

Genesis 29:1-20

Jacob and Rachel

God was moving in the lives of the great patriarchs of Israel. He had called Abraham out of his homeland to a land he did not know. Abraham obeyed and, despite the common and some rather uncommon failings of a sinful man, remained faithful to the Lord. He flourished beyond anything he could have expected. God blessed him. He passed his greatest test in the mountains of Moriah, when God asked him to offer his son, Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham obeyed, and the angel of the Lord stayed his hand. Isaac was spared, and he became the inheritor of the promises of land, seed, and blessing.

Isaac, then, had grown to manhood. He had taken a bride, and fathered twin sons. Family life was dysfunctional, as his wife Rebekah preferred one son and he the other. Yet, the years passed, Isaac prospered in Canaan, and settled in among the natives. He continued his father's legacy of being a powerful force in the region and demanded the attention of local kings. As he drew near what he believed to be the end of his time on earth, he shared a meal with and gave his, and vicariously the Lord's, blessing to his son. But it had not been the son he had intended. For Jacob, with the help of his mother Rebekah, had stolen the blessing from his brother Esau.

Naturally Esau was furious, so Jacob had traveled, perhaps a better word is fled, to visit his mother's brother in Paddan-aram. It seemed best to pass some time out of the reach of his angry brother, and while in Paddan-aram he could take a wife. Now that Jacob had inherited the Lord's promises of seed, land, and blessing, another generation had to be propagated to move the kingdom of God forward.

While on this journey, like his father and grandfather before him, Jacob had received a revelation from Yahweh. The Lord introduced Himself to Jacob and renewed His promises of land, seed and blessing. God also promised His presence and protection to Jacob. So, Jacob offered his allegiance to God, if God would assist him on his journey and bring him safely back to Canaan. Having made his bargain, Jacob continued on his journey and after some time arrived safely in the land of his ancestors.

Jacob Comes to Haran

This journey that must have taken Jacob and his companions at least two months is summarized tersely in Scripture. "Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east" (v. 1). The exact phrasing used is that Jacob "lifted up his feet," an expression usually devoted to the lifting up of the eyes (Genesis 13:10) or the voice (Genesis 29:11).

His destination is described cryptically as the East; no more specific designation is recorded. We have seen before that the book of Genesis granted to the East some special significance that was relatively unique in Scripture. Consider,

"So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life"
(Genesis 3:24).

“Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Genesis 4:16).

“It came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there” (Genesis 11:2).

“So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other” (Genesis 13:11).

“⁵Now Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; ⁶but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east” (Genesis 25:5-6).

So, though Haran was more to the north than to the east of Canaan, the geographical exactness was subjugated to literary consistency in the Genesis narrative as a whole.

Scripture records that at some point when Jacob arrived in Haran, “²he looked, and saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for from that well they watered the flocks. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. ³When all the flocks were gathered there, they would then roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well” (v. 2-3). Since the well was described as being in a field, we can understand from this that the well must have been located outside of the city, so that the animals need not be brought in among the people to be watered. However, it must also have been close enough to the city gates that women could go to the well for the water that was vital for cooking and other household chores.

To find a well in a field near the entrance to a city was not uncommon in the region. Indeed it was almost mandatory for living in the desert region. In addition, archaeology and written sources validate the description of the large stone that secured the opening of the well. Cisterns and wells were both often covered with a flat stone with a round hole cut out in the middle of it. Think of a doughnut. Then a heavy stone was placed over the hole, which was only removed when the local inhabitants wanted access to the precious water beneath. The stone was usually so heavy that several men were required to move it. This protected the town’s valuable water supply from either wandering livestock or individual travelers. It also served to safeguard the water from the potential of either intentional or accidental contamination.

Having safely led Jacob to the East, God now once again demonstrated His sovereignty in fulfilling His plans. God had promised Jacob that “I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” (Genesis 28:15). And now, as Jacob began a conversation with some of the local inhabitants, he was to see just how true that was. “⁴Jacob said to them, ‘my brothers, where are you from?’ And they said, ‘we are from Haran.’ ⁵He said to them, ‘do you know Laban the son of Nahor?’ And they said, ‘we know him.’ ⁶And he said to them, ‘is it well with him?’ And they said, ‘it is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep’” (v. 4-6).

We can see that the conversation was marked by short, quick questions. There was less dialogue and more of a staccato-like rhythm to the exchange. And ever the bargainer, Jacob said nothing about himself. He did not reveal the reasons for his travels, nor if having arrived in Haran, he had reached his destination. Neither did Jacob give a reason for inquiring about Laban.

That Rachel, serving as shepherdess for the family, was among those who greeted Jacob was precisely as God intended. It was no more of a coincidence that Jacob happened upon these men just as Rachel was joining them than that Ruth happened to be gleaning grain in the field belonging to her kinsman Boaz (Ruth 2:3). Rachel's appearance reminds the reader of Rebekah coming to fetch water for her family as the servant of Abraham rested at the (perhaps it was even the same) well.

Curiously, we can also see that Jacob seemed more interested in the sheep than in Rachel, who was still seen only in the distance. She had not yet, apparently, caught his attention. Instead, focusing on the flocks, Jacob said, "behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." "But they said, 'we cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep'" (v. 7-8). These particular shepherds had been the first to arrive at the well, it seemed. Now they had to wait for the others who were pasturing their flocks to arrive. It may even have been Rachel for whom they were waiting. Moving the stone was an arduous task, and it was only done when all were ready to make use of the well. It would have made no sense to move the huge stone for a few, then replace it and require others to move it themselves when they arrived.

Jacob Meets the Family

Jacob now took matters into his own hands, quite literally it seemed. "While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. "When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother" (v. 9-10). Jacob did what several men could not. He rolled the stone away in an amazing act of strength. Scripture makes it clear that it was the sight of Rachel up close that motivated him. Apparently what Jacob could not discern at a distance, he appreciated when it was up close.

That Rachel was a shepherdess was not unusual, nor is the fact that Jacob was able to impress her with a feat of strength. Moses would do much the same thing, "now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came to draw water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. "Then the shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock" (Exodus 2:16-17).

It is also interesting to consider Jacob's actions and personality apart from his mother, Rebekah. No longer dominated, Jacob here asserted himself. No longer passive, Jacob now became master of the situation. It is also reasonable to consider that, as the brother responsible for managing the household activities, he often tended to the domesticated animals, and so rolling away a huge stone from the mouth of a well was something he had done before. Or perhaps this speaks to nothing more than the fact that now that Jacob had noticed Rachel he was trying to be something of a show-off, by ordering the men around and

appearing as a know-it-all. He may even have used the need to pasture the flock a few more hours as a subterfuge to send the other shepherds away so that he could be alone with Rachel.

Having performed the task, and presumably while the shepherds were watering their flocks, ¹¹Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. ¹²Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father" (v. 11-12). Jacob kissing Rachel at their first meeting strikes the modern, Western reader as excessive and presumptuous. His weeping aloud also seems peculiar and unmanly. But in other cultures to greet with a kiss is not at all extraordinary, and perhaps Jacob sensed that he had met the person for whom he had traveled all this way. Yet, Scripture makes no mention of Jacob using this occasion to worship the God Who had guided him thus far. In this he differed from the servant of Abraham who worshipped God when he discovered Rebekah (Genesis 24:26-27).

Upon hearing details about this stranger. Rachel "ran and told her father" (v. 12). The hurried action again reminds the reader of the meeting between the servant of Abraham and Rebekah,

¹⁷Then the servant ran to meet her, and said, 'please let me drink a little water from your jar.'

¹⁸She said, 'drink, my lord'; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink.

¹⁹Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, 'I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking.' ²⁰So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels" (Genesis 24:17-20).

Laban seemed even more pleased to see Jacob than his daughter had been. ¹³When Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister's son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things. ¹⁴Laban said to him, 'surely you are my bone and my flesh.' And he stayed with him a month" (v. 13-14). The embrace and kiss were customary greetings to a family member or friend. Clearly, Jacob was not considered a stranger or a mere traveler. His description of himself was received without question. This, too, must be seen as the action of God in the hearts of men. That a perfect stranger could arrive and claim to be a distant relative must have been a common ruse for wicked men to perpetrate on unwary hosts. That Laban accepted the story as Jacob related it was God's work.

The phrase "my bone and my flesh" (v. 14) was formulaic, and was first used in Genesis 2 when Adam addressed Eve. It was repeated in different scenarios in Israel's history (Judges 9:2-3; 2 Samuel 5:1; 2 Samuel 19:13) and was used by those who were tied by blood. A less generous interpretation might see Laban's enthusiasm for Jacob based on Laban's memory of Abraham's servant who generously bestowed many gifts on the family when he came for Rebekah (Genesis 24:51-53).

First, we must comment on the fact that Scripture paid less attention to the words that were said than to the actions of the participants. Little is spoken, but Rachel *runs* to see her father and tell him of Jacob and Laban *runs* to greet Jacob. Also, we must recognize the sense that Laban was asserting himself as the dominant partner in their relationship. He was the uncle, and Jacob the nephew. It was his home, and it would be his flocks that Jacob eventually worked. For those who are aware of the rest of the narrative,

the kiss Laban gave Jacob would prove as deceitful as the kiss Jacob gave Isaac when he stole Esau's blessing.

Seven Years of Service

So, about one month after he arrived, Laban proposed that Jacob make his stay more permanent. "Laban said to Jacob, 'because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?'" (v. 15). There are two ways to look at this offer by Laban. On the one hand, it may be that Laban was being magnanimous, not wishing to take advantage of his nephew. In this interpretation, Laban was even so benevolent as to allow Jacob to name his wages. On the other hand, a more mercenary view might look at this offer as Laban asserting a new relationship status between the two men. No longer would they be uncle and nephew. Now they would be employer and employee. The privileges of family would be removed.

In prefacing Jacob's response, the narrator introduces us to Laban's other daughter. "¹⁶Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face" (v. 16-17). We are told two things about these girls. First, we are informed that Leah was the older of the two sisters. Second, we are told that while Rachel was "beautiful of form and face" Leah had 'weak' eyes. While the common rendering of the word describing Leah's eyes is 'weak' that word can also mean 'frail' or 'tender' which places a somewhat different emphasis on the matter. Yet it seems the intent of Scripture to draw the reader's attention to the difference between the two sisters, so however Leah's eyes may be described, they are in contrast to Rachel beauty.

It may be that Laban's presumed generosity disarmed Jacob. After all, Jacob had by now become emotionally involved in this negotiation. And like his distant relative Lot, Jacob was making a decision based upon how something looked. Just as Lot "lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere" (Genesis 13:10), here, Jacob was simply and intensely attracted to Rachel's physical appearance. And the eyes of a woman were considered in this culture to be of special significance. Since most unmarried women wore a veil, it was the eyes that were the only visible feature. Beautiful, enticing eyes, were an invaluable asset to a young girl.

Jacob had been enticed beyond his own duplicitous ability to negotiate. So Laban and Jacob made a bargain. "¹⁸Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, 'I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.' ¹⁹Laban said, 'it is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man; stay with me'" (v. 18-19).

It was clear that Jacob loved Rachel from the moment he met her. It was not clear that Rachel reciprocated. In fact, Scripture makes no mention of Rachel's opinion in the matter at all. We should not be surprised at this in a patriarchal culture, however. Rachel's thoughts on Jacob are irrelevant. It is also not clear why Jacob suggested a period of seven years. Perhaps he was in no hurry to return home. It may be that he was aware that Isaac had recovered (the Scriptures are very vague on the chronology of this period) and Jacob knew that he would not come into the possession of the birthright and blessing for several years. And in the meantime, Jacob had every reason to believe that Esau was waiting at home to

kill him. So staying with Laban for a few years and spending time with Rachel may have seemed a very agreeable alternative to taking a bride and hurrying straight back to Canaan.

For his part, Laban seemed as concerned about whom his daughters would marry as Isaac had been about Jacob's choice of a bride. And again, it is also worth reminding ourselves that Rachel was not consulted in the matter. As the Scripture states, Rachel was 'given' to Jacob by her father. Curiously, we use the same language today in Christian marriage ceremonies.

One may wonder why Jacob had to work for Rachel in the first place. It seemed that Jacob had not yet come into any portion of his inheritance and thus had nothing to offer a potential bride's father as a dowry. He had no choice but to work off the debt he incurred by taking Rachel away from her family. As to why Isaac did not 'advance' Jacob a portion of his inheritance prior to his traveling to find a bride (surely Isaac must have known that Jacob needed some sort of dowry) Scripture does not say.

Fortunately, the time passed quickly for Jacob. As Scripture poetically puts it, "Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her" (v. 20). As Rebekah had believed she would only need to send Jacob to her brother for a few days in order for Esau's anger to subside, so now to Jacob it seemed like it had been only a few days that he was compelled to labor for Rachel.

Takeaways

Jacob himself would one day reflect on this experience. When he blessed his son's children, Jacob referred to,

¹⁵The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,
The God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,

¹⁶The angel who has redeemed me from all evil" (Genesis 48:15-16).

Jacob would gain a wife but in the process lose some twenty years. Yet, through it all, Jacob sensed that God was with him. The presence and protection of God never failed, though they did not take the shape and form Jacob expected. So it is with us. Let us be grateful that we have the presence and protection of God, even though it may not appear to be so at the time.