

# Get Out of the Karma

- <sup>1</sup> Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east.
- <sup>2</sup> As he looked, he saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep lying beside it, for out of that well the flocks were watered. The stone on the well's mouth was large,
- <sup>3</sup> and when all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place over the mouth of the well.
- <sup>4</sup> Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where do you come from?" They said, "We are from Haran."
- <sup>5</sup> He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" They said, "We know him."
- <sup>6</sup> He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!"
- <sup>7</sup> He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them."
- <sup>8</sup> But they said, "We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep."
- <sup>9</sup> While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess.
- <sup>10</sup> Now as soon as Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well's mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother.
- <sup>11</sup> Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud.
- <sup>12</sup> And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's kinsman, and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father.

- <sup>13</sup> As soon as Laban heard the news about Jacob, his sister's son, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Jacob told Laban all these things,
- <sup>14</sup> and Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh!" And he stayed with him a month.
- <sup>15</sup> Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?"
- <sup>16</sup> Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.
- <sup>17</sup> Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance.
- <sup>18</sup> Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel."
- <sup>19</sup> Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me."
- <sup>20</sup> So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.
- <sup>21</sup> Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed."
- <sup>22</sup> So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast.
- <sup>23</sup> But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her.
- <sup>24</sup> (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.)
- <sup>25</sup> And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?"
- <sup>26</sup> Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.
- <sup>27</sup> Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years."
- <sup>28</sup> Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife.

- <sup>29</sup> (Laban gave his female servant **Bilhah** to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.)
- <sup>30</sup> So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than **Leah**, and served Laban for **another seven years**.
- <sup>31</sup> When **the LORD** saw that **Leah was hated**, he **opened her womb**, but Rachel was barren.
- <sup>32</sup> And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name **Reuben**, for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me."
- <sup>33</sup> She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name **Simeon**.
- <sup>34</sup> Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called **Levi**.
- <sup>35</sup> And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she called his name **Judah**. Then she ceased bearing.

### Genesis 29:1-35

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## Karma Chameleon

*And he came to the land of the people of the east.* The last word in **Gen 29:1** is a warning. The word "east" has often been the direction in Genesis of very bad things (guards: **Gen 3:24**; Cain: **4:16**; Babel: **11:2**; Sodom: **13:11**; death: **23:17, 25:9**). In the story, Jacob takes a long journey and arrives in the land of the east. What he does not realize is that things are going to happen to him that he did not want, that he did not foresee,

including things that he himself has done to others, thus creating an almost **karmic retribution**.

When discussing parts of this story, others have used terms like “**school of hard knocks**” or “**poetic justice**” or “**what goes around comes around**” to describe the things we will see happen to Jacob here. But I wanted to use the term “**karma**” for a few reasons. **First**, karma is a term that almost no American knew 50 years ago, but today nearly everyone uses it as if it were a real thing. I’ve also never talked about karma from the pulpit. Because of these things, I want to take this opportunity to help you learn that “karma” is actually something else disguising itself like a chameleon so that people will not be forced to deal with a God who is angry at their sins. Hopefully, this will give you better theology to think through this story more biblically.

Second, the term “east” reminded me of how karma is truly **a religious idea** of the **east**, particularly the orient in Buddhist, Hindu, and other eastern religions. The influx of eastern worldviews has turned western civilization on its ear. Those 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century importers of eastern religion, from occultists like Helena Blavatsky to dead Beatles singers would have viewed this influx as good and exciting, but I see it is profoundly dangerous to both the spiritual and physical

well-being of human beings. You don't believe me? Just as 7 out of 10 Indians who live in overwhelming poverty in cities like New Delhi.

A third reason I wanted to spend some time on this today has to do with the **meaning of the word** “karma” and how such an idea has actually been derived from our story by people who do not know any better. **What is karma?** Though many Americans use the term, it appears they actually have no idea what it means. In her 2003 song “Karma,” **Alicia Keys** sings, “It’s called karma baby | And it goes around | What goes around comes around | What goes up must come down.” But as author **Shoba Narayan** says, “That isn’t karma. That is **Newton’s Law of Physics.**”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps *Indigo Girls*’ Emily Saliers can do better. In the song “Galileo” she sings, “And then you had to bring up reincarnation | Over a couple of beers the other night | And now I'm serving time for mistakes | Made by another in another life time | How long 'til my soul gets it right | Can any human being ever reach that kind of light?” At least in this song, there is the admission that karma is directly tied to reincarnation. You can't have karma without the endless

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<sup>1</sup> Shoba Narayan, “Pop-Karma: NBC’s ‘My Name Is Earl’ Bandies about a Key Hindu Term without any Idea of Its Real Meaning—but That’s Not Such a Bad Thing,” Belief Net, [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/174/story\\_17471\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/174/story_17471_1.html).

cycle of the migration of the soul into a new body. And yet, in an interview about the song she says, “It’s a regeneration of souls for the betterment of all creatures and things over time.”<sup>2</sup> “For the betterment” presupposes that there is some purpose in karma, some Higher Intelligence behind it all. It also seems to be a peculiarly American flavor of karma that likes to take the good side without the bad.

But as Dr. Groothuis explains, “The law of karma is an unbending and impersonal rule of the universe ... All suffering is deserved on the basis of bad karma. The baby born without legs deserved it, as did the woman who was raped. There is no injustice--and no forgiveness. None are innocent, and there is no grace available.”<sup>3</sup> That isn’t exactly what yuppie American new agers like to talk about, but it is this exact reason why only 5% of the people in India are in the upper caste, and 75% make up the lowest castes, including the largest cast that used to be called Pariahs or “untouchables.” It is what they deserve from their previous life. In fact, no human being *can* reach that kind of light.

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<sup>2</sup> Song Facts, Emily Sayers of Indigo Girls,  
[http://www.songfacts.com/blog/interviews/emily\\_saliers\\_of\\_indigo\\_girls/](http://www.songfacts.com/blog/interviews/emily_saliers_of_indigo_girls/)

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Groothuis, “Reincarnation and the Message of Jesus,”  
<http://www.leaderu.com/theology/groothuis-reincarnation.html>

Karma simply keeps people in poverty, sickness, and subjection to an elite few. It is a despicable doctrine.

So if Americans only pick and choose a uniquely invented brand of karma that fits with a (as Leftover Salmon sings): “birkenstock, spandex, necktie, patchouli ... modern income socially conscience Boulder hippie” kind of worldview, and it isn’t actually karma as the rest of the world knows it, then what is karma? “Karma” comes from the Sanskrit root meaning “to do” or “what is done” or “a deed.”

This idea of work (though not karma) is found in our story. Jacob tells Laban “I will work/serve (*abad*) you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel” (Gen 29:18). “So Jacob work/served seven years for Rachel” (20; cf. vs. 27-28). Combine this with what Laban does to Jacob and it gets some people thinking about karma.

One more thing before we go to the story. The “law” of karma is not a physical law, but a metaphysical one. That is, it deals with things beyond physics, which is why it is not like the law of gravity. It deals with morality, even though it is itself an amoral force. Being that karma is utterly impersonal, its results are not to be considered a judgment enforced by God.

The Bible does have ideas of reciprocity such as, “Those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same” (Job 4:8) and “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity” (Prov 22:8). But it also tells us “Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!” (Ps 126:5). That certainly isn’t karma. It says, “One sows and another reaps” (John 4:37). That is the opposite of karma. And most importantly it says, “Do not be deceived: *God* is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap” (Gal 6:7).

So karma, cosmic forces, or fate? Or God? If karma, then you have a convenient way to avoid being held accountable for your evil actions. All you get is meaningless suffering in this life. As someone else has said, “Suffering is not caused by sin in the universe of karma; it occurs because of one’s ignorance of spiritual principles. Good actions always produce good karma; bad actions result in bad karma.”<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, let us now turn to our story and see more specifically what happens to Jacob after his joyful trip to the land of the east.

## Serendipity or Providence

Genesis 29 falls into three basic units. The first is the tale of how Jacob meets Rachel (29:1-14). The second is how

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<sup>4</sup> Mayhall



Laban cheats Jacob (15-30). The last is the first four births of Jacob's wife Leah (31-35). We will begin with the first.

The first verse says, “Then Jacob went on his journey and came to the land of the people of the east” (Gen 29:1). We've looked at the east. Now let's think about the first part of the verse. It literally says, “Then Jacob picked up his feet.” Calvin and Luther both take this unusual phrase as referring to Jacob's faith, which they suggest has been greatly strengthened in the previous story by his dream and the covenant God swore to this man to be with him always and to bless him.<sup>5</sup> I am not convinced that Jacob as of yet has true saving faith in Christ.

Instead, this man has promised that if God will do as he has promised and bring him back to his father's house, then he would worship the LORD, then Yahweh would be his God (Gen 28:21-22). Until such a time time, Jacob will insist that Yahweh is Isaac's God (cf. Gen 31:5, 29; 42; 32:9), never internalizing his own faith until after he returns to Bethel and God changes his name to Israel (cf. 35:8-15; cf. 43:14; 48:3;

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, “he commends the extraordinary strength of Jacob's faith, when he says, that “he lifted up his feet” to come into an unknown land” (Commentary on Gen 29:1). Luther is more general, talking about all of the saints of old, which include Jacob here. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 5 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 266.

49:25; Heb 11:21). I think it is important to read the text more closely at this point, so that we do not turn Jacob into something that he is not—not *yet* anyway. It will help us keep in mind that the actions of this man up to this point in his life and for the next few chapters, while being those of a man who has **met the LORD**, of a man who has **Christian parents**, and of a man who is **testing God**, are not yet those of a man of faith. Understanding this will help you see how it is that God *brings* Jacob to faith, rather than creating confusion in your mind about why (as Luther put it) “a **very saintly patriarch**” with “**sublime and truly ecclesiastical exercises of faith**” is put forth in this part of his life as a basically worthless fellow who gets what he deserves.

Instead, I think **Dr. Boice** is more cautious when he says simply that Jacob “**got under way joyfully with the burden of his fear of Esau lifted [with] his guilt in deceiving his father gone.**”<sup>6</sup> Isaac has blessed him. Esau cannot catch him. God has made a remarkable promise to him. And so he sets off on his journey like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz—a skip in his step and a song in his mouth.

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<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 781.

Upon arriving in somewhere outside of Haran, the home of his relatives, Jacob sees a well (29:2). Given how many times we have seen wells and women together in Genesis, we already sense what is coming, especially since Isaac has sent Jacob here to find himself a wife. Upon spotting the well in a field, he sees three flocks of sheep lying beside it. But the stone on the well's mouth was large and had not been rolled away so that the sheep could be watered.

Yet, the shepherds of these sheep were standing around by the well (3). For some reason, they had not rolled it away for the afternoon yet. So Jacob gets curious. “My brothers, where do you come from?” “We are from Haran” (4). “Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?” “Sure, we know him” (5). Jacob inquired, “Is it well with him” (6), no pun intended. “It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!” Here comes the girl.

At this point, since I've been talking about karma, I thought I might as well add its western twin: serendipity. “Serendipity” was coined in 1754 by an English Earl. It comes from an old word for Sri Lanka (*serendip*), which is made up of mostly Buddhists and Hindus. In other words, the idea is closely associated with karma. Perhaps a good word for it is

“fate,” a term used quite a bit in the Romantic Comedy *Serendipity*.

John Cusack’s character meets Kate Beckinsale’s character and says, “I think fate's behind everything.” “- Oh, you do?” Then later, her character says, “Fate's telling us to back off.” And his says, “If fate didn’t want us to be together, then why did we meet tonight, huh?” They go their separate ways that night, but not before he gets her name ... a name without a phone number! No way to contact her. The rest of the movie is about how Fate brings them together so that they can’t help but fall in love. Is this what will happen with Jacob and Rachel? Serendipity? Fate? Some unstoppable, mindless accident that results in purpose and love?

Let’s look at what Jacob does. It says, “Jacob saw Rachel ... and the sheep” (10). He immediately sees this girl and so says to the shepherds, “Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered together. Water the sheep and go, pasture them.” Boice and Luther<sup>7</sup> are convinced that what has happened here is love at first sight, something

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<sup>7</sup> “Therefore he is immediately inflamed with love at first sight, and natural desire toward his kinswoman comes to the fore, so that the two-fold impulse of faith and love made his body and heart more animated. For he wanted to show himself as a man of strength and agility—in order that he might capture the maiden’s heart and entice her to fall in love with him.” Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 5 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 281–282.

that many don't think is possible. Yet throughout his life, Rachel will be Jacob's only real love, all the way to her death. This is brought out most profoundly on his own deathbed, when after looking into the eyes of her firstborn son Joseph, he sees something of his beloved wife and tells him, "To my sorrow Rachel died in the land of Canaan on the way" (Gen 48:7).

What Boice suggests is going on in our verses here is not unlike a young boy who falls in love with a young girl. "First they notice the girl. Then they notice the car she is driving."<sup>8</sup> It gets better. These young shepherd boys are now a nuisance, sort of like that pesky little brother who is always following the boyfriend around. As soon as Jacob sees Rachel, he devises a plan. "Hey, those sheep should be grazing this time of day. Why don't you go run along now and come back later to get some water." It is as if Jacob is saying, "Hey kid, here's a buck. Why don't you walk down the block and go get yourself some ice cream. On me." "But it costs \$3." "Here, here's \$10. Go stuff yourself. Run along." Clever plan!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 781.

<sup>9</sup> **GOING DEEPER:** It is worth noting that Isaac was 137 years old at the time he gave Jacob his blessing. He had been 60 years old when Jacob was born. So Jacob was 77 years old when he started out for Haran. He is not a young man here. Jacob died at the age of 147 (Gen. 47:28), which was 70 years after his meeting with Rachel. This makes his moving the stone all

But they said, “We cannot until all the flocks are gathered together and the stone is rolled from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep.” Haha. They won’t be moved. Little brother, or in this case, several little brothers, stay. At just that moment, while he was still speaking to them (9), Rachel came with her father’s sheep, because she was a shepherdess. “As soon as” Jacob saw her and the sheep (10), he did what any young man with a newly found love would do. He tried to impress her. Jacob came near and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth all by himself! Look at those muscles. Look at the power. Then he watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother (10). He now does what his mother did for Abraham’s servant.

Is he trying to get on Laban’s good side through his daughter, or is he acting like some studly young fool trying to show Rachel how strong he is? It is probably a little of both, with more of the latter than the former. For it says, “Then Jacob kissed Rachel and wept aloud” (11). Thus begins the first great love story in the Bible. Of Adam and Eve, we know little of their actual love. Abraham and Sarah, the same. Even Isaac and Rebekah. But Jacob and Rachel, this is a true love story, as sordid as it all will become.

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the more impressive, as it also demonstrates all the more how excited he would have been to meet this girl after all those years of being alone.

**Love.** This is a word greatly misunderstood in our day. But it is important to think clearly about the love between a man and a woman. What we see here is that first, it is rooted in Jacob's physical attraction to Rachel. While Rachel is not immediately said to be beautiful (as Sarah and Rebekah were), this seems to be information that is saved until later. First, we must learn something about her sister. Then we learn that **"Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance"** (Gen 29:17). There is nothing wrong with be physically attracted to another person. What is wrong is when this is all that attracts the two people. Sadly, this seems to be the first, second, and last thing that many people today are looking for. But biblically speaking, while there can be a physical-erotic love (Gk: *eros*), love is deeper than mere attraction. **We will look at this more in the second part of the text today.**

But I can comment at least a little on why Jacob was kissing Rachel and weeping. It seems to be out of **thankfulness**. No, I do not believe that Jacob is converted at this moment. However, he takes it as the **first sign to him** that God is going to bless his journey. Here he has seen the perfect woman, who "just so happens" to be from the right family. This is **not serendipity**. **It is Providence** guiding the feet of Jacob and Rachel to *this* well at *this* time on *this* day.

Providence has a Mind, because God is the one who is providential over all the affairs of men on the earth. This is God beginning to do for Jacob as he swore that he would do, and Jacob is overwhelmed at the gift he sees.

But Jacob may be getting a little ahead of himself. The first part of the story ends with Jacob telling Rachel that he is her father's relative (12), that he was Rebekah's son. So Rachel ran home and told her father. As soon as Laban heard that his sister's son had come, he ran to meet him and embraced him and kissed him and brought him into his house (13). So Jacob told Laban "all these things." Exactly what he told him—only the good (such as the dream) or also the bad (such as his brother's hatred and his stealing the birthright), we are left to guess. But if he did not tell Laban the bad, then it only makes what will soon happen the more ironic. For now, Laban acknowledges that his "bone and flesh" had come, and he stayed with him a month (14).

### **Karma or Irony to Get Jacob Thinking?**

At this point, the second of the three parts of the story begins. It starts off innocently enough. Jacob is staying with Laban, and is obviously working for him during that time. At some point his uncle asks him, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what



shall your wages be” (15)? The word “serve” here is often translated as “work,” and as we saw, this is an idea that is associated with karma. But, of course, it doesn’t *have* to be, especially in cultures that do not even have such a concept.

Laban is simply being a good uncle and a fair boss. What kind of wage would you like, since you are helping me out? At this point, we get a parenthetical—“Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel” (16). Laban knows full well what the wage is going to be. His daughter! The names of the girls are quite interesting. “Rachel” means “Ewe.” Rachel is Laban’s precious little lamb. “Leah,” on the other hand, well, her name means “Wild Cow.” We aren’t told directly that Laban thought of her like a heifer, but he named her after one (maybe a goddess or maybe a literal cow).

What we are told is that Leah had “weak eyes” (17). This is contrasted with Rachel’s beautiful form and appearance. Wenham is delicate in the way he talks about this, “Most commentators think [‘soft’ eyes] means they had no fire or sparkle, a quality much prized in the East. Whether her eyes were the only features that let her down is not said, but the glowing description of Rachel as having ‘a beautiful figure and a lovely face’ suggests Leah was outshone by her sister in

various ways.”<sup>10</sup> From what we will learn in a moment, it may very well have been more than her eyes, for this woman was not being sought after as a bride like Rachel was (is this the real reason why the shepherds had to wait for Rachel)?

Now comes Jacob’s response. “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel” (18). Here we have the perfect number “seven” again. Why? We are told here, “Jacob loved Rachel.” The LXX translates love (*ahab*) with *agape*. Jacob is interested in more than Rachel’s beauty. He is so in love with her that he will work for seven years just to have her hand in marriage. Two things about Jacob’s love present themselves here. I’ll talk about the first for a moment.

First, his love is patient. This is the first virtue of *agape* love in 1 Cor 13:4. Contrary to popular opinion, which you know is popular based on how many people think that what Jacob agreed to here is insane, all true love is patient. This is its starting point. Ours is perhaps the most impatient society in the history of earth. No wonder we don’t know what love it.

But there is something to learn here from this patient love. When it is real love, love that seeks the best for others,

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<sup>10</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 235.

the time factor involved is not an issue. Time is only an issue when all you care about is **yourself**. But Jacob loved Rachel, not himself. And therefore, “**Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.**” (20). Certainly, this is a virtue to be desired above gold in all of our relationships.

If you find yourself deeply upset by something someone you love has done, patience with them is of the utmost importance, even the kind of patience that God showed to you when you were his enemy. It matters not if it is your child, your parent, your brother, your sister, your wife, your husband, or your neighbor. If you love them, you will be patient with them out of love. And you will know it is true love if God rewards your patience with a sense of calm in the midst of that which seems to be impossible. I don't know about you, but I would have been dying if I had to wait seven years before I could have married the one I loved. Fortunately, I didn't have to. That speaks more of Jacob's character than it does my own. And Jacob isn't exactly a shining star of virtue.

Just here, the **seeds of trouble** have been sown into the story. It is time to now point them out. First, notice that Jacob said, “**For your younger daughter Rachel.**” He wants

the younger, not the older. This is surely put into the story to cause us to remember that we have seen this older/younger language before *in the life of Jacob*. **Jacob is the younger** and he completely disrespected his older brother's status. This is a man who does not care about such things as this.

Second, notice **Laban's cryptic response**. "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me" (19). Who is "her?" We assume he meant Rachel, don't we? But he didn't actually say Rachel's name. Is it possible that Laban had someone else in mind for Jacob right from the start? Sometimes it is what you do not say that is the important thing.

After Jacob serves his seven years for Rachel, he tells Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed" (21). So in the traditional manner, Laban gathers everyone together and has a **feast** (22). But then he does something **unexpected**. He takes his daughter *Leah* and brings her to Jacob. She would have been covered from head to toe during the ceremony. Jacob did not know it was not Rachel, so he went in to her later than night (23). Presumably it was dark. Probably Jacob had also imbibed in some of the wine Laban had been saving up for just this night for just this

reason. Laban had pulled a fast one on his nephew. Sound familiar?

“And in the morning, behold, it was Leah!” (25). Our minds race back to Esau and Isaac discovering what Jacob had done. Those striking words are not as shocking as the *sight* that Jacob must have beheld. “How did *she* get in here?” So he runs out of the tent to his uncle and says, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” (25). Deceived me! Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob” (27:36)? For he cheated and deceived to get the birthright. Now, Jacob gets to see what it feels like.

Karma? No. Sovereignty. Karma would have been if Jacob had done something evil to *Laban*, but he hadn't. You reap what you sow? Yes, to a degree, but not because of mindless karma. Rather, it is because of God's providence. Will not Joseph teach his brothers this very lesson later on in the book? Perhaps more than anything, it is **delicious irony**. The hand of God is in it, as we will see shortly. This is not fate or chance or karma. It is **God's will working through Laban**.

What kind of a sick God would do something like this? First, let's ask why would Laban do this? We can speculate a

little. He surely remembers all those years ago when his sister was taken away, never to be seen again, by this servant of his father's brother. Now, his sister's nephew is here and is going to take his precious lamb from him. And perhaps he has come to learn a thing or two about the character of this man Jacob, which as we have seen, isn't exactly sterling. But we are not left to guess as to the stated reason: "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn" (26). Ouch! That one had to sting, and it does make you wonder if Jacob hadn't spilled the beans about what happened with Esau. "That may be the way you people work down in Canaan, but up here, we follow tradition, we do what is right."

"Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years" (27). Friend, would you do that? How would you have reacted to Laban's deception and demands? Would you demand Rachel then and there? Would you be a Beastie Boy and, "Fight for your right?" That is the American way. Or would you, perhaps, start to realize that you are Laban? That is the Godly way. Would your love for Rachel win out, or your own self interest?

In what has to be one of the more remarkable reactions to any wrong done to someone in the Bible, “Jacob did so, and completed her week [another “seven”]... and served Laban for another seven years” (Gen 29:28, 30). Where did Jacob find the strength? In his love for Rachel. Most forget that he did not have to wait seven *years*, but only seven *days* for Rachel’s hand. That would have made it easier. And yet, suddenly, Jacob finds himself with two wives rather than one, and he only wanted one. As a matter of fact, two other women—Zilpah and Bilhah are mentioned here too. These were given to Laban’s daughters as a dowry. They were servants to the women and they could do anything they wanted with them, just as Sarai could do with Hagar. Foreshadowing. Uh oh.

Before moving on to the last section, I thought I would bring up something Luther spends quite a bit of time talking about. This is the idea of marriage. In his day, you will remember, the Church did not allow priests to marry. Luther thought this was horrible. You can hear his own heart when he says, “For it is a Christian and godly thing to love a girl to join her to you in marriage, since there is a natural desire and inclination of sex to sex.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 5 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 282.

This got me thinking about the problem of marriage in our own day. Evil forces have been tearing apart this institution, first starting in the church with so many unlawful divorces and sexual acts of adultery and fornication that the world now mocks us for our hypocrisy for being so upset that soon it will be Federal law to allow homosexual marriages in every state. It is safe to say that there has never been a more dangerous time in the history of humanity for the sacred institution of marriage than today.

Luther spends a good deal of time saying things like these things are recounted in the story of Jacob and Rachel “not to kindle disgraceful love affairs in the hearts of youths, but to nourish the hope and the dignity of marriage, and that the Holy Spirit may testify that neither marriage nor the love of a husband and wife is displeasing to God, since God has created and ordained this love.”<sup>12</sup> He has a great desire to uphold the dignity of marriage, and this desire needs to be recaptured in the church today. And yet, it is kind of strange to me that he would do this in this story.

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 5: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 26-30*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 5 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 282.



Yes, Jacob had only one wife in mind, but apparently Laban didn't care at all. Did he really care about Leah's future? Polygamy was just fine with him, as long as he got Leah out of his house and married off so that she wouldn't be some old spinster staring at windows and walls when she got older. No one wanted her, so better for her to be in a crazy marriage than in no marriage at all.

Truly, humans have been corrupt since the beginning of time, and the story of Jacob and his wives is hardly the place to be extolling the ideals of marriage, even though Jacob certainly would have preferred it that way. Better to use [what is about to happen](#) to show how important following God's pattern for marriage is. Still, I love Luther's heart, and his point about marriage is one we all need to recapture today. For true and patient love finds no greater, more profound, or more difficult place to express itself than in the supernatural bonds of a husband and a wife. This is what all the persons in this story will soon find out.

## **A Sovereign Son through Sin**

Most commentaries break off here, but I like the way the chapter breaks the story off. What we have looked at is one literary unit; and what we are about to look at begins a new one. And yet, I find the ending of this chapter quite perfect

for preaching a sermon on Jacob and his wives. For we need to see God's grace here. They also fit well with the themes of karma and serendipity that I have chosen to speak out against. For what they do is point us to the sovereign purposes of God in the mess that has just unfolded before our eyes. Yes, God is here, and he has a good purpose in mind for these things. Indeed, through a story that will only get uglier, we have here the very heart of God's grace shining through like a laser beam into the utter darkness.

It begins with “**the LORD**” seeing that **Leah was hated** (**Gen 29:36**). God now enters the story. Notice that “**He [Jacob] loved Rachel more than Leah**” (**30**) is now paralleled with “**Leah was hated**” (**31**). This is as we have spoken about previously with God hating Esau. This hatred towards Leah is not utter disgust that wishes evil and harm upon her. Rather, it is loving someone less than another. Certainly, in a marriage, this would have felt like hatred, and we can only pity Leah, as even the LORD himself did. But we must not think that Jacob hated this woman's guts. No. So God “**opened her womb, but Rachel was barren**” (**31**).

Jacob had to be with Leah, which is hardly something he would do if he couldn't stand the sight of the woman. So they were together, and their union produced **a son**. “**Leah**

conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, ‘Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me’” (32). “Reuben” means “behold a son.” I will comment next time on Leah’s sad statement and how she thinks that this will make Jacob love her. Such a thing makes you want to weep at her pitiful plight.

The birth of Reuben begins a crazy story of women jockeying for the love of a man, and in the process, it tells us about the origins of the twelve patriarchs of Israel—the twelve tribes. But today, we only get four of them. “She conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also.’ And she called his name Simeon” (33). “Simeon” comes from “he hears.” “Again she conceived and a son, and said, ‘Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.’ Therefore his name was called Levi” (34). “Levi” means to be joined to or to cleave. Finally, she conceives again and has a fourth son. “This time I will praise the LORD.’ Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing” (35).

This is the end of the chapter, and I said it is perfect for preaching a sermon? How so? It has to do with Judah.

“Judah” means “Praise of God.” The Apostle Paul knows this and uses it to explain what it means to be a True Jew—“Jew” being a shortened form of “Judah.” “A Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Rom 2:29). Do you hear the wordplay with Jew (Judah) and praise (Judah)?

But why would Paul do this? It is because as all Jews would have known, Judah was promised the kingly line. Through him would come the Messiah. And when Jesus is born, his lineage is traced in both of his genealogies: to Judah. Jesus is the son of Judah. Jesus is the True Jew, the True Judah. But he could not be born unless Judah was born.

Why mention this here? I return one last time to the idea of karma. This unthinking, mindless force has no ability to do anything purposeful. Some see karma in what happens to Jacob at the hands of Laban. One person writes, “In a cosmic karma sense, Laban is only playing a role intended to give Jacob his reward. He cheated his own father, pretending to be the eldest, and when he has to flee, his father in law cheats him on the same matter. What goes around, Jacob, surely

comes around, in the form of the wrong wife at your bedside.”<sup>13</sup>

No, this is completely wrong. Laban is playing a role ordained by God. Even if Laban himself has evil motives for it, God’s purposes are eternal and redemptive and salvific. For you see, Judah’s mother is not Rachel (as I unintentionally stated off the cuff in last week’s sermon). Judah’s mother is Leah. If Jacob does not marry Leah, Judah is not born and therefore, Jesus is not born. Yes, there is purpose in all of this confusion, there is light in the darkness. God knows what he is doing, and in the story of the marriage(s) of Jacob, God ends up showing us that purpose.

There are several things to be gleaned from this story. We can learn about true love. We can learn about patience. We can learn about hard work. We can learn about how very often people really do reap what they sow, sometimes in the most unexpected places. But we cannot learn about karma or serendipity, and if we do, we are utterly lost. For what we

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<sup>13</sup> Aryeh Amihay, “All my life I struggle against kindergarten teachers, January 29, 2014. <http://hebraicdraughts.wordpress.com/2014/01/29/kindergarten/>, last accessed 11-13-2014. Another writes, “In yoga, we would call this the fast hand of karma. Jacob basically gets called out for the similar deception he wrought on his older brother and father. Karma is almost mathematical in its efficiency, and everyone, regardless of their station, is affected by it.” Greg Marzullo, “Jacob and the Fast Hand of Karma,” <http://sixthandi.blogspot.com/2013/11/jacob-and-fast-hand-of-karma.html>, last accessed 11-13-2014.

must learn the most is God's sovereign purposeful hand of salvation working itself out by [opening the womb of Leah the Unloved](#) so that she might have a son, a son whose name is Jesus Christ. And if Jesus' own mother was unloved, he surely knows how to love the unlovable. Perhaps then, at the end of the day, this chapter is not about Jacob or Rachel, but Leah. Leah is where our focus of this story ends. And in her, we should all have great hope.