

Family History Repeats Itself

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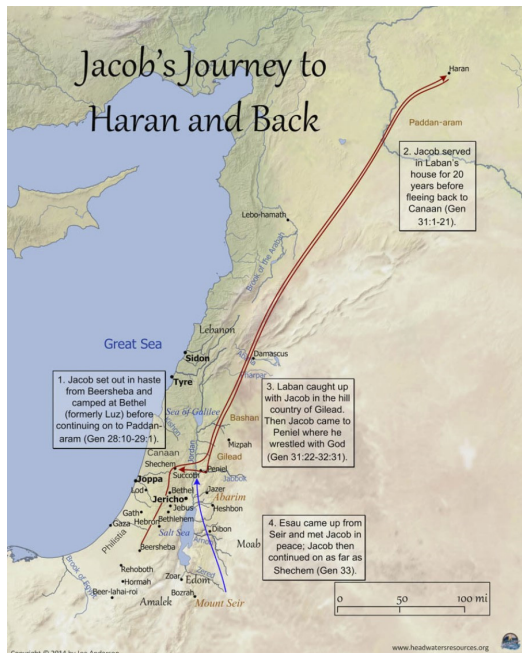


Prayer of Illumination

God, you reveal yourself to us
through your holy Word and by your Spirit.
Speak to us again in this hour.
Show us the wisdom and joy of your ways
that we may know what's good and do what is right,
through our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen.

Background

After Jacob's dream of the angels ascending and descending the stairway to heaven, he had a spring in his step, and could eventually complete his several hundred-mile journey to look for a wife in Haran. God was with him.



Jacob's making progress, but he doesn't know exactly where he is—only that he's in the land of the people of the East. Along the way he runs into three flocks of sheep gathered around a well that was covered up by a large stone.

The shepherds shared about their custom: they wait until all the shepherds were there, together they all lift off the heavy stone, water all the sheep, and then put the stone back over the covering to protect the water in the well.

Jacob: *Where are you all from?*

Shepherds: *We're from Haran.*

Jacob: *Oh, do you happen to know Laban?*

Shepherds: *We do. (Laban was Jacob's uncle—his mother Rebekah's brother).*



Jacob: *How's he doing these days?*

Shepherds: *He's well. And look, here's his daughter Rachel coming, with his sheep.*

Like Jacob, Rachel was the youngest child.
Of course he falls for the youngest, not the oldest!

[A spoiler alert is in order. In Scripture, whenever there's a woman and a well, you can be sure a wedding is soon to follow.]

Jacob then gives these lackluster shepherds some unsolicited advice:

Never mind your customs, you should water your sheep now and take them out to pasture while there's still light.

We don't know if Jacob was trying to get the competition out of the picture or if we're seeing a demonstration of his professional shepherding skills at work. Maybe both are at play here. Well, by this time the shepherdess Rachel (*her name means "lamb"*) came closer to the well. Jacob, ever the man of action, decided to take things into his own

hands and *"grabbed the ram by the horns."* Being a strong man, he lifted the stone off the well all by himself. The shepherds looked on in disbelief. *"Show off"* they mutter amongst themselves. Rachel, however, noticed Jacob's biceps. Jacob then proceeded to water Laban's lambs (like his mother Rebekah who watered 30 camels). He then kissed the lamb, *meaning his cousin Rachel*, and wept loudly. It was love at first sight.

Jacob was the most emotional of the patriarchs. Like finding a needle in a haystack, Jacob found who he needed to find, all by himself. Well, God's invisible hand was at work too, as we see later. After wiping his eyes with the Kleenex Rachel gave him, Jacob shares why he was such a hot mess: they're related. His mother is her aunt Rebekah. Rachel's father is his uncle Laban. The Shepherdess Rachel (like her aunt Rebekah) hoofs it to tell the news to her father. Uncle Laban hoofs it to the well to see for himself. There's more hugging and kissing. He brings his nephew Jacob to their home. Jacob continues to help with his uncle's business for the next several weeks. And they all live happily ever after. ...NOT!

So let's find out about the plot twist...

Scripture: Genesis 29:15-28 (NRSVue)

¹⁵ Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ¹⁶ Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ Leah's eyes were weak,^[b] but Rachel was graceful and beautiful. ¹⁸ Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹ Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." ²⁰ So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her.

²¹ Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." ²² So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. ²³ But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. ²⁴ (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.) ²⁵ When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" ²⁶ Laban said, "This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn. ²⁷ Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." ²⁸ Jacob did so and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Family History Repeats Itself”

Well, the trickster got tricked. The fleece pulled over his eyes. Jacob and Laban were cut from the same cloth. Jacob met his match in Laban. And he got a dose of his own medicine. What comes around, goes around. Comeuppance. Poetic justice. You get the picture. It’s a good reminder for all of us:

What we do will be done to us.

Let’s backtrack a little bit. Jacob kept hanging around Laban’s house. And Laban was doing a lot of thinking.

How can I rope Jacob in to get more help around the farm?

It’s obvious he’s smitten with Rachel.

He’ll do anything to have her.

But, how am I going to get my oldest daughter married?

Do you remember what Rachel’s name means?... “Lamb.”

Her older sister, Leah—*any idea what her name means?* “Cow.” Not joking here.

I don’t know what Laban was thinking naming his daughter “Cow” but she was no Princess Leah. He had to figure out how to get help AND get BOTH of his daughters married AND have them stick around Haran and not move away. So Laban, in a rather vague way promises to let Jacob marry his daughter—*for seven years of service*. What’s seven years of hard labor compared to getting to marry your cousin, right? The two shake on it. Time flies. The seven years seemed to Jacob less than seven days because of his love for Rachel. But Jacob kept his eye on the sundial—on the very day the seven years were completed, Jacob testily said to his uncle: now give me my wife. Laban got the wedding festivities planned and everyone gathered. Copious amounts of alcohol were consumed. With no electricity, the night was dark. The bride’s veil was especially thick. Or maybe, Jacob inherited the blindness of his father Isaac...

Well, after the wedding night, it wasn’t the rooster that woke up the sleepy village of Haran. It was Jacob’s scream in the morning.

“WHY HAVE YOU DECEIVED ME LABAN??!!!”

The deceiver was now the deceived. He would also later be deceived by his own sons. The ancient rabbis have a story about this scene.

Jacob immediately questioned Leah in the morning. “You responded all night when I said ‘Rachel’ to you. Why did you deceive me, you daughter of a deceiver?” Leah replied, “Can there be a schoolmaster without any students? Was it not just this way when your father called out to you “Esau” and you answered him? So when you called to me, I answered likewise.” Jacob masqueraded as Esau. Now Leah masqueraded as Rachel. Laban sheepishly explained his motives: “Jacob, here we don’t marry the youngest before the eldest daughter.” The real message: this was payback. And a jab at Jacob for taking the birthright and blessing of his older brother Esau. Laban continued, “But let me offer another deal. Just work another seven years for me. And you can have Rachel in a week’s time—just finish the wedding week with Leah. And Jacob does. He’s now married to the two sisters. As you can imagine, things get messier.

Now a sisterly rivalry ensues between Leah and Rachel. There's envy and competition. Yet God was working. "*The Lord saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb.*" The Lord saw that Rachel was barren, and so God remembered her, and *opened her womb*. Both sisters have children. Their two maidservants help as well. More competition happens: we'll call it the "Baby Wars." Jacob is helplessly stuck in the middle of all this. Conflict follows him everywhere he goes. It's a dysfunctional mess. And yet, the 12 Tribes of Israel and a daughter come from these offspring. More dysfunction follows, but... Kings and priests will come from Leah's side—all from a marriage that wasn't supposed to happen.

More trickery happens between Laban and Jacob over the next twenty years. Rachel even plays a trick on her dad. There's more trickery going on here than all the Halloweens of history combined. ***What's going on here?***

There's a purpose to all of this—a lesson for God's people. For us. God is at work and God is faithful. Our God sticks with his people—no matter what. This isn't condoning bad behavior, rather it's emphasizing God's *character*. It's all about God. Not us. Yet God, remembers us—especially the lowly. And God has a sense of humor. And we need to laugh at ourselves, not take ourselves too seriously. We need the eyes to see the comedy of our lives—that it's often a comedy of errors, *and God still loves us*. It keeps us humble.

Remember the blessing that Jacob stole, the blessing promised that others would serve Jacob? But for the last twenty years *Jacob* had been serving his father-in-law. Make God laugh—tell him your plans. Only God could turn a train wreck like this into something beautiful. This is grace. The goodness of God. God loves the unloved...and the unlovable. And we know this—we can't take the credit. We can't say we earned it. It's all a gift.

Jacob came to Haran empty-handed and alone. He leaves wealthy and the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was a long and winding road, but it happened. Though flawed, Jacob isn't all bad. In fact, the more I study Jacob, the more I like him—especially if you see the humor in some of these scenes. He's got moxy. He was strong. Took initiative. Worked hard. Made things happen. He felt deeply and cared. He persevered. Jacob wrestled with life and the angel—and wouldn't let go. He loved much, even if imperfectly at times.

And Joseph was one of the two sons born to Rachel...who we'll be hearing more about soon. God's promises are coming to fruition. The future belongs to God. We're good at bungling things up, but we're also in good hands.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*Rachel Hides Her Father's Household Gods*" by Marc Chagall, 1956

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