparently been getting colder, and so Rachel asks for a portion of the mandrakes. They both treat Jacob almost as a commodity, as Rachel trades the night with Jacob for a portion of the mandrakes. Leah conceives Issachhaar and then Zebulon and Dinah.

D. Finally, grace seems to be present as Rachel is at prayer and God hears her prayer, leading to the birth of Joseph. The seven years have been both fruitful and tragic. Here, one hopes, God will resolve the situation. But there is still the relationship with Laban and Esau to resolve.