

# **Genesis 29:14 - 30:24**

**- To be married to a man who doesn't love you,  
and the story of Jesus Christ -**

**Author: Evert Jan Hempenius**

© 2015

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)

For any questions about this Scripture passage or the notes,  
please contact us through the Contact Us tab on the website.

## **Foreword**

- ❖ The story of Jacob who married Leah and Rachel, the two daughters of his uncle Laban, and the subsequent tale of the birth of eleven sons and one daughter is fundamental for the people of Israel, and also fundamental for the church of Christ. The sons of Jacob became the tribes of Israel and their names will be written on the gates of the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven (Rev. 21:1-27, especially Rev. 21:12).<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ More important: Judah is born (Gen. 29:35). He is mentioned in the lineage of Jesus Christ (Mt 1:2). And our Lord is called: "the Lion of the tribe of Judah." It is salvation history.

## **Context**

- ❖ The promise given to Abram/Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3) is fundamental to the understanding of the second part of the book of Genesis (12-50):
  - "I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,

---

<sup>1</sup> The history of the names of the tribes is interesting. There had actually been thirteen tribes: the sons of Joseph became two tribes and the tribe of Levi was set apart for the worship service. In the Book of Revelation there is a remarkable change in the listing of the twelve tribes (Rev. 7:5-8).

and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

- The promise of becoming a father of a great nation and of many nations is repeated several times: “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted” (Abraham: Gen. 13:6-17; 15: 5; 17:5-6; 18:18; 22:17-18; Isaac: 26:4; Jacob: 28:14; 35:11).
- ❖ The personal history and character of Jacob are important for the understanding of this story.<sup>2</sup>
  - He was born as the youngest of twins. The two brothers (Esau and Jacob) were already struggling in the womb (Gen. 25:22). The LORD said to Rebecca: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” (Gen 25:23). Esau became a man of the field, a hunter. Jacob stayed quietly at home. Esau was the favourite of their father Isaac, while their mother Rebekah loved Jacob more. Esau, the firstborn, would have inherited a double portion and received the blessing of his father, due to his first birthright, but he despised his rights and sold them to Jacob for some red stew.
  - Jacob had a cunning and deceiving character, which is demonstrated in two important events:
    - he acquired the birthright of the firstborn (Gen. 25:29-34);
    - he deceived his own father Isaac to procure the blessing for the firstborn (Gen. 27). In this situation he didn't hesitate to misuse the name of God for his own sake. “Isaac asked his son, ‘How did you find it (game) so quickly, my son?’ ‘The LORD your God gave me success,’ he replied” (Gen.27:20).
  - He had to flee from his father's house because he feared his brother Esau's revenge. He was sent by his mother to her brother, his uncle Laban. During his journey he had an important encounter with the LORD God at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-22), where he received the promises of the covenant (see above), first given to Abraham.
  - During his whole life Jacob continually wrestled with God and his promises, a struggle which culminated in the fight during the night with the angel of the LORD God at Mahanaim. Afterwards he called this site “Pniel – Face of God”, for he said: “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Gen. 32:30). Jacob knew God and his promises, but he wanted to arrange things by himself, often by means of deceit.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rigsby, R. (2003). Jacob. In Dictionary of the Old Testament. Pentateuch (pp. 461-467). Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

## Form and structure

- ❖ This part of the story of Jacob consists of two sections, the first being the foundation for the second:
  - 1. The marriage of Jacob to Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:14-30).
  - 2. The struggle for love and acceptance by giving birth to twelve children, eleven sons and one daughter (Gen. 29:31-30:24).

## Technical notes

- ❖ This is a remarkable piece of Hebrew storytelling. The writer makes use of several features to enhance the dramatic effects and to illustrate the characters of Jacob, Laban, Leah and Rachel.
  - In verse 18-20 he makes use of an inclusio. This passage starts and ends with Jacob's love for Rachel. The composition in between summarizes the seven years in a beautiful way.
  - "Jacob was in love with Rachel
    - and said, 'I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.'
    - Laban said, 'It's better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me.'
    - So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him
  - because of his love for her."
- ❖ This dramatic story should be read aloud, because it is full of emotional outcries. Two examples will illustrate this:
  - "So Rachel said to Jacob, '**Give me children, or I'll die!**'  
Jacob became angry with her and said, '**Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"** (Gen. 30:1-3).
  - "During wheat harvest, Reuben went out into the fields and found some mandrake plants, which he brought to his mother Leah. Rachel said to Leah, '**Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.**'  
But she said to her, '**Wasn't it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son's mandrakes too?**'  
**'Very well,'** Rachel said, '**he can sleep with you tonight in return for your son's mandrakes.**'  
So when Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. **'You**

**must sleep with me,'** she said. **'I have hired you with my son's mandrakes.'** So he slept with her that night (Gen. 30:14-16).

- **'I have hired you.'** A woman who hires her own husband for making love!
- Both texts are a dramatic intermezzo. Rachel's outcry takes place after Leah gave birth to her fourth son. The second intermezzo is found after the eighth son was born:
- ❖ It is helpful to list the announcements of the births as follows to have an overview:

wife	child	reason for naming <sup>3</sup>
Leah	Ruben	"It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now" (Gen. 29:32).
Leah	Simeon	"Because the LORD heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too" (Gen. 29:33).
Leah	Levi	"Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons" (Gen. 29:34).
Leah	Judah	"This time I will praise the LORD" (Gen. 29:35).

#### **First dramatic intermezzo (Gen. 30:1-3)**

Rachel (Bilhah)	Dan	"God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son" (Gen. 30:6).
Rachel (Bilhah)	Naphtali	"I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won" (Gen. 30:8).
Leah (Zilpah)	Gad	"What good fortune!" (Gen. 30:10).
Leah (Zilpah)	Asher	"How happy I am! The women will call me happy" (Gen. 30:13).

#### **Second dramatic intermezzo (Gen. 30:14-16)**

Leah	Issachar	"God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband" (Gen 30:18).
Leah	Zebulun	"God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons" (Gen 30:20).
Leah	Dinah	(Gen 30:21)

---

<sup>3</sup> The etymological aspects of the names are interesting.

Rachel	Joseph	"God has taken away my disgrace" (Gen 30:24).
--------	--------	---

- ❖ The words that Rachel spoke after Bilhah gave birth to Naphtali express the feelings of both sisters very well: "**I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won.**" It is the basic struggle for love and acceptance by Jacob, not only by Leah, who was married to a man who didn't love her, but also by Rachel.
- ❖ There are some other features of this listing which should be noted:
  - In the case of Ruben, Simeon and Levi, Leah **expressed her deep longing for love** – the love she so badly missed! It is absent.
  - In the case of Dan and Naphtali (Bilhah), Rachel **has won the victory** – of what contest, making love, the birth of children?
  - In the case of Gad and Asher (Zilpah), Leah **expressed her joy** – is it real joy or is it emotional pain?
  - In the case of Issachar, Leah **thinks in terms of reward** – for what?
  - In the case of Zebulun (Leah) and Joseph the words "**honour**" (Leah) and "**taken away disgrace**" (Rachel) have been used.

## Cultural background

- ❖ It was normal custom for a wife to have a personal maid servant:
  - Abraham – Sarah + Hagar
  - Isaac – Rebecca + ?<sup>4</sup>
  - \* Jacob – Leah + Zilpah
  - \* Jacob – Rachel + Bilhah
- In the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it was quite normal that the mother or mistress of the maid servant gave the newborn baby its name (see also Gen. 4:1, 25). In other cases it was done by the father (Abram, Gen. 16:15 and Gen. 21:3) or by both, father and mother (Isaac and Rebekah, Gen. 25:25).
  - Compare:  
"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maid servant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. **Go, sleep with my maid servant; perhaps I can build a family through her**" (Gen. 16:1-3).

<sup>4</sup> Rebekah was rather young when Eliezer brought her to Abraham to become the wife of Isaac. The story mentions "a nurse" (Gen 24:59).

"When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children... Then she said, "Here is Bilhah, **my maidservant. Sleep with her** so that she can bear children for me and **that through her I too can build a family.**"

- This is a kind of surrogacy,<sup>5</sup> but it is better to call this a **vicarious pregnancy or vicarious motherhood**. Bilhah will be pregnant on behalf of her mistress Rachel and Zilpah on behalf of her mistress Leah.

## Exposition

### Verse 29:14-30

- The narrative starts about one month after Jacob arrived at his uncle's home. His uncle Laban is a wealthy and shrewd businessman. He wants to pay his nephew for all his labour from which he has already benefited. Jacob wants to marry Rachel and he will pay the bride price by shepherding the flocks of his uncle for seven years (a full period, because of the number seven).
  - Before Jacob answers Laban's question, both sisters are introduced by the storyteller; Leah being the elder one, Rachel the younger. Leah had weak eyes. This probably doesn't mean that she couldn't see very well, but her eyes were not sparkling compared to her sister's. Eyes reveal a lot about personality, emotions and physical health.
  - By doing this, he provides a background for the struggle between Leah and Rachel for the love of Jacob after they both married him.
- Laban agrees, but Jacob has to remind him of this agreement after the seven years have been completed. It seems that Laban was a bit reluctant.
- Then the deceiver Jacob (see context) is deceived by Laban, the brother of Rebekah and brother-in-law of Isaac.
  - Isaac blessed Jacob instead of Esau, because Jacob took advantage of Isaac's visual impairment due to his old age.
  - Jacob married Leah instead of Rachel, because Laban took advantage of Jacob's 'visual impairment' due to the darkness of the night. Leah takes part in this deception too, because she apparently said nothing.
    - Jacob is very disappointed and angry because of this deception. He is shocked: "**When morning came, there was Leah!**" (Gen 29:25; "**And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah.**")<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Surrogacy. (n.d.). Retrieved August 26, 2015, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrogacy>

<sup>6</sup> KJV

- In reply to the anger of Jacob, Laban said: “**It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one**” (Gen. 29:26). A better translation would be: “the younger daughter in marriage before the firstborn.”<sup>7</sup> Did he know about the deception of Isaac by his nephew? “*It is not our custom here to give the younger son the blessing before the older one.*” It looks like Laban is teaching Jacob some kind of lesson.
- No problem, Jacob can marry the other one as well. The only thing Jacob has to do is to work for another seven years. The reader is again reminded of Jacob’s love for Rachel: “Jacob lay with Rachel also, **and he loved Rachel more than Leah.** And he worked for Laban another seven years” (Gen. 29:30).

#### Verse 29:31-35

- **Leah is married to a man who doesn’t love her.** Imagine the case where there is sexual intercourse but no love, no intimacy, no tender care; sexual intercourse as a perfunctory event, as an obligation. How lonely Leah must have felt. Maybe a child may change the feelings of Jacob. And the LORD opens her womb and she became pregnant. “**It is because the LORD has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now**” (Gen. 29:32). These words need to be felt emotionally: “**my misery.**” The feelings of Jacob for Leah didn’t change at all and each time she gave birth to a son, Leah expressed her longing for love and bonding in vain. There is one exception (see below).

#### Verse 30:1-3

- **The first intermezzo.** Rachel was jealous and desperate to death. She blamed Jacob. Here again we come across a woman longing for fulfilment in her life and to have a child herself. She was also lonely:
  - Leah has four children and a husband who doesn’t love her.
  - Rachel has a husband, but no children to take care of.
- Jacob was also desperate and angry: “Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?”
  - Is this the right way to comfort your wife, whom you love so much? Jacob is rubbing salt into the wound and expressing his own frustration.
- Rachel probably realized that she had been unreasonable and came up with the solution of Bilhah, a vicarious motherhood. Jacob agreed.

---

<sup>7</sup> Brown, F., Driver, S. R. & Briggs, C. A. (1977). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (p. 114). Oxford: Clarendon Press: . ס<sup>1067</sup> TWOT<sup>244d</sup> GK<sup>1142</sup> n.f. **first-born**, always of women Gn 19:31, 33, 34, 37; 29:26 (JE) 1 S 14:49.

### Verse 30:4-13

- Bilhah gave birth to two sons. Rachel expressed her feelings by the following words: “**God has vindicated me**” (Gen. 30:6) and “**I have had a great struggle with my sister**” (Gen. 30:7). Both exclamations reflect her jealousy. She is self-centred, just like Leah. Leah was longing for love which Jacob doesn’t want to give, Rachel for children, which Jacob cannot give.
- Rachel claimed the victory in a childbirth-contest! Leah didn’t surrender. It is remarkable that there is no discussion recorded between Leah and Jacob before she gave Zilpah to Jacob, again an example of vicarious motherhood. It is another proof of the lack of feelings of Jacob for Leah. Zilpah gave birth to two sons of Jacob. Leah professed to be glad, but was she really? No! When she said: “**How happy I am! The women will call me happy,**” (Gen. 30:13) she didn’t expect anything from Jacob. This happiness is void. And what did this do to Rachel? If the women will call Leah happy, how will they call Rachel?

### Verse 30:14-16

- **The second intermezzo.** Reuben is coming home from the fields and he has brought some fruits of the mandrake plant with him. It is also the time of the wheat harvest, a period of joy.
  - The identity of this plant is disputed.<sup>8</sup> The mandrake plant, in particular the root and leaves, is poisonous. Therefore other plants have been suggested, because of the apparent aphrodisiac properties of its fruits. The fact that Rachel asked for them might suggest that she didn’t have sexual intercourse with Jacob for some time.
  - Note the discrepancy between Gen. 30:2 where Jacob said: “**Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?**” <> “**Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.**” If Rachel is hoping that some aphrodisiac or medicinal property of this plant will solve her problem of infertility, it is in vain.
- The answer of Leah is full of bitterness.
  - “**Wasn’t it enough that you took away my husband? Will you take my son’s mandrakes too?**” This reaction of Leah might suggest that Jacob had abandoned her.
- And Rachel is selling Jacob for one night to Leah.
  - When Jacob came home, Leah said: “**You must sleep with me. I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes**” (Gen. 30:16). Any comment is superfluous.
  - Leah gives birth to another two sons and one daughter. She is still longing for some kind of acceptance by God: “**God has rewarded me for giving my maidservant to my husband,**” and by Jacob: “This time my husband will treat me with honour, because I have borne him six sons.”

---

<sup>8</sup> Mandrake. (n.d.). Retrieved August 28, 2015, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandrake>

#### Verse 30:17-24

- Leah gave birth to Issachar and Zebulun and to one daughter. There is still a deep longing for Jacob's acceptance and love: "**This time my husband will treat me with honour, because I have borne him six sons.**" Again in vain.
- "**Then God remembered Rachel; He listened to her and opened her womb.**" Finally! The mandrakes were to no avail. Only God can give children. Leah already had seven children, Zilpah two, Bilhah her own maidservant also two. She felt it as disgrace, the only one loved by Jacob.
  - When Joseph is born, her pain of disgrace has been taken away.
  - And she expresses her hope: "**May the LORD add to me another son.**"

#### Verse 29:35

- When Leah gave birth to her fourth son, Judah, she praised the Lord without expressing any feelings of loneliness and pain of unanswered love. This is the true fulfilment of every human life.
  - Judah will become the forefather of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Application – salvation history**

- In this story the foundation has been laid for the people of Israel, the people of the covenant. Unfortunately, the struggle between the two women (Leah and Rachel) will continue during the (salvation) history:
  - The (half-)brothers sold Joseph as a slave to the Midianites (Gen. 37).
  - The struggle for the hegemony between Ephraim (son of Joseph; Israel) and Judah.
- **Important.** Jesus is the son of David,... Judah, Jacob, Isaac, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah,... Adam, the son of God (Lk. 3:23-37; Rev. 5:5).
  - Gen 29:35 shows the purpose of man: "This time I will praise the LORD." Jesus Christ is the glory of God. He will be praised for ever and ever (Rev. 5:12).

### **Application – personal history and tragedy**

- Besides the grand view of salvation history, there are personal and psychological lessons to be learnt.
  - **Leah is married to a man who doesn't love her.** This marriage had been arranged by her father, who deceived the deceiver.

- Marriages based on calculation or wrong motives, expectations and assumptions will lead to unhappiness, loneliness and false hope.<sup>9</sup>
  - Leah is trying to “buy” love and acceptance through the birth of children. It is to no avail. If a marriage is in trouble, some people hold on to this kind of fantasy, that if they have a child this will revive or even rescue their marriage. This is not true.
  - Leah felt this emptiness of unanswered love in her life. The feeling of emptiness deepens after each disillusion. There is one exception. **This exception is important.** “Praise the Lord.” Praising and glorifying the Lord changed her feelings, her longings, and joy filled her heart.
- Children are a gift from God. We should always be reminded of this fact, especially in an age where women have access to medical help when they suffer from infertility. Jacob, Leah and Rachel were well aware of this, but at the same time they had their own solutions and both sisters made use of vicarious motherhood by giving their maidservants to Jacob. There were also the mandrakes.
  - Rachel felt it as disgrace that, though being the only one loved by Jacob, she didn’t have any children. When women are unwillingly childless they might regard it as a great personal tragedy, involving much emotional pain and grief. Friends, sisters and sisters-in-law who do have children should be well aware of this. Special pastoral care and prayer is needed.
  - Where Leah expressed her **praise** (Judah), Rachel expressed her feelings of **hope**. Both are important aspects of Christians life.
    - There are two different aspects of hope. Firstly there is hope based on a personal experience in the past; it will lead to trust. Secondly there is hope in the absence of personal experience in the past. This kind of hope requires great faith and trust. In the case of Rachel it led to despair.
  - Although it isn’t mentioned explicitly, both women did pray and call upon the name of the LORD:
    - “When the LORD saw,” (Gen. 29:31), “the LORD heard” (Gen. 29:33), “God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea” (Gen. 30:6), “God listened to Leah” (Gen. 30:17), “then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her” (Gen. 30:22).

---

<sup>9</sup> Human givens. (n.d.). Retrieved August 29, 2015, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_givens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_givens)

## Bibliography

- Alter, R. (1996). *Genesis*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Alter, R. (2004). *The five books of Moses: A translation with commentary*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Baldwin, J. (1986). *The message of Genesis 12-50: From Abraham to Joseph*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Fokkelman, J. (1975). Narrative art in Genesis: Specimens of stylistic and structural analysis. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Fokkelman, J. (1999). Reading Biblical narrative: An introductory guide. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Keller, T. (2009). *Counterfeit gods: The empty promises of money, sex, and power, and the only hope that matters*. (pp. 80-89). New York: Dutton.
- Wenham, G. (1994). Word biblical commentary: *Genesis 16-50*. Dallas: Word Books.