

Desires and Disputes

Reading: Genesis 29:31-30:24, James 4

H/N 15/02/04pm

Study: Genesis 29: 31-30:24

Psalms: 137, 127, 128, 20:6-9

Years ago I was visiting a farm in East Africa. It was the home of a rich man who had lots of cattle. Most farms have numerous buildings scattered around but this one had a number of huts encircling a compound. I wondered what they were used for. There were a lot of children running about. Then I was told that he had a number of wives and each one lived in a separate hut.

Maybe Jacob's compound was a bit like this. He had been tricked into marrying Leah when he was in love with her younger sister Rachel and wanted to marry her. He ended up marrying both as you know. This was a recipe for certain disaster. And that is just what we find in the passage today – although the sovereign rule of the Lord prevailed. As the Proverbs (16:1) tell us, *The plans of the heart belong to man but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.*

Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (29:30) – in fact Leah was unloved. The lot of a married person who is unloved is not a pleasant one. But the Lord saw that Leah was unloved. He saw and he acted in justice and mercy. The Lord is always concerned for the oppressed and the unloved. He saw and he acted in a powerful way. He opened the womb of Leah but Rachel remained barren.

And so this episode in the life of Jacob begins. We will observe and learn from the actions and reactions of the three people involved and then come back to see how the Lord was over-ruling all along.

Leah

What marked Leah's life? Was she happy? No. Why not? She was unloved – literally hated. Jacob spent the first week with her but after that all his affection was given to Rachel. Leah was desperate for love – she wanted to be loved by her husband.

The Lord in his mercy opened her womb and she had a son. What a joy it was to her to have a baby – not just the baby in itself but her hope was that her husband might now love her as she presented him with a son. See what Leah said as she named her sons w. 32, 33, 34.

Leah was not as foolish as some women today who think that having a baby will bring joy and happiness apart from a loving husband and father. The Bible clearly teaches there should be love in a marriage and that the joy of having child is to be shared between mother and father – for the sake of everyone not just the child. And indeed to the glory of God who gives children.

Leah bore Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah. These men became heads of tribes in Israel – including the priestly and kingly tribe. And *then she stopped bearing children*. Did the Lord close her womb or was it that Jacob neglected her completely? Certainly the sons she bore to Jacob did not bring him closer to her. We see her desperation to have Jacob come to her in the incident with the mandrakes.

Maid

Before the mandrakes appear Leah resorts to the same method as her sister in that she gave her maid Zilpah to Jacob to bear children for her. She was still living in the hope that the more sons she had the greater would be her chances of having Jacob love her.

While such a practice may have been culturally acceptable, it was not acceptable to the Lord. He did not open the wombs of these maids. Besides it was a practice fraught with danger – as they might have learned from Sarah and Hagar. It clearly reveals a heart that trusts in human methods rather than trusting in the Lord.

Mandrakes

One day Leah's young son Reuben came home from the fields with mandrakes – a yellow prune sized fruit. This rare fruit was prized as an aphrodisiac and for promoting fertility. Rachel saw these things and asked Leah for some. A bitter exchange between the two sisters ensued.

Rachel envied Leah for having children (v. 1) and Leah envied Rachel for the love and attention she received from her husband (v. 15). Envy all around. Envy was still there in the church in the days of James (James 4) – *you lust and you do not have* he wrote. *You fight and war – yet you do not have because you do not ask.* Is it still in the church today? Is there envy in your heart? Then get rid of it by submitting yourself to God and taking hold of his grace.

Leah sinks to the depths of selling these mandrakes to her sister in order to have Jacob spend the night with her. *I have hired you with my son's mandrakes* she said to Jacob as he came in from the fields – you must spend the night with me. Desperation led her to buying the love of her husband. What a tragic state of affairs within this 'family' – this bigamist relationship.

God listened to Leah (v. 17). How amazing that in the midst of this sordid affair God came and listened to Leah. He heard her cry, he saw her desperation, and he had mercy on her. Leah had a sixth son called Issachar – which was not a very appropriate name under the circumstances – wages??? If only she had more of the grace of God.

Leah went on to have a sixth son and then a daughter. She probably had other daughters in the meantime but this one Dinah, is mentioned because she features in a later narrative.

Rachel

Leah wanted to be loved. What did Rachel want? She was desperate for children. Like Jacob's mother Rebecca and Grandmother Sarah, Rachel was unable to have children for some years after marriage.

Mad

Rachel's response was to get mad at Jacob and blame him for her infertility. *Give me children or else I die.* How stupid, how irrational. He was having children by Leah – it was not his fault. That is what envy does. She got angry and exploded in the face of this man who loved her.

Jacob's response was also marked with anger, and bordered on blasphemy. Although he did at least acknowledge that it was the prerogative and power of the Lord to give or withhold children.

Jacob knew why Rachel was not having children. He knew that God was in control of the fruit of the womb. But he did not act according to that knowledge. He did not go to the Lord in prayer seeking his face as he should have. Rather he reacted with anger and abuse. He did not learn from his father Isaac. Isaac pleaded with the Lord for his wife because she was barren (25:21) – and the Lord granted his plea!

Envy and anger in the heart of Rachel and Jacob respectively. What should have been the response of their hearts, particularly when they knew the power of God and even his grace? Do we always respond, react according to the knowledge, the precious knowledge of Gods grace and power that we have been given? Or does anger get aroused and smother a prayerful and gracious response?

Maid

Rather than looking to the Lord for help in her time of need. Rather than asking the Lord for a child and waiting upon him, Rachel rushes in with her own solution – and Leah followed her as we have seen. Bilhah she says to herself – Of course my servant girl/maid can have children for me. And so she took Bilhah and gave her to Jacob as a wife.

Again she, as well as Jacob, could have learnt from their forbears – viz. Sarah and her maid Hagar. Jacob agreed to Rachel's plan and so were born Dan and Naphtali. It is intriguing that Rachel claims God heard her voice (note Elohim not YHWH) and judged her case (30:6). Clearly that voice must have been more than what we have read in verse 1. We might wonder exactly how she prayed as she set about doing her own thing. Rationalising her actions?

Mandrakes

Back to the mandrakes. Rachel pleaded for these in the hope that they would help her get pregnant. The conversation between the two sisters is brief and terse. Rachel agrees to hire out her husband for a night in order to get the mandrakes. Bitterness and scheming all round.

Again Rachel resorts to her own methods – not just local custom this time, but local pagan beliefs. It is clear from the narrative that the mandrakes did not help her. She did have a baby son in the end. How was that? It was because God opened her womb!

Jacob

A brief review of Jacob's character as demonstrated in this narrative. His failure to love Leah was tragic though not unexpected considering the manner of their marriage. Bigamy was not in Gods plan for marriage.

Jacob angry response towards Rachel shows his failure to act 'righteously' as head of this family. We have noted his neglect of prayer and poor leadership.

The Lord

As we close let us take note of the Lord's over-ruling, over-ruling for good, in the tragic events in Jacobs household. It is an important narrative for in it 11 of the 12 tribes of Israel are inaugurated.

At the beginning it is the Lord who had mercy upon the unloved Leah and

opened her womb. At the end it is the Lord who remembered Rachel – *he listened to her and opened her womb*. God also listened to Leah and gave her two more sons after she had stopped bearing for a while (v. 17).

We are left in no doubt that is the Lord who blesses his people with children. As Psalm 127 tells us *children are a heritage from the Lord*, they are a gift from Him and Him alone.

Children are Gods gift to a married couple – man and woman. There are many women and families today who would do well to remember this, rather than trust in mandrakes, maids or modern medicine.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon