

**Genesis 30:1-24**  
**The Sons of Jacob**

As we have studied the patriarchal period of the book of Genesis, we have concentrated on the three themes of land, seed, and blessing. The original promise of God to Abraham had outlined each of these.

“<sup>1</sup>Go forth from your country,  
And from your relatives  
And from your father’s house,  
*To the land which I will show you;*  
<sup>2</sup>*And I will make you a great nation,*  
And I will bless you,  
And make your name great;  
And so you shall be a blessing;  
<sup>3</sup>And I will bless those who bless you,  
And the one who curses you I will curse.  
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3), my italics.

From the beginning, God had promised Abraham the land of Canaan, progeny to fill that land, and blessing. He had repeated those promises to Isaac (Genesis 26:24) and Jacob (Genesis 28:13-15), and had added to them the specific promises of His presence and protection.

And we have seen that all of these promises were fulfilled despite the sometimes misguided, and often inexplicably foolish, actions of the patriarchs themselves. These were men of God to be sure, yet they still showed weakness and human frailty. They often lacked faith, they were frequently impatient with God’s timing, and they generally behaved like the sinful, fallen individuals they were. But despite that, or perhaps better still because of that, I find that they are some of the most relatable characters in all of Scripture.

Yet another pattern we cannot have missed as we have studied the family history of these patriarchs, is that of dysfunctional households. The marital struggles of Abraham and Sarah were mirrored by Isaac and Rebekah. The fraternal dissension we saw in the conflict between Esau and Jacob was replicated in the friction between Jacob and Laban. Now, in this passage, we will witness the competition between Leah and Rachel. Yet, God used this particular conflict, perhaps we ought to say contest, between Leah and Rachel to provide an assembly of sons for the patriarch.

**Jacob’s Children by Bilhah**

As the years passed, Rachel could not have been oblivious to the children Leah was bearing for Jacob. Despite the fact that Jacob loved her more than Leah, still she must have felt she suffered in comparison with her very fruitful rival. Her emotional response to being unable to bear children while her sister seemed able to bear them with great regularity was what we might expect. In fact, Scripture uses the same language to describe Rachel’s feelings as it does when it described the feelings of the Philistines to Isaac’s prosperity (Genesis 26:14), or that of Joseph’s brothers toward him (Genesis 37:11). Simply put,

she envied her sister. It might be worth noting that Scripture makes no mention of Leah envying Rachel's beauty of face and figure. Nevertheless, Rachel now envied Leah's success in bearing children.

To make matters worse for Rachel, unlike Abraham and Sarah (before the encounter with Hagar) or Isaac and Rebekah, Rachel knew that the problem lay entirely with her. Jacob had been able to father four sons. Clearly he was able to do his part. So now she was exasperated. And she gave vent to her feelings. "Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'give me children, or else I die'" (v. 1). As Jacob had made a blunt demand of Laban when asking for Rachel as his wife, so now Rachel made a the same straightforward appeal to her husband.

We might speculate whether Rachel had ever heard of the difficulties in child bearing that Isaac and Rebekah suffered. If so, perhaps she hoped Jacob would make the same intercessions for her that Isaac had made for his own wife. During their difficult time, "Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived" (Genesis 25:21). Rachel may have been chiding Jacob for not doing more to intercede to God on her behalf. However, it is also worth noting that Scripture makes no mention of Rachel praying for herself. This is in marked contrast to another godly woman, Hannah, who chose to bring her pain before the Lord rather than simply lash out at her husband (1 Samuel 1:10).

Jacob could hardly have known what to say to Rachel's accusation. He was, himself, irritated. "Jacob's anger burned against Rachel, and he said, 'am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?'" (v. 2). Jacob's answer to Rachel was a rebuke, not a response. Jacob understood, as did Rachel in her saner moments, that children were a gift from the Lord. Yet we cannot mistake the tension in their relationship, which was made plain by the way the two spoke to each other. Jacob may have loved Rachel more than Leah, even though she was unable to bear children, but he became as frustrated as any husband when his wife made demands on him he was unable to fulfill.

So now Rachel, like Sarah before her, determined to take matters into her own hands. Approaching Jacob, "<sup>3</sup>she said, 'here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children'" (v. 3). Her purpose was twofold. First, she hoped that through Bilhah she might have offspring. Second, she believed that through those offspring she would have a legacy. As we saw with the Sarah-Hagar relationship, in this culture, as in others of the time period, having a servant bear a child in the name of the mistress was not unusual. In fact, it was even expected. Servants, or slaves, had no legal rights of possession over either their own bodies or their progeny.

Like Abraham, Jacob acquiesced without questioning his wife. He was, apparently, more anxious to try to relieve the tension in his relationship with Rachel, than to honor God's requirements for marriage. "So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her" (v. 4). And, indeed, their union proved fruitful. "<sup>5</sup>Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. <sup>6</sup>Then Rachel said, 'God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son.' Therefore she named him Dan." (v. 5-6). It seemed that everyone except Rachel was able to bear Jacob a child. And even more, they were able to bear him sons. But in contrast to Sarah, as frustrated as this may have made Rachel, Scripture does not indicate that she showed any resentment for Bilhah.

As we saw in the Sarah-Hagar narrative, it was not the mother who named the child but the one who had commissioned the union. Bilhah had no more say in all of this than had Hagar. The name of the child means “God has judged” an unmistakable reference to Rachel feeling justified in her actions. The specific language refers to a person in a hopeless situation who receives vindication. The fact that she attributed the birth of the child to God also demonstrated her understanding that God had approved of her actions and had been the source of her deliverance. It is a reminder how we can mistake God’s patience and willingness to work in us despite our sin for His approval of that sin in the first place.

But one child, even a son, apparently did not satisfy Rachel. After all, Leah had given Jacob four sons. So Rachel offered, insisted might be a better word, that Bilhah go in to Jacob again. And so she must have done for later, “<sup>7</sup>Rachel’s maid Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. <sup>8</sup>So Rachel said, ‘with mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister, and I have indeed prevailed.’ And she named him Naphtali” (v. 7-8). The focus of Rachel’s rejoicing was clearly on her apparent victory over Leah. She had ‘wrestled’ with her and emerged victorious. And again we see that the name of the child was used to describe Rachel’s emotions. She had “been entangled in a desperate contest” with her sister, to take the literal meaning of the name. And there was even the implication that the struggle had been with God for His favor in bearing children. Sadly, there was certainly less maternal affection and more the vanquishing of a foe than we might expect to read in a birth story.

### **Jacob’s Children by Zilpah**

Now it was Leah who ‘saw’ what was happening. And she decided that she could also play the game Rachel was playing. “When Leah saw that she had stopped bearing, she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife” (v. 9). We do not know if Leah had stopped bearing children because Jacob no longer engaged in sexual activity with her or for some other reason. Scripture simply does not give a reason for Leah’s ceasing to bear children. It seems likely, though, that with four living sons, Jacob had devoted his attentions to the woman he loved rather than the one who bore him children.

The competition between the two sisters must have been intense. When Sarah and Rachel called upon a surrogate, they had been barren. But, Leah already had four sons. Nevertheless, she still wanted to be certain she outperformed her younger sister in bearing children to the man to whom they were both married. It seems that she simply did not want Rachel to think that she had triumphed. Rachel may have won Jacob’s affections, but Leah would bear him the most children. As for Jacob, caught in the middle of this maternal feud, he passively and submissively went along with whatever was decided by his two wives.

Leah’s plan worked as well as had Rachel’s. “<sup>10</sup>Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a son. <sup>11</sup>Then Leah said, ‘how fortunate!’ So she named him Gad” (v. 10-11). Again the mother, who was a servant, did not have the privilege of naming the child. Zilpah, like Bilhah and Hagar before her had merely been a tool. And the name of the child, like his brothers, reflected the emotions of the moment. Leah had been fortunate, and so she named the child.

But she, too, was not satisfied. So again Jacob had relations with Zilpah. “<sup>12</sup>Leah’s maid Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. <sup>13</sup>Then Leah said, ‘happy am I! For women will call me happy.’ So she named him

Asher” (v. 12-13). Now Leah competed not only with her sister, but with all women. All who heard of her would rejoice at her achievements. This was yet another reminder of the values of this culture, in which childbearing was that most important measure of a woman’s self-worth. We can also see that these women had shifted their praise from God to themselves.

### **Jacob’s Children by Leah**

So competitive had the two sisters become, that they even resorted to taking advantage of local folklore and legends to achieve their ends. “<sup>14</sup>Now in the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, ‘please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.’ <sup>15</sup>But she said to her, ‘is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son’s mandrakes also?’ So Rachel said, ‘therefore he may lie with you tonight in return for your son’s mandrakes.’ <sup>16</sup>When Jacob came in from the field in the evening, then Leah went out to meet him and said, ‘you must come in to me, for I have surely hired you with my son’s mandrakes.’ So he lay with her that night” (v. 14-16).

Some time had passed. Reuben had grown up enough that he could be out in the field during the wheat harvest. This makes chronological sense, since the four sons born to Leah occurred before Rachel gave her servant Bilah to Jacob. Since then two additional sons had been born by Bilah, and then Zilpah, Leah’s servant, had born two sons. Though some of the mothers may have been pregnant concurrently, still it is likely that at least ten years had passed since Reuben, the first of Leah’s children, had been born. As a young boy then, Reuben was out helping or watching the men take in the harvest when he came upon the mandrakes. Finding them lovely, and wanting to please his mother, he gathered some to take home to her.

The mandrake is a plant that is part of the nightshade family (think tomato or potato) and are mentioned only again in Scripture in the Song of Solomon, where it seems to be something of an aphrodisiac.

“The mandrakes have given forth fragrance;  
And over our doors are all choice fruits,  
Both new and old,  
Which I have saved up for you, my beloved” (Song of Solomon 7:13).

The plant has long green leaves that form a rosette pattern and it produces purple or greenish-white flowers. In the spring the plant also yields a plum sized fruit that is yellow-red. It may have been that the shape of the leaves or the exotic fragrance exuded by the plant was why traditional ancient customs had ascribed love-inducing powers to the plant. The Arabs called the plant “devil’s apples” and the Greeks referred to it as the “love apple,” so the belief in the power of the plant spread far beyond ancient Mesopotamia. Even today, it grows wild in Palestine, but it was also intentionally cultivated in ancient Egypt, where artistic depictions of the royal family often include them wearing garlands of the leaves or flowers of the mandrake.

In our narrative, though, it was less an aphrodisiac than a product with which Leah could barter for Jacob’s attentions, if not his affections. Notice that upon encountering Leah, Rachel did not demand the mandrakes when she saw them. She may be able to command her servant, but Leah was her older sister.

Apparently, Rachel, at least in this moment, was able to maintain some appearance of civility in her sororal relationships. So she politely asked for some, not all mind you, of the mandrakes Leah was proudly carrying. Leah, showing the strain on the relationship that the last decade or so had produced in her was not able to maintain a measure of politeness. Instead she responded rudely to her sister's request. She led by reminding Rachel that she had stolen *her* husband, though that was really a technicality brought about by Laban's treachery to Jacob.

Perhaps Leah wanted the mandrakes for herself because of the generosity and kindness her firstborn son had shown her by gathering the flowers in the first place. It may have been no more than motherly pride that motivated her rudeness. But we might also consider that Leah wanted the mandrakes, perhaps, to use to win Jacob's affections, if only for an evening. Her plan may have been to use their reputed powers to seduce Jacob. One might wonder if Reuben knew the trials of his mother when he gathered the flowers and hoped to help her in her endeavor to spend time with his father.

Whatever Leah's motivations, Rachel quickly acquiesced to Leah's demands. The reader cannot help but think of Esau, who parted with his birthright in the same quick, unconsidered fashion. She, apparently, was willing to trade Jacob's love for one night in exchange for flowers that will induce him to love her later. Minus her mandrakes, but in possession of the rights to Jacob for the evening, Leah did not wait patiently. Scripture indicates that she went out to meet Jacob as he came in from the fields where, no doubt, he had been overseeing the harvest. And she was no less blunt in rendering her account of the negotiations. She had hired Jacob for the night, and she frankly told him so. Jacob, apparently, did not question Leah. He simply assumed that what she said was true. He had gone from tent to tent with such regularity that he had become numb to the occasion. Jacob, as he had been with his own mother, was a pawn in the hands of his wives. No doubt Freud would make much of this, but clearly Scripture indicates the lack of backbone and character in the patriarch at this stage of his life, and it does not portray him to his advantage.

Leah's mandrakes were well spent. <sup>17</sup>“God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. <sup>18</sup>Then Leah said, ‘God has given me my wages because I gave my maid to my husband.’ So she named him Issachar” (v. 17-18). Again, the name of the child fit the circumstance. His name means literally “man of hire” and acknowledged the process by which his conception had been achieved. Leah had hired Jacob for the night, and Issachar had been the result. But Scripture makes it clear, however, that it was God's attentiveness, and not the presumed magical powers of the mandrakes, that had resulted in the conception of the child. Leah, too, attributed the birth of the child to God's intervention, though she, like Rachel, presumed it demonstrated God's approval for her allowing Jacob to spend the night with her servant.

Whether Leah pleased Jacob, or whether there was another arrangement involving more mandrakes, Jacob again went into Leah. <sup>19</sup>“Leah conceived again and bore a sixth son to Jacob. <sup>20</sup>Then Leah said, ‘God has endowed me with a good gift; now my husband will dwell with me, because I have borne him six sons.’ So she named him Zebulun. <sup>21</sup>Afterward she bore a daughter and named her Dinah” (v. 19-21). Again we see Leah hoping that her giving Jacob sons will induce him to love her. The word used to name the child can mean to dwell with or to exalt, perhaps a better indication of Leah's aspirations. She anticipated

that after six sons, certainly Jacob would cherish her more than Rachel. She was to be disappointed. Also we must note that the prodigious contribution of Leah to the house of Jacob was testimony to the special attention God gives to the neglected. We would do well to remember that God uses flawed people, even in their own superstitions to achieve His divine purposes.

We cannot pass over the birth of the daughter, though. The mention of Dinah is certainly distinctive. First, it is unique in that she is the only daughter named, though Jacob eventually fathered many, for “all his sons and his daughters numbered thirty-three” (Genesis 46:15). With twelve sons, that means Jacob sired twenty-one daughters, only one of which is mentioned here. Second, Dinah’s name is not given an etymology, though we should suggest that this may simply reflect the patriarchal nature of the society and the fact that she was not the ancestor of one of the tribes of Israel.

### **Finally Rachel Bears a Son**

At long last, and we must remember that it had probably been about twenty years, counting the seven years that Jacob and Rachel knew each other before they were married, God gave Rachel a child. “<sup>22</sup>God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. <sup>23</sup>So she conceived and bore a son and said, ‘God has taken away my reproach.’ <sup>24</sup>She named him Joseph, saying, ‘may the Lord give me another son’” (v. 22-24). It is interesting that, like Abraham, all of Jacob’s children were born outside of the promised land of Canaan. They possessed the promise of land, but not yet did they possess the land itself.

But we must see that God remembered. As God had remembered Noah (Genesis 8:1) and Abraham (Genesis 19:29), and as He would remember His covenant with the patriarchs (Exodus 2:24), God now remembered Rachel. She named the boy Joseph, in praise of the fact that God had removed from her the disgrace of being a barren woman. Then name was an exclamation of the fact that now the ridicule, the behind-the-back comments, the social stigma had all been taken away. And Rachel expressed confidence that God would continue to bless her. She expected yet another child. Yet, sadly, the woman who originally proclaimed that she would die if she could not bear children, and who was not satisfied with having children through a surrogate, would die while giving birth to that second child years later (Genesis 35:16-19).

### **Takeaways**

Scripture makes it clear throughout this passage that the Lord 'saw' and 'heard' the two women. The very names of the children reflected that truth. Thus this passage is yet another testimony to the grace of God in the lives of His unworthy chosen people. The Lord used the struggles of this flawed and dysfunctional family to bring about blessing for Jacob. The maternal contest between Leah and Rachel resulted in an assembly of offspring for the patriarch that was something to be rejoiced in. What a God we have the privilege to serve! He has promised that “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). As weak people, we can take comfort in that.