

GENESIS 30

Verses 1–8: Rachel Gave Jacob Her Handmaid

Meanwhile, Rachel was barren, and her husband’s love and affection was not enough to alleviate the sorrow that came from her inability to bear children: she had to turn to God (Genesis 30:1–2).¹ Rachel’s desperate plea—“Give me children, or else I die” (verse 1)—was “more than an instinctive maternal yearning.” Rather, in its ancient context, “it was a profound longing to fulfill her God-given responsibility to continue the Abrahamic covenant through future generations.”²

Following the same customs manifest in the story of Abraham and Hagar (see 16:1–4), Rachel gave Jacob her handmaiden, Bilhah, as a wife (verses 3–4). Bilhah gave birth to two sons, which Rachel counted as her own, and thus Rachel took the prerogative of naming them, calling the first Dan and the second Naphtali (verses 5–8).

Verses 9–13: Leah Gave Jacob Her Handmaid

Leah had the remarkable and exclusive privilege among all of Israel’s matriarchs to be the only one who never suffered an *initial* period of barrenness and as such never had to fear that she might not bear any sons.³ Yet it does seem that after an initial period of fertility, she also went through a phase when “she had ceased bearing children” (Genesis 30:9 English Standard Version). In light of her complaint to Rachel

1 Camilla Fronk Olson, *Women of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2009), 70–71.

2 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), 407.

3 Olson, “Matriarchs,” 407; Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 72.

(“that thou hast taken my husband” [verse 15]), this may have been more because Jacob, due to his favoritism toward Rachel, had stopped spending the night with Leah rather than because Leah had become barren.

In any case, she employed the same solution Rachel did and offered her handmaiden, Zilpah, to Jacob as a wife (verse 9). Like Bilhah, Zilpah bore Jacob two sons, which Leah counted as her own and thus named Gad and Asher, respectively (verses 10–13).

Verses 14–21: Leah Bore More Children

In ancient and medieval times, the roots of a mandrake were believed to have supernatural properties that could induce pregnancy, and a tonic made from the crushed-up mandrake roots was a common folk remedy for barrenness.⁴ Thus, when Reuben found mandrakes in the field, he took them to his mother, Leah, who probably hoped to use them for herself (Genesis 30:14). Instead, Rachel bartered with Leah for them, promising to ensure that Jacob would spend the night with Leah in exchange for the mandrakes (verse 15).

Leah agreed to this deal (verse 16), and even without the mandrakes, that night with her husband produced yet another son, whom she named Issachar (verses 17–18). Leah subsequently produced a sixth son, named Zebulun (verses 19–20), and a daughter, Dinah (verse 21).

Verses 22–24: Rachel Finally Bore a Son

Finally, after what must have been several years (given the number of children Leah had birthed),⁵ Rachel conceived and bore a son (Genesis 30:23). Because the son came so soon after she procured the mandrakes, some scholars have suggested that the mandrakes proved effective.⁶ Whatever the means or mechanism, however, the scriptural text indicates that it was *divine intervention*. “God remembered Rachel . . . and opened her womb” (verse 22). Rachel understood this, stating, “God hath taken away my reproach” (verse 23). She named her son Joseph, optimistic that the Lord would bless her with yet another son (verse 24).

Verses 25–43: Jacob Tended to Laban’s Livestock and Prospered

By now, Jacob had likely served his additional seven years to Laban for Rachel and then some, and thus sought to be released from his debt to Laban and permitted to return to his homeland (Genesis

4 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 71.

5 Olson, *Women of the Old Testament*, 74.

6 Dennis T. Olson, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: One Volume Commentary*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Petersen (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 24.

30:25–26). Laban, however, had recognized that he had prospered significantly with Jacob in his service and was reluctant to let such a valuable asset go (verse 27).⁷ Laban and Jacob thus negotiated new terms of payment going forward. The details of the arrangement can be hard to follow or understand from a modern perspective.

In short, sheep typically are white, and goats typically are a solid, dark color, so Jacob proposed that he be permitted to keep all the black sheep and spotted goats born into Laban’s flocks as his payment (verses 31–34). Laban then removed all the black sheep and spotted goats from the flock and separated them by a three-day distance (verse 35). Had he not done this, Jacob could have artificially increased the number of black sheep and spotted goats born to the next generation by crossbreeding them with the white sheep and solid, dark-colored goats.⁸ By removing all the abnormally colored sheep and goats from his flocks, Laban sought to minimize Jacob’s payout.

Jacob, however, placed white striped or streaked rods in the line of sight for the goats as they were feeding and breeding, which increased the chance of spotted goats being born (verses 37–39). He did this specifically among the “stronger livestock” (verse 41 New King James Version). The sheep, meanwhile, he kept facing the dark-colored goats (verse 40). As strange and inexplicable as all this may seem, according to some scholars, ancient animal breeders believed that “visual impressions” upon the female livestock at the time of conception affected the color of the offspring.⁹ This unusual method aside, Jacob had a dream revealing that it was ultimately God who caused greater numbers of abnormally colored animals to be born into Laban’s flocks so as to benefit Jacob (31:5–13).

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⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 60.

⁸ Robert Alter, trans., *The Hebrew Bible*, 3 vols. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:110, note on verses 35–36.

⁹ David M. Carr, “Genesis,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: An Ecumenical Study Bible*, 4th ed., ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 53, note on verses 37–40.