

# BOY MEETS GIRL

*SERIES: THE JACOB NARRATIVE*

By Scott Grant

## The mirror of Haran

After leaving the land of Canaan with Jacob, we enter into the land of Haran. This is the dark period of Jacob's life, bracketed in the narrative by a sunset and a sunrise (Genesis 28:11, 32:31). He expects to spend a few days in Haran, but it will be 20 years before he extricates himself. These are the hardest years of his life. Yet the Lord promised to be with him through it all. These, then, are years of spiritual formation for Jacob.

In Haran, the Lord holds up a mirror so that Jacob might see himself. What Jacob has done to others is now done to him; he reaps what he has sowed. And, likewise, he now does to others what has been done to him; he sows what he has reaped. Perhaps Jacob will feel and see something of the pain he has inflicted and is inflicting on others. Perhaps he will understand that his monumental conflicts with others are symptomatic of his conflict with God. Perhaps, then, he will be ready to encounter the Lord on the banks of the Jabbok. In Haran, Jacob encounters relational and occupational heartache. His dreams of marriage and career turn into nightmares.

It seems sometimes as if we are living in Haran, the land of relational and occupational heartache. Our biggest dreams often gather around marriage and career, but sometimes those dreams turn into nightmares. Yet the Lord remains with us and forms us in the land of broken dreams. In this land, we look into the mirror and see ourselves—what we have done to others and what we're doing to others. It is the place where our conflicts with others show us something of our conflict with God. It is the place where the Lord prepares us for himself.

## The Gypsy Poet

A few months after my wife and I were married, we spent a weekend at an inn on the coast in Northern California. A little rummaging around in our room turned up a journal that was filled with the entries of people who had stayed there through the years. Most of the writers reflected on the joys of marital love, but one of the last entries reflected an entirely different outlook. The writer was a single man who had visited this romantic getaway by himself more than once. Here's what he wrote:

*I was here in 1985, and I was with her. How is it that a man can love a woman and not know it? She called me the Gypsy poet—in love with the world and words and not knowing I was in love with her. I was here in 1990. She was married now with family...happy... all that I could have ever wanted. And so it was. I was single from birth and 33 years old. Still I was in love; now I knew what it was. It has taken so long to recognize this.*

*I know why men go to sea. It is not for money or adventure or fame. It is now December of 2000, and I am here again. I am still single, still in love, and the sea is a woman—the same that I met in 1985 and again in 1990. I am 43 years old now, and remain the gypsy poet—and I remain in love with her. There may remain in the world a woman of flesh and warmth, but as of tonight, my mistress is the sea. My heart remains open and my vision remains clear. Where are you tonight, this woman to steal me from my mistress so that I too might write of our love in so many years to come?*

YOUR FAITHFUL GYPSY POET

I saw a bit of myself in the Gypsy Poet. We were the same age: 43. I too was in love with the world and words. I too had been single for many years. I too wondered if I was single because I had missed something earlier in life. Finally, in my 40s, I met a woman of flesh and warmth, and she became my wife.

You don't have to identify with the Gypsy Poet as closely as I do to hear the longing in his words, and for them to resonate with the longing in your own heart, whether you're single or married. Even if you find a lifelong partner who inspires poetic journal entries, you still want something more than what that relationship gives.

Genesis 29:1-14 applies to single men and women who are interested in one day being married. It also applies to all of us, first because we have many single men and women in our midst, and we need to know about them, and second because the hope for relationship, according to the scriptures, is finally and ultimately fulfilled in relationship with Christ.

The Jacob-Rachel encounter in Genesis 29 is the second of three fully developed "woman-at-the-well" scenes in the Hebrew scriptures. (The other two involve Isaac and Moses. Saul is also involved in a woman-at-the-well encounter, but the scene falls apart. Samson and Ruth are also involved in similar betrothal scenes, but those stories omit the well.) These scenes follow a similar story line, much in the manner of our fairy tales involving the meeting and marriage of young men and women.

We love the fairy tales, because something deep within us wants it to be this way. We want to meet Prince Charming or Cinderella in some surprising way and live happily ever after. The woman-at-the-well scenes inspired similar feelings among the readers of their day. They can do so in our day as well when we see them as the timeless "boy-meets-girl" story that finds different expressions in every culture.

Let's now read Genesis 29:1-14:

**Then Jacob went on his journey, and came to the land of the sons of the east. He looked, and saw a well in the field, and behold, three flocks of sheep were lying there beside it, for from that well they watered the flocks. Now the stone on the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, they would then roll the stone from the mouth of the well and water the sheep, and put the stone back in its place on the mouth of the well. Jacob said to them, "My brothers, where are you from?" And they said, "We are from Haran." He said to them, "Do you know Laban the son of Nahor?" And they said, "We know him." And he said to them, "Is it well with him?" And they said, "It is well, and here is Rachel his daughter coming with the sheep." He said, "Behold, it is still high day; it is not time for the livestock to be gathered. Water the sheep, and go, pasture them." But they said, "We cannot, until all the flocks are gathered, and they roll the stone from the mouth of the well; then we water the sheep." While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep, for she was a shepherdess. When Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, Jacob went up and rolled the stone from the mouth of the well and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice and wept. Jacob told Rachel that he was a relative of her father and that he was Rebekah's son, and she ran and told her father. So when Laban heard the news of Jacob his sister's son, he ran to meet him, and embraced him and kissed him and brought him to his house. Then he related to Laban all these things. Laban said to him, "Surely you are my bone and my flesh." And he stayed with him a month.**

### **Jacob meets the shepherds**

Evidently buoyed by his encounter with the Lord on the northeastern edge of the promised land, Jacob literally "lifted his feet," heading east in search of a wife. He comes to "the land of the sons of the east," a description that alerts attentive readers that he may be in danger (Genesis 2:3, 3:24, 4:16; Judges 6:3, 33). His journey echoes that of Abraham's servant, who headed east in search of a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24).

The word "behold" signifies that the sight of three flocks of sheep next to a well would be considered strange. What's strange is that they were lying beside the well but not drinking from it. The narrator further offers that the stone covering the well was large. Such descriptions in verse 2 set the stage for Rachel's entrance.

Stones were used as coverings to keep wells clean and to restrict their use. Therefore, the stone is a key motif in

the Jacob narrative. In Genesis 28:11, a stone signified that Jacob had come to a hard place. But when the Lord revealed himself to Jacob in that place, the stone became to him a symbol of God's presence (Genesis 28:18-19). Here, the stone covering the well poses as an obstacle in that the water Jacob will want is, at least for now, inaccessible. Also, since a stone signifies difficulty, yet the well is a symbol of fruitfulness, this stone also foreshadows both Rachel, who would be inaccessible to Jacob for many years, and Rachel's womb, which would also be blocked (Genesis 29:31).

In verse 3, the narrator explains the custom of this place. The shepherds would not water their sheep until all the flocks that had a right to be at the well had gathered there. The shepherds' answer to Jacob's question about their home tells him that he has arrived at his destination. He had set out for Haran in hopes of making one of Laban's daughters his wife (Genesis 28:2, 10).

Therefore, in order, Jacob is looking for Haran, Laban, and a daughter of Laban. Not surprisingly, his next question for the shepherds is whether they know Laban. They answer yes. Jacob then poses his next question, concerning Laban's welfare, in order to get information about his daughters. The shepherds, no doubt irritated with the nosiness of this foreigner, are brisk with their answers and finally say, in so many words, "If you want to know about Laban, ask his daughter; here she comes." This is more than Jacob could have hoped for. He has come looking for a wife from among Laban's daughters, and Rachel, one of Laban's daughters, is coming toward him.

As Rachel approaches, Jacob notes that midday is not the time for gathering the sheep but for pasturing them, and he admonishes the shepherds to water the sheep and leave. He wants to be alone with Rachel. Jacob finds out what the narrator has already told us—that the shepherds would wait until all the flocks were gathered. In this way, the narrator gives us the opportunity to anticipate Jacob's response. The shepherds are somewhat more expansive in their response to Jacob this time, but only to put him in his place. Jacob's comment to the shepherds, that "it is not time" for the livestock to be gathered, hovers over the story of his romance with Rachel. By all appearances she is the right woman. But Jacob tries to do with time the same thing he would do to the stone: push it out of the way. As a result, time would push back: It would be many years before he would marry Rachel and many years after that before they would leave together.

### **Jacob meets Rachel**

During this exchange between Jacob and the shepherds, Rachel comes into view. Jacob sees the sheep with her and understands that she has a need. One look at Rachel, whom the narrator will later describe as "beautiful of form and face," prompts Jacob to spring into action (Genesis 29:17). He seizes the opportunity to impress her and her family.

The narrator identifies Rachel as the daughter of Laban, the brother of Jacob's mother, possibly because of Jacob's strong attachment to his mother (Genesis 25:28). The stone is very large, but Jacob, demonstrating extraordinary strength, rolls it away by himself and waters the sheep that Rachel is shepherding. The narrator, for emphasis, three times identifies Rachel as the daughter of "Laban his mother's brother," which causes us to look both backward and forward in the story. In Genesis 24, Rebekah, Jacob's mother, met a man at a well who would introduce her to her future husband. Laban appeared in that chapter as well. In Genesis 29-31, Laban will be Jacob's nemesis. These are "the sheep of Laban," and Jacob will be shepherding Laban's flock.

Isaac and Esau, Jacob's father and brother, each had violent emotional reactions in Genesis 27. Up to this point in Genesis, Jacob is seen as calculating and emotionless. Jacob, unloved by his father and envious of his brother; Jacob, who fled for his life and made the journey to another land in search of a wife; Jacob, who through it all is never once depicted as showing any emotion, who keeps it all inside with the suppressant of calculating logic, can hold it in no longer. Jacob kisses Rachel, though she does not yet know who he is.

When Esau found out that Jacob had stolen his blessing, he "lifted his voice and wept" (Genesis 27:38). Jacob now lifts up his voice and weeps. He senses that his long and lonely journey has come to an end. For now, he

weeps with joy, but if he knew that his treatment of Esau and Isaac was about to be visited upon him in Laban's treatment of him, his tears would be like those of his brother. The word "lifted," near the end of this scene, forms a frame with the same word at the beginning of the scene, when Jacob literally "lifted" his feet.

Upon being informed of Jacob's familial connection, Rachel no doubt remembers the Genesis 24 story, which culminated in Rebekah's departure to meet her future husband.

### **Jacob meets Laban**

Laban showers Jacob with greetings and brings him to his house, where Jacob tells Laban "all these things." Laban undoubtedly learns that Jacob, unlike Abraham's servant, is bearing no gifts. He also figures that the penniless Jacob, whose strength as a workman could benefit him, is at his mercy. Seeking to ingratiate himself to Jacob, Laban tells him, "Surely you are my bone and flesh," echoing Adam's words regarding Eve in Genesis 2:23. Unlike Adam, who joined himself to Eve, Laban's only intention in joining himself to Jacob is to enslave him. Jacob, who thought he would be gone from his family for only a "few days," initially stays with Laban for a month (Genesis 27:44). In fact, many more months will pass before Jacob sees home again. Yet, Laban's response resonates with Jacob's heart. Jacob's father didn't love him. He had to leave his family. Now, here's a relative who runs to greet him and calls him "my bone and flesh." Jacob, the lonely exile, thinks he has found his new family.

After his encounter with God in the previous scene, Jacob transformed the stone of difficulty into a symbol of God's presence. In this scene, Jacob has neither met with God nor sought him. He never acknowledges the Lord's leading. For Jacob, the stone remains a stone. The stone this time ends up symbolizing Jacob's strength, not God's presence.

### **Echoes from another story**

This story is similar to, but at the same time different from, the "woman-at-the well" scene in Genesis 24. The differences illustrate Jacob's failures. For Abraham's servant, the search for a wife for Isaac was a thoroughly spiritual enterprise, bathed in prayer. Rebekah was beautiful, but that wasn't enough for the servant. He wanted to know her character. So he asked her for a drink of water from her jar. Not only did Rebekah quickly oblige, she also announced that she would draw water for the servant's camels until they had finished drinking. She quickly emptied her jar and ran back to the well to draw water for all the camels. As she did so, the servant "was gazing at her in silence to know whether the Lord had made his journey successful or not." He still didn't know if this was the one. He presented her with a gift and asked her about herself: "Whose daughter are you? Please tell me, is there room for us to lodge in your father's house?" Abraham had insisted that a wife for his son be one of his relatives. The answer to both questions was yes. She's from the right family, Rebekah said her family had "plenty" of straw and feed for the camels, and she offered the servant a room. Then the servant "bowed low and worshiped the Lord." He said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his lovingkindness and his truth toward my master; as for me, the Lord has guided me in the way to the house of my master's brothers."

In contrast to Abraham's servant, Jacob doesn't pray. He eagerly engages the shepherds but not the Lord. Unlike Abraham's servant, Jacob's thoughts and actions are those of a schemer, not a man of prayer. For Jacob, a little background information (she's from the right family) and one look at her (she's beautiful) are all he needs to conclude that Rachel is the one.

The servant thoroughly investigated Rebekah's character, but Jacob has no interest in such matters. The servant was able to see Rebekah's heart. Jacob springs into action before Rachel's character emerges. Jacob wants to impress the woman, not find out who she is. Whereas Rebekah was impressive in the earlier scene, running to and fro, Jacob, with his mighty feat, takes center stage now. We don't know whether Jacob's strength impressed Rachel, but we know that it impressed Laban, who sees Jacob as a potential worker and schemes to keep him in Haran.

The servant, at the end of a thoroughly spiritual investigation, worshiped and thanked God. Having short-circuited the process, Jacob, who is all emotion and no worship, kisses Rachel, lifts his voice (but not to God) and weeps. Like Rebekah, Rachel runs to tell her family, but Jacob never gets to see whether she, like Rebekah, would run to care for him or her animals.

The servant left with Rebekah; it would be 20 years before Jacob would leave with Rachel.

### **The search for a spouse**

Jacob inhabited a culture that is vastly different from ours, but we can still learn from him. What does this story have to say to the single men and women of God today who would like to be married? How should they go about seeking a wife or husband?

There is much to lament about today's dating culture. As a single man in my 30s, I remember telling a friend once that I might prefer a culture of arranged marriages. He immediately responded by telling me who I should marry. I said, "I don't think so." He said, "You can't help it; it's arranged!" He won that argument. The truth is, we'll probably not be completely happy with any approach, even one that tries to eliminate the concept of dating. Yet, God can work within any culture, and there are godly ways to go about finding a spouse within any culture.

### **Desire is a gift**

Jacob wants a wife, and everything in the text suggests that he wants a good thing. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be married; on the contrary, there is everything right about it. This may seem like stating the obvious, but for people whose deep desire for a spouse goes unrealized, the desire often becomes the enemy. The thinking goes like this: "If I don't desire, I won't be disappointed." Therefore, many people attempt to kill the desire. But it is God who gives the desire. If God gives it, we can't kill it. If we try, the desire goes underground and resurfaces in all sorts of behavior that belies a longing for intimacy that will not die. The desire for emotional and physical intimacy is a gift from God.

Whether or not the desire finds some measure of fulfillment in a spouse, it opens our hearts to God. The desire for intimacy becomes a furnace in which the Lord forges his relationship with us. We open up our hearts to him, sometimes with groaning too deep for words, and we access an even deeper desire for God than we have ever felt before. This, to our surprise, doesn't necessarily make things easier; it enflames our desire for God without necessarily reducing our desire for human intimacy. In fact, as our romance with God deepens, our desire for someone to share it with may deepen as well. If you become more passionate about Christ, then, you may actually become more passionate about finding a spouse.

The narrative links Jacob's relationship with God with his journey in search of a wife. In fact, God interrupts his journey at Bethel so that it becomes not only a search for a wife but a search for God. Our hope for romance, then, is linked to our romance with God.

### **Prayer is essential**

The narrative faults Jacob for engaging everyone but the Lord and holds up Abraham's servant, who sought the Lord at every turn. The search for a spouse should be bathed in prayer. It is a thoroughly spiritual enterprise, and God should not be left out of it. Most of us are better at planning than praying. All the planning gets you nowhere good unless God is doing the leading.

Pray, then, as Abraham's servant did, for God's leading. Pray that you would be sensitive to his Holy Spirit. Pray that he would align your heart with his heart. Pray in a specific way based on your understanding of your strengths and weaknesses. Pray with ministry in mind. Pray knowing that God knows you far better than you know yourself—and that he knows what you need, when you need it. Pray believing that God is able to lead

you to the right person.

### **What to look for**

Jacob, and Abraham's servant before him, goes to great lengths to find the right woman. Each travels a great distance in order to find someone who is spiritually compatible. The Canaanites, who would not give up their gods, are ruled out. Jacob searches for a woman who will share his faith in the God of Abraham, even though his own faith is somewhat shaky. The implication is that those of us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ should do the same. If we are followers of Jesus, and expect to grow in our devotion to him, we will probably eventually find ourselves frustrated in a relationship with someone who doesn't share our faith, no matter how good the partner may seem.

Jacob was attracted to Rachel, who is described as beautiful. God made them male and female, different in appearance, so that they would be attracted to one another. This should not be downplayed. Neither, though, should it be elevated to the exclusion of other qualities. The narrative indicts Jacob for jumping to an instant conclusion based on Rachel's appearance. Appearance is a factor, but it isn't primary.

What about feelings? Jacob has a powerful emotional response when he meets Rachel. Again, the narrative does not criticize Jacob for this emotional response. We should probably see this as a good step in Jacob's development. He has finally allowed something—someone!—to touch his heart. But the narrative brings Jacob up short for overemphasizing the emotional aspect. Jacob “falls in love” with Rachel, but falling in love with someone doesn't mean you should marry him or her. Be wary of instant conclusions—love at first sight—based on a few so-called essentials that create a purely emotional response. Like appearance, feelings are a factor, but they're not primary.

The meeting of Jacob and Rachel seems impeccably timed—perhaps divinely timed. It would be easy to conclude, based on such a meeting, that it was ordained by God that the two of them should meet and marry. Such “signs”—remarkable meetings, surprising similarities—are often worth investigating but are by no means determinative. The “signs,” if they are from the Lord, will encourage you to test the relationship. Circumstances can make a relationship look right even though it's wrong. Like appearance and feelings, signs aren't primary.

The two woman-at-the-well scenes in Genesis lead us to look for a person of character. Some of us, like Jacob, are more interested in impressing someone we hardly know and responding to superficial attributes than understanding his or her character. Character, unlike appearance, feelings and signs, is primary. Mostly, look for someone you can trust with your heart.

If you're involved in a relationship, ask yourself three questions: What do I know about me? What do I know about this person? What do I know about God? If you ask those questions, and prayerfully think through the answers in light of scripture and the input of those who know you, you'll eventually end up with a pretty good idea whether you should marry this person or not. Nevertheless, it may not be as clear as you'd like it to be. Most of us don't get “the sign” from heaven; we get nudges from heaven. God leaves room for faith.

### **Where to look**

Jacob is intentional about looking for a wife. For all the faults that the narrative finds with Jacob, this isn't one of them. If you desire a spouse, look for a spouse. You can't create the relationship God wants for you, but you can be on the lookout for it. One thing you can do is put yourself in a place where there are other single people who are following Jesus. Jacob met Rachel at a well. Today's equivalent of the well is the church.

When I was single and working for a newspaper, a co-worker heard me often talk about female friends. He asked me, “Where do you meet women?” I said, “Most of the women I know I've met at church.” My answer was met with silence. Finally, my friend said, “Huh, I've never thought of that!”

There is a line of thinking that goes, “If you go to church looking for a husband or wife, you’re going with impure motives.” As we have seen, the search for a spouse is a thoroughly spiritual endeavor. It makes complete sense to look for a spouse in a place where other people are looking to the Lord. If you have a church where people are seeking the Lord and people respect each other, and the shepherds are keeping an eye out for the wolves, you have a safe place where people can meet each other. At PBC, we seek to be such a place.

Certainly, one could use dating services and the internet and seek to maximize the possibilities in other ways. Personally, although I wanted a wife, I was too passionate about what I was doing to do something else or go somewhere else to meet someone. I therefore didn’t feel inclined to go out of my way to meet someone. I prayed, “I’ll respond. I’ll move toward her. But you bring her to me.” As it turned out, the Lord answered my prayer, although not for several years. I met my wife after a worship service here.

### **What about obstacles?**

The stone over the well poses an obstacle to Jacob’s hope for relationship with Rachel. Sometimes relationships run into roadblocks, often before they even get started. Sometimes, God transforms the stone, as he did in Bethel. In Haran, Jacob takes matters into his own very powerful hands and pushes the stone aside. Sometimes, no matter how determined we may be, the stone that keeps a relationship from moving forward just won’t budge. If you spend more time in a relationship pushing on a rock than moving on the road toward marriage, it may be time to conclude that the rock is a gift from God, who is preventing you from making a mistake you’d live to regret.

### **What about timing?**

God’s timing is impeccable. It looks as if God’s intent was to bring Rachel to Jacob, but Jacob rushes ahead of things and never finds out. Some people, like Jacob, move too fast. Some, however, move too slowly. Some of us, then, need to be more proactive and move faster. Some of us need to be less proactive and move slower. All of us need to know ourselves, and to know the pace for us that will allow us to express our faith in God—slowing down to trust God or accelerating to trust God.

### **Transform the stone**

When God says, “It’s time,” and leads us to a spouse, it’s time to worship. When God showed up in Bethel, Bethel became a place of worship; Jacob transformed the stone. In Haran, though Jacob meets Rachel, he doesn’t worship. If God gives you a spouse, your marriage then should become a place of worship. The weddings we do at PBC are worship services. We honor the couple, of course, but even more than that we honor the Lord.

If you look on singleness as a stone, a place of difficulty, you still have the opportunity to transform the stone into a place of worship. Jacob’s night in Bethel tells us that God is with us in the place of difficulty and that we can therefore worship him there.

I look at my wife and I worship the Lord. Long before I met my wife, the longing in my heart to meet her led me to a place of meeting with the Lord. There, where desire felt like pain, I found a deeper desire for the Lord, a deeper desire to trust him and a deeper desire to worship him.

### **Another well**

What does the Jacob-Rachel story do for all of us, both single and married? It leads us to another story. We find, in the end, that the woman-at-the-well stories in the Hebrew scriptures leave us wanting for something more. Jacob and Rachel don’t live happily ever after, nor do any of the other men and women who meet at

wells.

All these stories lead us to the New Testament, and to John 4, where the “woman-at-the-well” story reaches its climax. A man leaves his home in Galilee and travels, via Judea, to Samaria, a foreign land. At a well—”Jacob’s well,” no less—Jesus meets a woman who has come to draw water. He offers her “living water.” The woman, who has already had five husbands and is currently living out of wedlock with another man, runs to town to announce the presence of Jesus. Many Samaritans meet Jesus and come to believe in him. The new Jacob (Jesus) meets the new Rachel (the woman at the well), and they give spiritual birth to the people of that place, who themselves become part of the bride of Christ, which is his church (Revelation 19:7). Jesus came from heaven to the foreign land, earth, in search of a bride. He came searching for us, offering us the living water of relationship with him. He came searching for you.

Whatever our current state, our thirst for intimacy leaves us wanting for something more. For some of us, it has led to the deepest heartache we have known. For others of us, it has led to fulfilling relationships that only make us long for something even more fulfilling. Some of us have known both: heartache and fulfillment. All of us know what it’s like to thirst—and to never stop thirsting. But when Jesus comes for us once more from the foreign land, and if you have tasted of his living water and long for more, you really will live happily ever after.

### **Another journal entry**

Before my wife and I left the coast-side inn, I took pen in hand and added my work to that of others in the journal. I wrote that I resonated with the words of the Gypsy Poet. I wrote that at long last, I had met a woman to share the years with. But I also wrote that long before I met her, I met an even greater love. It’s the same love that the Samaritan woman met at Jacob’s well so many years ago. It’s the same love that so many of us meet as we try to understand this overwhelming desire that surges within us. It is the love of Jesus, who has given me a well of water springing up to eternal life.

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Sixth Message  
Genesis 29:1-14  
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