

GENESIS 29

Verses 1–10: Jacob Met Rachel at a Well

As Jacob arrived in “the land of the people of the east” (Genesis 29:1), we get the second occurrence of the common betrothal type scene when a prospective suitor (or his emissary) encounters his bride-to-be at a well (the first is in 24:10–61).¹ Type scenes follow an expected narrative pattern while employing a common set of motifs and images. In the case of betrothal type scenes, the bridegroom-to-be journeys to a foreign land and encounters a maiden at a well. Water is drawn, and the maiden rushes home to bring news of the stranger to her family, at which point the suitor is invited to join the family for a meal where the betrothal takes place.²

Type scenes, however, are not rigid, and often the most significant details in a particular narrative are the ways in which the narrative varies from the expected pattern. In this instance, there was a stone covering the well, and Jacob had to exert great force to remove it in order to water Rachel’s flocks (29:2, 10). On the one hand, this foreshadowed the years of intensive labor Jacob would have to endure to secure Rachel as his wife.³ On the other hand, the well is often a symbol of fertility, and thus its being blocked by an obstacle also foreshadowed Rachel’s years of infertility, during which her womb was, in biblical idiom, “shut up.”⁴

1 See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011), 65–67.

2 Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 62.

3 Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 59.

4 Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 66.

Verses 11–20: Jacob Negotiated with Laban

Jacob was welcomed into the household of Laban, Rachel’s father and Jacob’s uncle (Genesis 29:13–14), and in another departure from the typical pattern, a month passed before the expected betrothal negotiations took place between Laban and Jacob, during which Jacob was evidently working for Laban (verses 14–15). It is at this point that we are first informed that Laban actually had two daughters, Leah and Rachel, and that Rachel, the one Jacob had met and fallen in love with, was the *younger* sister (verses 16–18), setting the stage for the narrative that follows.

Not having any possessions with him, Jacob could not offer the customary payment typically owed to the father of the bride when making marriage proposals in the ancient world. Thus, Jacob offered to work for Laban for seven years as a form of payment for Rachel’s hand in marriage (verses 18–20). “The bride-price usually was equal to a few years’ wages, but seven is on the high side, reflecting both Laban’s greed and Jacob’s love for Rachel.”⁵

Verses 21–26: Jacob Unknowingly Married Leah

After seven years had passed, Jacob reminded Laban of their arrangement (Genesis 29:21), and Laban hosted a wedding feast (verse 22). But instead of receiving his beloved Rachel, Jacob was given Leah, and due to the darkness of night, he did not notice until morning (verses 23–25). For Leah, this must have been a difficult and uncomfortable situation, knowing, as she did, that her husband really desired her sister and would be disappointed when he found out his new wife was not Rachel.⁶

Jacob confronted Laban over this deception, and Laban responded, “It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn” (verse 26). Many scholars believe this alludes back to Genesis 27, wherein Jacob, as the younger son, used a disguise to obtain what Isaac had intended for his older brother, Esau. Here, with Jacob expecting to receive the younger sister, deception was used to instead give him the older one, with Laban reprimanding Jacob about the proper place of the firstborn.⁷

Verses 27–30: Jacob Married Rachel

Nevertheless, Laban agreed to give Rachel to Jacob, too—in exchange for another seven years of service (Genesis 29:27). In this case, however, Jacob did not have to wait until the end of his service to marry Rachel.

5 Wenham, “Genesis,” 59.

6 Camilla Fronk Olson, *Women of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2009), 69.

7 Wenham, “Genesis,” 59.

After waiting until the end of the customary seven-day wedding feast (“fulfil her week;” verse 27),⁸ Jacob was permitted to marry Rachel (verses 28–30). Nothing is said about how Rachel felt about having to wait while her sister first enjoyed the privilege of being married to Jacob because of their father’s trickery.⁹

Verses 31–35: Leah Was Blessed with Fertility

Although each sister’s reaction to the marriage arrangements goes unmentioned, it soon becomes clear that both would endure hardship and difficulty because of their father’s unfairly using them as pawns in his schemes to exploit Jacob. As a result, they ended up competing for the love and affection of the same man. Thus, their behavior can at times seem to be based on petty jealousy, but it is better to recognize that both were put in a difficult situation and bore the responsibility of securing the best future for themselves and their children under less-than-ideal circumstances.¹⁰

Jacob naturally showed favoritism toward Rachel and “hated” Leah (Genesis 29:31). In response, the Lord “opened [Leah’s] womb” and blessed her with children, while “Rachel was barren” (verse 31). Leah gave birth to four sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah (verses 31–35). With each son, Leah recognized that the Lord had looked favorably upon her (verse 32) and heard her (verse 33), and she in return praised Him (verse 35). Her sons were a sign to her that she had been seen and heard of the Lord, even if she had been neglected by her husband and others.¹¹ As is often the case in biblical birth narratives, Leah’s exclamations of gratitude at each birth were encoded into the name of the of the son itself:¹²

- Reuben = “Look, a son” (verse 32)
- Simeon = “Hearing” (verse 33)
- Levi = “Joined” (verse 34)
- Judah = “Praise” (verse 35)

According to Camilla Fronk Olson, Leah’s “sons’ names also serve as reminders of our need for Christ, the *Son* who opens our communication so that God *hears* us, *joins* us to the Father with At-one-ment, and deserves our eternal *praises* for his sacrifice on our behalf.”¹³

8 Wenham, “Genesis,” 59.

9 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 69.

10 Camilla Fronk Olson, “The Matriarchs: Administrators of God’s Covenantal Blessings,” in *From Creation to Sinai: The Old Testament Through the Lens of the Restoration*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap and Aaron P. Schade (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2021), 405.

11 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 70.

12 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 406.

13 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 70; emphasis in the original.

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