

Genesis Chapters 30-31

Last week the question was asked as to whether or not God caused the misery in the family of Jacob through giving children to Leah while withholding them from Rachel and as usual I gave my superficial fence-straddling answer while waiting on a better one to occur to me. Part of that answer came to me during one of the evening worship hymns Sunday night and the rest arrived about 7:30 Monday morning.

Pondering it further, the question becomes one of how much of our lives does God dictate and how much is our own doing, and in a good answer we'd have to consider the role of circumstances, choices and consequences along with the difference between the actions and reactions of God as related in our Biblical accounts. So here goes.

God's plan was for Jacob to have the twelve sons to create the twelve tribes, just as earlier it had been God's plan for Abraham and Sarah to have Isaac.

The decision for Jacob to use four different women was the plan of Laban, Rachel and Leah, not necessarily that of God.

God doesn't cause (at least in our theology) all the choices that people make and they may use their free will (at least in our theology) to do things that God didn't necessarily intend or want to happen, but He is never caught off guard of by surprise and can always use and mold events and circumstances to accomplish His will, as we'll see in the book of Esther, where the only real hero of the book is God Himself.

Did God cause the misery of Jacob and his family? No. They did that themselves by their choices, the consequences of those choices and how they chose to react to their consequences and the circumstances they found themselves in.

Jacob could've stopped the much of the misery by being a better husband to Leah. Leah could've stopped much of her own misery by turning to God sooner than the birth of Judah. Rachel could've stopped much of the misery by being content with Jacob's love and by deciding to be a sister instead of a competitor to Leah. Laban could've prevented much of the misery by either not tricking Jacob into marrying Leah or at least to have arranged the marriage properly.

The two words that are key to understanding the role of God in all this are the words "When" and "Then." "When God saw that Leah was not loved, he opened her womb," and by implication, closed Rachel's, although we're not told that. God's role in Leah having children was as a reaction to the actions of Jacob and the unhappiness of Leah and was perhaps (you can get into trouble quickly when you start assigning motives and intentions to God's actions) designed not to promote the misery that was already there, but to guide Leah into the reliance on and satisfaction in Him that she expressed however fleetingly with the birth of Judah or perhaps as part of his ongoing work in forging the character of Jacob or perhaps as part of the balancing of the scales of divine justice (in the Old Testament they looked for this more in this life, while we've been inclined to think of as happening more in the next.)

The next time that God is mentioned as having a role in the family life is when the text tells us that "Then God remembered Rachel..." and she had Joseph. The last time we saw this phrase is "Then God remembered Noah..." when he was in the ark. Once again, it's not that God had forgotten about them and then suddenly remembered. The idea expressed is that the story was about something else for a while and after that was accomplished then the attention of the story

and of God turned back and continued with the person he is said to have remembered. We're told about Noah and their going into the ark, then the story shifts to the rains and the destruction of all the life through the flood. With that accomplished, we then return to Noah. Likewise, whatever God was working on in the lives of Jacob and his family, after that had been accomplished, then the story can turn back to Rachel.

So, did God cause all the misery of the family? No, His actions are preceded by conditional words indicating that He acts out of love and compassion. But, He did work through their unhappiness to accomplish His purposes. What was he working on and accomplishing? We're not told.

Usually we're told that he was using this to shape and mold and change the character of Jacob, but if that's true then he didn't do a very good job because as we'll see Jacob hasn't changed much and it will take a divine fight to change him and even then he never seems to learn his lesson about the dangers of playing favorites.

Perhaps the change was in Leah and Rachel. After this chapter we're not shown any more conflict between them and in the last major episode involving the both of them, they're shown to be in agreement and both disparaging and wanting to leave their father. So maybe there was peace in the family after the birth of Joseph.

Perhaps the project was simply the birth of the first ten sons. Once again, it's dangerous to speculate and to march too boldly where the text doesn't take us, so we'll just leave these last thoughts where they belong, in the realm of possibility but certainly no certainty.

Anyway, to move back to our story in chapter 30. After Joseph was born and Jacob had completed the final year of his 14-year dowry, he and Laban have a discussion over what his wages should now be. Jacob wants to go home, but Laban knows that he's prospering because of Jacob (just as Abimilech realized that he was blessed because of the proximity of Isaac and as those around Joseph will realize the same blessings in Egypt) and they strike a bargain on how Jacob can build up his own flocks.

With this deal we're given several lessons: in sneakery, in plotting, in recent history. in primitive genetic engineering, in dominant and recessive genes and finally one in humility. Let's look at what we've got. Jacob and Laban reach an agreement where Jacob will keep any spotted or marked lambs or goats and Laban will keep the white ones.

This seems to be to the advantage of Laban because the white is the dominant gene and the marked or dark or spotted is the recessive gene. Without drawing any genome tables like we did in Biology I, suffice it to say that you'd only expect about 1/4th of the flock to be born spotted. Is Jacob getting soft or stupid in his older age? No, the text shows us that he's up to his usual plotting. Remember how he conned Esau out of his birthright with the red stew and that he was then known as Edom, or red? So Jacob used red to con Red. As you'll recall, Laban means "white" and Jacob is going to trick him with the white flock and the white branches. So we're subtly told that Jacob isn't the victim here, even when Laban removes all the current dark animals to the herds three days away, which would mean that only the unborn animals that are already spotted will be his. No, just like he used red to slicker Red, now he's going to use white to slicker White.

So there's the lesson about genes, sneakery, plotting and recent history. To accomplish the genetic engineering Jacob uses a common folk belief of his day by putting the stripped sticks in front of the strongest of the white animals when they came to get water and to breed and they'd have stripped offspring. If the white animals were weak or feeble he hid the sticks so they'd have feeble offspring

that'd be white and therefore Laban's. This goes on for six years and we're told that by doing this Jacob becomes wealthy, gathering not only livestock but also servants and camels and other signs of wealth, while Laban's own flocks and wealth diminishes.

What's that you say? The text doesn't say that Laban's own flocks and wealth diminished? Yes, it does. We know that he wasn't doing well because his sons are complaining about it; because he kept changing the terms of their agreement, something he wouldn't have done if he'd been prospering; and because Jacob and his wives say so.

So much for the genetic engineering lesson. Does this mean that this actually works? They used to warn mothers against getting scared by a snake or something and marking the baby. Should we have also warned them against getting too close to a barber's pole?

No, Jacob's sticks and all his cunning and craftiness had nothing to do with his success. There's the lesson in humility from this. It's nearly hidden and could be easily missed. In the next chapter Jacob tells his wives of a dream he had where the spotted livestock is jumping on the white livestock and of God telling him to notice what they were doing and that they were doing that because God had seen how Laban was doing him. We know that all the breeding flocks were actually white, so this is a symbolic dream. So what was God telling him? He was telling him in effect that he had prospered because God had helped him and let him prosper, not by any cleverness or trickery of his own. So while this was a blessing from God it was also a clear rebuke to Jacob and a reminder that he wasn't as smart as he thought he was.

In chapter 31 Jacob decides and God confirms to him that it's time to go home. He tells his wives about his plan and they agree that Daddy's a jerk and that he's spent all their dowry money and treats them like strangers and that they ought to take off.

So they do. He puts the wives and kids (aged 19 to 6) on camels, gathers all the livestock, servants and other wealth, and they take off. We're given two rare instances of the text actually stating judgments instead of implying it, when it says that Rachel "stole" and Jacob "deceived."

What is the author trying to tell us here? It says that Jacob deceived Laban or stole away and puts that in the same category as Rachel stealing. In fact, the word is the same. (gaw-nab') If we go with the deceived translation, then we're reminded of Esau declaring him a "deceiver" and if we go with the stole away translation then we're again reminded of Esau being robbed twice by Jacob. Either way, the implication of the author is, in our modern slang, "Folks, that boy ain't changed a bit!"

They must have been cuttin' sand, too, because they had a three day head start and then it took Laban and his relatives another seven days to catch up with them, and Laban wasn't herding goats, lambs, camels and donkeys.

When they do catch up and Laban confronts Jacob, he tells him that he could harm him, but God appeared to him and told him to be careful to speak neither good nor ill toward Jacob. Why is this significant? Remember way, way back when Abraham's servant came and asked for Rebekah's hand in marriage. Laban and his father, after listening to the story, told him that they could "speak neither good nor ill" of the matter because it was clearly from God. By throwing these same words back in his face so many years later (just like Laban threw the dig about the younger not going before the older in their country at Jacob) God was warning Laban that Jacob's flight, like Rebekah's marriage, was clearly from Him, and even a pagan like Laban knows better than to tangle with God.

Anyway, Jacob and Laban have a dramatic confrontation, with each one confronting the other about how poorly the other one has treated him. Notice the first thing Laban says to Jacob is demanding to know why he has “gaw-nab’ed” him and then insisting that he just wanted to tell everybody good-bye, but now he wants to know why Jacob has “gaw-nab’ed” his household gods.

Jacob’s reply is that he was afraid that Laban wouldn’t let him take his family, but he protests that he hasn’t stolen the household gods and that whoever has will die.

Be careful of rash vows and promises. Remember what we studied in Ecclesiastes 5:2: “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God” We know more than Jacob. We know who stole the gods and we know what’s going to happen in chapter 35 with the birth of Benjamin.

Why was it significant who had the household gods? These were one of the things that you’d use in cases of a dispute over inheritance. If you had the gods you had the better claim. In effect, Rachel is changing the will, to put it in our terms.

Laban looks for them but is deceived by Rachel.

Now it’s Jacob’s time to explode and he reminds Laban of all the wrongs he’s done to him over the last twenty years and how he himself has gone above and beyond the call of duty in caring for Laban’s flocks. Notice that he reminds Laban (and Laban doesn’t dispute) of how Laban has broken every legal law and custom while Jacob kept them beyond what was required and brought him good fortune:

1. “Your sheep and goats have not miscarried” - the law and shepherd contracts assumed a birth-rate of 80%, instead Jacob has produced 100%.
2. “nor have I eaten rams from your flocks” - the shepherd was permitted to eat rams, although they’d be deducted from his final pay.
3. “I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts: I bore the loss myself” - both the ancient law and the Biblical law (Exodus 22:13) protected the shepherd from losses from wild animals.
4. “you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night” - the law said that the shepherd didn’t have to replace or account for whatever was stolen at night.
5. “heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes” - the law required that the owner provide the shepherd with adequate clothing, food that evidently Laban didn’t do.
6. “you changed my wages ten times” - this would have been during the six years he was working for something other than wives. The contracts were up once a year at shearing time and were only to be changed then, but in six contract cycles Laban changed the contract four extra times.

Also note, that since Jacob left when Laban was shearing his sheep, this means that Jacob didn’t break his contract since it would’ve been up at shearing time.

Laban tries to make the case that Jacob and Rachel and Leah had a metronymic marriage, one in which since the father-in-law had adopted the son-in-law, that the wives, children and property all belonged to the father-in-law, but he concedes defeat to Jacob.

Jacob and Laban take their leave of each other by making a covenant that said “I don’t trust you and you don’t trust me, but God will keep an eye on each of us for the other.” They set up a standing stone and a pillar of stones and agreed not to cross that point to attack the other. Jacob also pledged not to mistreat or replace his wives, which would have nullified the treaty.