

## ***The Greatest Love Story***

*By Dr. Dave Neale*

We continue this morning in the story of Jacob. Today we have the narrative of how Jacob, son of Isaac, brother of Esau, and grandson of Abraham, acquires two wives. They are Leah and Rachel, whose crafty and duplicitous father, Laban, keeps Jacob at work for twenty years in payment for his daughters in marriage.

### **Behind the Text**

Let me give you the overall context of this story and say a few words about it generally, before we get to today's text.

There are four components in the structure of Genesis. There is the pre-history in chapters 1-11 (creation, fall, flood, new start). There are no time markers and we don't know when any of it occurred. Biblical *history* (that which has a known time and place) begins in chapter 12 of Genesis and has three great "cycles." There is the Abraham Cycle (12-24), the Jacob Cycle (25-35) and the Joseph Cycle (37-50). They are called cycles because they use a circular structure. In our Jacob Cycle that is expressed as the trip to Haran to find a wife, the 20-year sojourn there, and then the return to Bethel where the story transitions to his 12 sons.

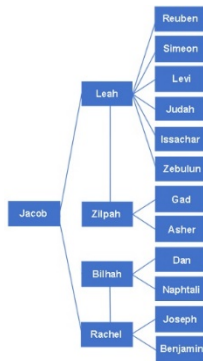
Altogether this material comprises the Patriarchal Narrative, the story of the beginning of the nation of Israel.

The Jacob Cycle is a very complex and painful story. Jacob and his family are what we call in biblical studies a "hot mess." Nobody looks very good.

The dozen or so episodes that comprise the cycle each has its own story to unpack for meaning. None of them easy to interpret. We find:

- Jacob has stolen his brother's birthright and then spends the rest of his life worrying that his brother is going to kill him (27);
- Jacob dreams of a stairway to heaven (28);
- Laban, Jacob's uncle to whom he travels to find a wife, is a greedy schemer, as we shall see (29);
- Jacob's wives can't get along at all (30 – mandrake story)<sup>1</sup>;
- Four women bear him 12 sons;
- Laban and his sons plot to steal Jacob's wealth and take back Leah and Rachel (30)<sup>2</sup>
- Jacob "wrestles" with God (our story for next week)
- Jacob's first son by Leah, Rueben, sleeps with Jacob's concubine Bilhah (35);
- And his wife Rachel dies in childbirth bearing his last son, Benjamin (35).

## Slide on Children of Jacob



It is a history of deceit, jealousy, greed, duplicity and unfairness. It is a family history so plagued by dysfunction that you would think any one recording the history would surely have been tempted to scrub the material and made it more palatable.

### In the Text

But the community of faith that preserved this story of its origins, over countless generations, let the story stand *as it was*.

In historical reporting, one surest measure of authenticity is that people and events are *not* idealized, but told in all their flawed reality. The honesty of the story argues for its authenticity.

The opposite of historical objectivity is historiography, making someone sound like a saint. It's why I don't read autobiographies!

What do we learn from this honesty? Well, something very valuable about how our honesty about the human condition is essential to understanding the nature of God. Without this honesty about its context, the grace of God cannot be understood. We are to understand that the grace of God is this far-reaching.

The story also teaches us how ridiculous self-righteousness is, because we and our forebearers are all sinners in need of God's mercy.

The gospel in all of this is that, in a sad tale of human failure, unbelievably, the purpose of God fulfilled in the creation of the nations, and love of God expressed in a patience and grace that is the Good News in this story.

The story of Jacob and Rachel is one of the greatest love stories in the Bible. At the centre of the narrative of the emergence of the nation is a love story for all time! Something beautiful there. And it is remarkable that it is this love story that is the engine that drives the entire narrative forward. No love story... no Jacob Cycle.

***Jacob loved Rachel...So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. (Gen 29:20)***

Famously, on the night of the wedding Laban sends the veiled Leah in to Jacob and in the morning Jacob says, ***What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?*** After a week of wedlock to Leah, Laban gives Rachel to Jacob and he works another seven years.

### **From the Text**

The lessons the Jacob teaches us are subtle and certainly not simplistic.

Someone said, the thing to know about sheet music is that it isn't about *reading* the notes, it is about *hearing* the music. As Neils Bohr said to J. Robert Oppenheimer, "You might understand the math of physics, but do you hear the music?"

The individual notes of the Jacob Cycle are tough to contemplate, so what is the music here?

- Jacob is a good man who lives in the midst of jealous and treacherous relatives. After the vision of God and the stairway to heaven, Jacob eventually pulls his life together. He works hard; he is faithful in what he performs. He prospers (and makes his father-in-law rich in the process!). He claws his life back from his earlier sins. That's music.
- I think the story tells us that life is a fluid journey toward God with its ebbs and flows. The story tells us we *can* do better than we did yesterday. Music.
- I think the story tells us that while the notes are discouraging, the music is that God persisted in creating a path to salvation *in the midst* of human sin. The patience and love and purpose of God could not be more powerfully made clear than that he should produce the 12 sons of Jacob/ Israel to create a nation and eventually send the Messiah, out of this hot mess.

And finally this point.

The Bible seldom retells its own sacred history (Acts 7 is a notable exception). You will look in vain for reference to the creation stories. Outside of the first few chapters of Genesis, Noah is barely mentioned in the Bible. There are *passing* references to Abraham. Our Jacob story is never retold in the Bible. I guess they did that around the dinner table ("a wandering Aramaean was our father" goes the Passover Haggadah).

But this once I want to point us to the interpretation of the Jacob story contained in the Wisdom of Solomon, chapter 10 (one of the Deuterocanonical books). In a rare chapter that *does* rehearse the sacred history (Adam, Noah, Babel, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Moses), the Jacob story gets this treatment in four verses... It is a soliloquy on the presence of Wisdom in the history of God. This is the lesson the Wisdom of Solomon takes from this story:

***When a righteous man fled from his brother's wrath, she guided him on straight paths; she showed him the kingdom of God and gave him knowledge of holy things; she prospered him in his labors, and increased the fruit of his toil. When his oppressors were covetous, she stood by him and made him rich. She protected him from his enemies, and kept him safe from those who lay in wait for him; in his arduous contest she gave him the victory, so that he might learn that godliness is more powerful than anything else.*** (Wisdom of Solomon 10:9-12)

**Godliness is more powerful than anything else.** How do we define godliness? Not in the sense of mere piety, the absence of sinful behaviour. The pietistic version of Christian faith defines godliness as avoiding a checklist of behaviours that are considered almost taboo; “don’t do that, don’t do that...”. Pietism is not godliness.

Godliness (*eusebeia*) means to show the same character of God in this story to people in our lives - love, patience and grace in the midst of the hot mess.

**Train yourself in godliness...** Says 1 Timothy (4:7).

[Worship Team Come]

Why is that more powerful than anything else? It seems weaker than deceit and jealousy and greed. The power of godliness only becomes clear in the landscape of wickedness. Just as the Jacob Rachel love story is juxtaposed with the dysfunction of Laban’s family, so our godliness is meaningful because we must pursue it in a wicked world.

The story teaches us that, in spite of it all, godliness overcomes evil and Jacob finds peace with his brother, a life of peace with his 12 sons, that poor Joseph, sold into slavery, becomes the salvation of the nations.

Because only by its pursuit can we bring healing and salvation to a lost world.

Thanks be to God.

<sup>1</sup> When Leah’s son Reuben brings mandrakes for his mother, the childless Rachel asks to have some because mandrakes were considered an “aphrodisiac that stimulated conception” (Gen 30:14-21; p 39, Oxford Study Bible). Leah immediately bore Jacob two more sons!

<sup>2</sup> Jacob was skilled in selective breeding. For example, in that time herders believed that during breeding the female would produce an offspring according to the colour they were seeing. So Jacob peeled white strips in poplar rods and put them before his sheep when they were breeding (Gen 30:37-43). **Striped, speckled, and spotted** offspring were the result. Since he only promised to keep the striped ones and give the rest to Laban, he grew wealthy in livestock.