

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 26

Chapter 29

This story begins at the end of the 2222nd year after the creation of Adam. Jacob is 71 years old. He is a single man on his own needing to make his way in this world without the financial help of his wealthy father. When he reaches the city of Haran, he will be 660 miles from his family.

Jacob at Laban's Well

Genesis 29:1 Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east. ² And he 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. ³ When 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. ⁴ And Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where are you from?" And they said, "We are from Haran."

A literal translation of the first verse renders the following: And Jacob lifted up his feet and he traveled unto the land of the children of the east. In the Scripture, those who lived beyond the Euphrates River in the upper Fertile Crescent area of Mesopotamia were identified in Hebrew as *kedem* or easterners. For clarity, *kedem* should not be confused with *kedemah* which means "eastward." In the Scripture, the phrase eastward people refers to the Arabian tribes who were the descendants of Ishmael and Esau. In this passage, the children of the east are the descendants of Shem, relatives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Three flocks of sheep were at the well waiting to be watered. Are these three flocks owned by the same person or separate individuals? That answer we do not know. Large herds were often separated into smaller flocks to be tended by the shepherds. These three flocks could have belonged to Laban, but, for sure, the fourth flock that arrived with Rachel in verse 6 did, in fact, belong to Laban.

The grammar in verse 3 implies that the sheep rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and then replaced it, but that is not the case. The shepherds rolled the stone away to draw the water for the sheep.

Evidently, Jacob was not sure of his location. He had never been there before; therefore, he asked the shepherds where they were from and they answered "Haran."

Introduction of Rachel

Genesis 29:5 And he said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" And they said, "We know *him*." ⁶ And he said to them, "Is it well with him?" And they said, "It is well, and behold, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep." ⁷ And he said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." ⁸ 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."

Because the men were from Haran, Jacob asked them if they knew Laban. Their affirmative answer led to his third question as to Laban's well-being. Some commentators assume that because of these three questions, the three flocks could not have belonged to Laban, but that is not necessarily so. Their third answer to Jacob seems to be cut short by the arrival of Rachel with another flock of sheep. Jacob understood the process of watering the sheep and he knew that it was not time for the watering because the day was only half gone with the sun high in the sky at noon. His instruction was direct – water the sheep and put them back in the field. It was not the right time to fold all the flocks together into a herd and gather them in a place where they could be safe through the night. However, their answer implies that a rule determined when the stone could be rolled away and it was not until all the flocks that had the right to drink from the well had arrived. Rachel's flock was the fourth and last flock that needed to arrive in order to remove the stone and water all the flocks privileged to drink from that well.

Here we see the introduction of Rachel in the story. Her name means *ewe* or *sheep*. She will be the love of Jacob's life and also one of his greatest heartbreaks when she dies giving birth to Benjamin, Joseph's younger brother. She will be buried in Ephrath which is modern-day Benjamin. Her grave has never been in question because Jacob marked it clearly. It is the third holiest site in Judaism. It is one mile north of Bethlehem and about two miles south of the border of Jerusalem.



Picture: Rachel's Tomb

Rachel with Laban's Sheep

Genesis 29:9 While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. ¹⁰ And it came about, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went up, and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother.

Some commentators use verse 9 to prove that the other three flocks did not belong to Laban. When the Scripture says, "Rachel came with her father's sheep," it is just indicating that she was

a shepherdess of a flock that belonged to her father. It does not indicate that the other three flocks did not belong to Laban.

Jacob was so taken by Rachel that he watered the sheep instead of letting the shepherds do their jobs. At least one of the flocks belonged to his mother's brother, his uncle, but at this point in the story, Jacob was a stranger to those at the well.

Jacob's Kiss

Genesis 29: 11 Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. ¹² And Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

What kind of kiss did Jacob give to Rachel? Was it an appropriate or inappropriate kiss? If it was a kiss on each cheek, it was appropriate; if it was a kiss on the lips, it was inappropriate. The order of the disclosure to Rachel that he was a relative matters greatly. The kiss between male and female relatives on the cheek was appropriate; the kiss of this sort between strangers of the opposite sex was inappropriate. Perhaps Jacob's emotions overtook the protocol of the custom of the day. Surely his action was offensive to the other shepherds looking on; nevertheless, he did explain his relationship to Rachel and her father which probably calmed their reaction, yet we know from the rest of the story, Jacob was immediately smitten by Rachel's beauty and might have weighed heavily on the intent of his kiss. The event did not stifle Rachel; she immediately ran to tell her father of Jacob's arrival.

Laban's Joy

Genesis 29:13 So it came about, when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister's son, that 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. ¹⁴ And Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh." And he stayed with him a month.

Laban was extremely excited to meet his sister's son. We must remember that Jacob was 71 years old and Laban was already an adult more than 20 years before Jacob's birth.⁴² Therefore, we can safely say that Laban was more than 110 years old at this time. Laban embraced Jacob as a relative and welcomed him into his house where he stayed and helped with the chores for one month.

Jacob's Wage

Genesis 29:15 Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"

⁴² Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebekah. They were married 20 years before Jacob and Esau were born. Laban was an adult, handling the family business when Rebekah was chosen to be Isaac's wife.

Jacob had clearly become a staple in the house of Laban. He was valuable to the family workload. Laban believed he needed to be paid a salary.

Jacob's Work Arrangement – Seven Years for Rachel

Genesis 29:16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. ¹⁷ And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face. ¹⁸ Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." ¹⁹ And Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to another 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.

After 30 days, Jacob revealed his love for Rachel to Laban. He would work for seven years for no wage except the gift of Laban's youngest daughter's hand in marriage. Jacob had proved himself to Laban during the month's stay and Laban agreed that Jacob was a better choice for Rachel than all the others who were available at the time.

Time flies when you are doing something you love to do. Time doesn't matter when you are working toward a prized objective. Every day is filled with happiness knowing that each moment brings you closer to your goal. Every minute brought Jacob closer to a relationship with his bride and every second increased his love for Rachel.

Jacob's Marriage to Leah – Laban's Deceit

Genesis 29:21 Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give *me* my wife, for my time is completed, that I may go in to her." ²² And Laban gathered all the men of the place, and made a feast. ²³ Now it came about in the evening that he took his daughter Leah, and brought her to him; and *Jacob* went in to her. ²⁴ Laban also gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a maid. ²⁵ So it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?" ²⁶ But Laban said, "It is not the practice in our place, to marry off the younger before the first-born.

Seven years had passed; Jacob was 78 years old. It was time for the wedding. In this one event, the great deceiver was deceived by his uncle Laban. He made all the arrangements for the night; all Jacob had to do was enjoy the feast with the men of Laban's household and then enter the tent with his veiled bride and consummate the marriage. We might wonder how Jacob was deceived when he entered the tent. Did he not recognize Leah's voice? Did he not notice Leah's weak eyes? Why did Jacob not catch the switch? We must remember, the men had a feast before the bride was presented to Jacob. In those days, wine was always part of a feast. Although it is speculation, it is fairly safe to assume that the wine at the feast had affected Jacob's senses.

Jacob's reaction to Laban received the customary answer of most families through time. A younger daughter could marry prior to an older daughter only when the older one was labeled a spinster, a daughter the family considered unlikely to marry or past the usual or legal age of marriage. In those days, such designation could be placed on a daughter if she was not married by the age of 20. Leah was perfectly suitable to be a wife and Laban made the decision to give her to Jacob in opposition to their agreement.

Jacob's Work Arrangement – Another Seven Years for Rachel

Genesis 29:27 "Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me for another seven years."

The marriage ceremony lasted seven days. Jacob had spent only one night with Leah. Had the bride been Rachel, Jacob would not have left the tent for seven days. It is important to understand that the feast Laban held for Jacob was not the wedding ceremony. American culture holds a wedding ceremony and then a feast or reception for the couple before the marriage is actually consummated. In Jacob's culture, a wedding feast was given for the groom and then the marriage ceremony was private between the bride and groom in the chamber or tent for seven days where the couple consummated the marriage. After the seven days had passed, the couple emerged as husband and wife and the bride no longer wore her veil.

Laban made a new contract with Jacob; if he would finish the marriage ceremony with Laban according to the custom of the day, and then, if he would serve Laban seven more years, Rachel could be his wife.

Jacob's Marriage to Rachel

Genesis 29:28 And Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. ²⁹ Laban also gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her maid. ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years.

Jacob returned to the marriage chamber and completed his week with Leah. Then Laban allowed Jacob to be engaged to Rachel. Laban had given Leah a maid and he did the same for Rachel.

This passage seems to indicate that Jacob immediately entered the marriage chamber with Rachel the week following his time with Leah. Commentators differ in their interpretations of this passage. In the first 28 chapters of Genesis, Moses summarized the ultimate conclusion of many events in order to move the story along so he could address the more important theological issues. For those who hold this position verses 28-30 are a summary of what transpired and those commentators take the position that Jacob had to work for Laban another seven years before he actually took possession of Rachel as a wife. As we have seen, some of the summaries in the first 28 chapters have caused difficulties in understanding and applying those passages.

Others take the translation at face value and determine that Rachel married Jacob the week after Leah, therefore causing Jacob to incur a seven year debt to Laban for Rachel.

In the following verses, Moses tells of the births of twelve of Jacob's children.⁴³ If Jacob married Rachel seven years after the marriage to Leah, fourteen years had transpired and those twelve children were born in the last six years of Jacob's stay in Haran. Leah, Zilpah and Bilhah will bear eleven of the children and Rachel will give Jacob the twelfth. Although eleven children can easily be born to three women in six years, the problem occurs when we realize that Leah bore seven of the children; that would be impossible in six years unless there were twins and in this case, there were not; therefore, Jacob must have taken Rachel as his wife the week after taking Leah.

Leah's Son Reuben

Genesis 29:31 Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren. ³² And Leah conceived and bore a son and named him Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has seen my affliction; surely now my husband will love me."

Finally, for the first time in seven years, the LORD entered the story again. He saw Jacob's deepest desires for Rachel and they were very different from his desires for Leah. Notice this seed of truth about the LORD; He loves and tends to the unloved. Even with the intervention of the LORD, Leah misinterpreted the impact that the birth of Reuben would have on Jacob. She thought he would love her because of the birth of the son, but that would not initially be the case.

The name Reuben means in Hebrew "who sees the son."

Leah's Son Simeon

Genesis 29: 33 Then she conceived again and bore a son and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am unloved, He has therefore given me this *son* also." So she named him Simeon.

Soon after the birth of Reuben, Leah was with child again. When she bore a son, she named him Simeon which means in Hebrew "that hears and obeys." Because of Leah's response, it is evident that the birth of Reuben did not change Jacob's attitude toward Leah; therefore, she sought solace in the LORD's granting of another son, hoping it would change Jacob's mind.

Leah's Son Levi

Genesis 29:34 And she conceived again and bore a son and said, "Now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore he was named Levi.

⁴³ Jacob will be the father of 13 children once Benjamin is born in Bethlehem.

With the birth of Leah's third son, she was still trying to gain the love of Jacob. She named the son Levi which means in Hebrew, "associated with him." Obviously, Jacob still had not given Leah his love.

Leah's Son Judah

Genesis 29:35 And she conceived again and bore a son and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing.

Finally, after the birth of her fourth child, Leah changed the direction of her desires. In Leah's mind, the first three sons were an attempt on the part of the LORD to entice Jacob to love her; it was Leah's thought, not the LORD's. With this fourth son, Leah did not desire the love of Jacob but rather the "praise of the LORD." She named the son Judah which in Hebrew means "the praise of the LORD." Was the LORD pleased with the plural marriage of Jacob to two wives at the same time? We do not know. Isaac, Jacob's father, had only one wife. Abraham, Jacob's grandfather had only one wife at a time; however, he did have concubines. Was the LORD pleased with the concubines of Abraham? We do not know. We do know that the LORD was pleased with this response from Leah. Leah's response should be our response in similar circumstances. We should never take a blessing from the LORD and seek an application of our choosing. That will never work. Rather, we should thank the LORD for His blessing and give Him all the praise at that time. Three sons, three precious miracles of the LORD could not change the heart of Jacob. A fourth son, a fourth blessing from the LORD changed the heart of Leah – for the right reason and for the right purpose. Finally, her heart was in the right place before the LORD.

With the birth of Judah, Leah's body would rest from childbirth for a while. It would take a little while for Leah to realize that she could not bear Jacob any more children. If these four sons were born to Leah as soon as possible, the first was born when Jacob was about 79 and the last would be born four to five years later when he was approximately 84.

Unbeknownst to Leah, it will be through this son that the LORD will complete the promise of the covenant to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From the line of Judah, Jesus will be born.